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# UNDERSTANDING ETHIOPIA – ERITREA RELATIONS SINCE 2018

This research paper is part of a series of outputs from the Peace Research Facility (PRF) focusing on key issues in domestic and foreign affairs in Ethiopia. The paper is based on research by Firehiwot Sintayehu and draws on the work of a team of PRF researchers and analysts working on various topics, including the aftermath of the Tigray war and the insurgency in the Amhara region.

## KEY POINTS

- The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has shifted significantly since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, precipitating a rapid rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Asmara.
- The rapprochement later developed into an ostensibly strong military alliance—sometimes called a ‘war pact’—to fight, and eventually defeat, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in a bloody two-year long conflict.
- The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA)—sometimes known as the Pretoria Agreement—which ended the war in November 2022, accentuated crucial differences in opinion between the leaders in Addis Ababa and Asmara regarding the future of Ethiopia’s Tigray region and the TPLF.
- The differences brought to light by the CoHA were subsequently increased by Abiy’s overt pursuit of an Ethiopian seaport, with attention drawn to the Eritrean port of Assab.
- Differences in alliance-making—both in the region, and more widely—particularly over the Sudan conflict, have also highlighted structural divergence in how the two neighbours, and their leaders, see the future of the Horn of Africa region.
- While this divergence does not suggest complete incompatibility, it does demonstrate that the alliance-making from 2018-2022 was largely opportunistic and returning to a more cooperative, mutually advantageous, relationship may prove difficult.

## THE ABIY-ISAYAS RAPPROCHEMENT (2018-2020)

In 2018, after several years of political turmoil in Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed came to power promising a new vision for the country following nearly 30 years of rule under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).<sup>1</sup> While much of the reform that Abiy promised was on the domestic front, particularly related to liberalizing the economy, he also sought to change Ethiopia's foreign policy, including its relationship with its neighbour Eritrea. The two countries had been estranged since 1998 when they fought a two-year war over disputed areas on their shared border.<sup>2</sup>

Building on the EPRDF's decision in 2018—prior to Abiy's ascent to power—to accept the Algiers Accord (2000), which put in place an independent commission to determine the border between the two countries, Abiy visited Eritrea in July 2018 and declared he was ready to sign a peace agreement with Eritrean president Isayas Afwerki.<sup>3</sup> Later that month, Isayas visited Ethiopia, reciprocating Abiy's gesture.<sup>4</sup> In September 2018, Ethiopian and Eritrean representatives signed an agreement on 'Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation' in Jeddah in the presence of King Salman and UN Secretary General, António Guterres, signalling the international community's strong support for the process.<sup>5</sup>

In this period, there were three major factors that pushed Abiy to normalize relations with Eritrea. First, Abiy was already interested in gaining more permanent access—through consensual means—to a seaport. From the beginning of the rapprochement, Abiy was explicit about Ethiopia's interest in the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab. At a speech in Addis Ababa in July 2018, delivered in front of a raucous crowd with Isayas also present, Abiy proclaimed, 'when Isaias and I are added together we share Assab'.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the idea seemed to raise no major alarm for Isayas, although whether he saw a potential future threat is unknown. Second, it seems likely that Abiy was preparing for the possibility of a deterioration of relations with the TPLF, and saw Asmara as an essential ally in the looming standoff. Third, the influence of the Gulf countries, especially UAE, was significant in bringing the two countries together in the same camp under the Gulf sphere of influence. In particular, Saudi Arabia and UAE put pressure on Asmara to respond positively to Addis's request for normalization in 2018-19.

At first, the rapprochement led to positive gains for both countries. Flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara restarted in July 2018 and the land border reopened in September. However, one unanticipated

- 1 Abiy's rise to power followed several years of protests against the EPRDF. He benefitted from a political alliance between the Amhara and Oromo regions whose elites successfully sought to unseat the previously dominant TPLF. On coming to power, Abiy abolished the EPRDF and launched the Prosperity Party as his political vehicle in 2019.
- 2 The so-called Border War began ostensibly because of a dispute over the small settlement of Badme. However, in reality, the war was the consequence of a broader divergence between the two states following Eritrea's secession in 1993. While no direct war had been fought between Ethiopia and Eritrea since 2000, Eritrea supported Ethiopian opposition groups in exile, including the Oromo Liberation Front and Ginbot-7, while Ethiopia has sought to isolate Asmara diplomatically.
- 3 'Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed in Eritrea for landmark visit', *Al Jazeera*, 8 July 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/8/ethiopia-pm-abiy-ahmed-in-eritrea-for-landmark-visit>.
- 4 'Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki in historic Ethiopia visit', BBC, 14 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-44824676>.
- 5 Amongst other things, the agreement officially ended the state of war between the two countries; committed them to the implementation of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission decision; and produced a rhetorical commitment to work together in combatting terrorism and people trafficking in the region. See: 'Agreement on Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea', <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/2098>.
- 6 'Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's speech at the Ethiopian Millennium Hall July 15, 2018', YouTube, 15 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJ04jq7c4tk>.

consequence was that thousands of Eritreans took the opportunity to migrate to Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Fearing a mass-exodus, Eritrea closed the border again in December 2018. At first it had seemed that making peace with Ethiopia would enable Eritrea to break out of its long years of isolation and seek new alliances—significantly, the UN Security Council lifted its sanctions against Eritrea that had been in place for nearly a decade.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Asmara sought to improve its relationship with Somalia and on 30 July 2018 signed a Joint Declaration on Brotherly Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation.<sup>9</sup> This became a ‘Tripartite Agreement’ between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia when the leaders of the three nations concluded a Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation (often referred to as the ‘Tripartite Alliance’), aiming to enhance their respective territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence.<sup>10</sup>

