

The Search for an Elusive Peace in the Horn of Africa

New breakthroughs enhancing interstate relations are threatened by western economic and military imperatives

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Major developments related to internal and external relations are taking place in Horn of Africa states.

This is a region of East Africa which has been deeply fractured due to the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism since the 19th century. The area has been a focal point for interventions by the United States along with other NATO governments.

Prospects for making strides towards greater cooperation came with the reality of the newly-ascended Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed visiting the capital of neighboring Eritrea on July 8-9 to meet with his counterpart President Isaias Afwerki. The two leaders signed agreements ending their dispute over the border territories around Badme, the reconnecting of direct communication links and a pledge to embark upon joint economic projects designed to benefit both nations.

Abiy, who came to power on April 2 amid widespread discontent with the previous administration of Hailemariam Desalegn, made the first gesture towards Eritrea when he announced in June that Ethiopia would withdraw its troops from the Badme border and revoke all claims to the territory. Later a delegation from the Eritrean foreign ministry paid a working visit to Addis Ababa setting tone for a reciprocal trip to Asmara.

Eritrea had been colonized by Italian imperialism after the failed attempt by Rome to conquer Abyssinia in 1896. Menelik II defeated the Italian army, however, allowed the imperialists to establish a base on the Red Sea restricting Addis Ababa's access to the waterways so vital to national development.

Fascist Benito Mussolini held delusional notions of reclaiming the ancient Roman Empire and invaded Abyssinia in October 1935 killing thousands of Africans utilizing sophisticated armaments and chemical weapons. After the defeat of Italy during World War II in North Africa, Britain and later the Ethiopian monarchy under His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I designated Eritrea a protectorate under London and later incorporating the country into Ethiopia as a province.

A thirty-year war raged between Eritrean independence organizations and Ethiopia, under both the monarchy beginning in 1961 and continuing into the socialist-oriented government after 1974, until the time of its demise in 1991. Eritrea declared itself independent in 1991

and a United Nations sponsored plebiscite in 1993 won international recognition for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) led government.

Even though the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) headed by Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam collapsed amid intensive fighting with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the EPLF, relations soon deteriorated between the new government in Addis Ababa and Asmara. In 1998 and 2000 an eruption of military clashes around Badme left an estimated 100,000 troops and civilians dead on both sides.

Algeria on behalf of the-then Organization of African Unity (OAU) negotiated a truce although tensions remained high for nearly two decades. The commitment of both Addis Ababa and Asmara for normalized relations has been warmly received from people in the region and internationally.

Other Internal Challenges in Ethiopia

After coming to power, Prime Minister Abiy lifted the state of emergency which had been imposed on several occasions over the last decade and a-half. Thousands of political prisoners were released from detention and exiled political leaders from the Oromia region of Ethiopia were allowed to return to the country. Abiy held talks with opposition party leaders while legalizing their peaceful activities inside Ethiopia.

However, on June 23 during a political rally in Addis Ababa, a grenade was thrown into a crowd in the immediate aftermath of an address delivered by Abiy. The prime minister was not injured although at least two people were killed in the explosion and dozens more were wounded.

There is speculation that elements within the TPLF wing of the ruling EPRDF are not enthusiastic about the bold moves taken by the prime minister. The assassination attempt did not at all halt the pace of national reconciliation which has become the hallmark of the new administration.

In the Somali-dominated Ogaden region of Ethiopia unrest flared up again based upon long-held grievances. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) has been long suppressed by the Ethiopian state and declared as terrorists. In recent weeks this policy has been reversed with the release of ONLF prisoners and a suspension of hostilities between the two sides.

Also the Omoro Liberation Front (OLF) has joined in with its own gestures through the halting of hostilities with Addis Ababa. At present the country has moved further than ever in modern times towards ethnic reconciliation and social stability.

Somalia and Eritrea Hold Talks

For many years, the western-backed government in Mogadishu has accused Eritrea of supporting the al-Shabaab rebels who have fought both the Somalia national army and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) troops which have occupied the country since 2007. Yet on July 28, Somalia President Mohamed Abdullahi Famarjo paid a state visit to Asmara in a joint effort to normalize relations.

Eritrea has been subjected to United Nations sanctions for a decade over allegations that it

interfered in the Washington and European Union plans for the direction of the political system in Somalia. President Afwerki has continually denied any involvement in Somalian affairs.

With the pledge of Mogadishu and Asmara to refrain from any form of meddling in the affairs of each other's respective states, pressure will mount on the UN to lift these punitive measures. Ethiopia as well has called for the lifting of the sanctions against Eritrea based on its commitment to realizing peace in the region.

The Horn of Africa and the Strategic Imperatives of Imperialism

Left on their own these states could move in a direction which could easily improve the living standards of the majority of people within all of the countries. Although Ethiopia has been cited as having phenomenal economic growth over the last few years at some ten percent annually, the distribution of the national wealth remains highly disproportionate.

Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti have tremendous potential for development considering their vast mineral, energy and shipping potentials. Somalia and Ethiopia have oil which is only now being extracted at critical levels while the strategic ports on the coasts of Eritrea and Djibouti place these states in a lucrative position.

Despite all of this, all four governments are bound by relationships with the imperialist states and their allies in the Middle East. Ethiopia has received significant military assistance from Washington along with business investments. Somalia is beholden to the Pentagon, Britain, Turkey and the EU for its security infrastructure aimed at preventing al-Shabaab from seizing power. Djibouti allows its ports and territory to be used as bases for the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), which has a military installation at Camp Lemonnier housing several thousand Pentagon soldiers.



Eritrea allows United Arab Emirates to build military base at the Port of Assab

Eritrea has close military relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia where the ports at Assab serves as a staging area for the war against neighboring Yemen where over ten thousand people have been killed through aerial bombardments and ground offensives against the Ansurallah since March 2015. Yemen has the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with cholera, the lack of adequate water, food and medicine imperiling millions within this already least developed country in the Middle East.

It has been reported that the UAE played a significant role in the mediation talks which brought Asmara and Addis Ababa towards this historic agreement. At the same time the UAE has constructed a military base at Assab. The Eritrea-Ethiopia normalization will lead to the opening of Assab again for Ethiopian exports particularly in the textile industry. Ethiopia has relied on the port at Djibouti which could see a decline in activity from Addis Ababa with the opening of Assab.

Another major aspect of the rapprochement involving Asmara and Addis Ababa is the reports surfacing in early August that the UAE is slated to build an oil pipeline connecting Assab with the Ethiopian capital. Prime Minister Abiy's government wants to begin a full-fledged oil drilling operation in the southeast.

To demonstrate its connection with Saudi Arabia, President Afwerki has taken sides in the diplomatic row which has erupted over alleged human rights policies with Canada. Eritrea is saying that Ottawa has no business commenting on the internal affairs of Riyadh.

These foreign policy questions expose the continuing neo-colonial character of international relations in the Horn of Africa. For there to be genuine development within the region where the masses of workers, farmers, youth and professionals are to enjoy the remunerations gained from the marketing of natural resources of all of the countries, a system of socialist construction must be adopted.

Socialism can unleash the productive capacity of the majority of people within this region of Africa as well as the continent as a whole. Sustainable peace is inevitably linked with people-centered economic growth and development. In the long term Washington and its principal allies among the Gulf monarchies will act in their own interests which are at variance with the people of the Horn of Africa.

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