However, the new alliance was viewed with suspicion by other regional powers and many commentators and observers who disliked the perceived personalized, authoritarian shift and apparent attempt to marginalize IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development)—the Horn of Africa’s main multilateral organization.<sup>11</sup> This was driven by three factors: First, the perception that Isayas—a long-standing, internationally-isolated autocrat—was leading the alliance. Second, the emphasis on the federal government of Somalia, rather than the member states, generated suspicions that the alliance was meant to facilitate top-down control and undermine federalism in Somalia. Third, Abiy’s deteriorating relations with the TPLF led some of its members to correctly suspect that the alliance would become a military one and be used to impose Abiy’s political will on the country, particularly on Tigray.

Ultimately, the ‘alliance’, which was closely tied to the personalities of Abiy, Isayas and Farmajo, rather than being a serious, institutionalized attempt to redraw relations in the Horn of Africa, foundered when Farmajo lost power in 2022. Even before this, the logic of major developments in the region, particularly the Tigray war, had driven Ethiopia and Eritrea closer together, while Somalia seemed increasingly peripheral.

## THE TIGRAY WAR AND THE COHA (2020-22)

As noted above, the Tigray conflict has been the single biggest factor in shaping Ethiopia-Eritrea relations since 2020. Isayas saw the conflict as an opportunity to destroy the TPLF, which he continues to view as a significant security threat to Eritrea, and also to extract revenge for the border

7 K. Amare & S. Mohammed, ‘The Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement: highly personalised and less-institutionalised initiative’, *Third World Quarterly* 44/4 (2023): 762-775.

8 The UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea in 2009 due to its provision of support to armed groups in Somalia and for not withdrawing its troops following armed clashes with Djibouti in 2008. See: ‘Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Eritrea over Its Role in Somalia, Refusal to Withdraw Troops Following Conflict with Djibouti’, 23 December 2009, <https://press.un.org/en/2009/sc9833.doc.htm>.

9 See: ‘Eritrea-Somalia Joint Declaration on Brotherly Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation’, 30 July 2018, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2100>.

10 ‘Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea’, 5 September 2018, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2099>.

11 See, for example, Goitom Gebreluel, ‘The tripartite alliance destabilising the Horn of Africa’, *Al Jazeera*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/5/10/the-tripartite-alliance-that-is-destabilising-the-horn-of-africa>. Sudan and Djibouti, both of which then had a mutually antagonistic relationship with Asmara, also resented Abiy’s attempt to reintegrate the former into the regional system. Djibouti feared that Ethiopia might seek to replace Djibouti port with Assab for its import-export needs.

war.<sup>12</sup> During the conflict, the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) were able to take control over border territories that it has long-claimed, including Badme.<sup>13</sup> The EDF, particularly its mechanized forces, played a crucial role alongside the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), and regional special forces, in the eventual military defeat of the TPLF.

While the war provided the strategic imperative for the Addis-Asmara alliance, the two countries did have their differences over the two years of the conflict. This included military tactics—for example, whether to withdraw from Mekelle in 2021<sup>14</sup>—and on the response to international criticism on the conduct of the war, particularly whether to accept the accusation of human rights abuses uncovered by the joint UN-Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report published in April 2022.<sup>15</sup> At the time, disagreements were suppressed in the face of a formidable common enemy only to surface with the signing of the CoHA by the TPLF and federal government in November 2022.

While the CoHA was successful in ending the two-year-long war, the agreement excluded major conflict actors, including Eritrea, and betrayed a difference in strategic goals between Addis Ababa and Asmara.<sup>16</sup> While Abiy was prepared for the TPLF to retain control of Tigray, albeit in a severely weakened state, Isayas sought the complete destruction of the group.<sup>17</sup> Abiy was also desperate to end the war due to the damage it was doing to the economy, and to his international reputation as a peacemaker, but Isayas, who has been an international pariah for years, had no such concerns. In fact, Isayas may have seen the continued mobilization against the TPLF as being a useful justification for the militarized form of governance, including mandatory conscription, that has facilitated his 30-year rule, albeit pushing many people out of the country in the process.

## DIVERGENCE POST-COHA

At present, Ethiopia-Eritrea relations are influenced by four main factors. These include, the ongoing insurgency in the Amhara region (and alleged involvement of Eritrea); Ethiopia's renewed search for a seaport, which has intensified since October 2023; relatedly, Abiy's aspiration to assert Ethiopia's position as a regional hegemon; and finally, divergent foreign policy agendas, particularly with respect to relations with Western countries and the Gulf states.

### THE AMHARA FANO INSURGENCY

Since August 2023, Amhara nationalist *Fano* militia groups from across the region, some of which participated in the Tigray war, have been engaged in an insurgency against the regional and federal governments. This has resulted in an ongoing state of emergency and governance under military

12 Richard Reid, 'Eritrea's involvement in Tigray could backfire', Blog, LSE, 31 January 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/01/31/eritreas-involvement-in-tigray-could-backfire-tplf-conflict/>.

13 Abel Abate Demisse, 'Navigating the regionalization of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict', Chatham House, 8 September 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/navigating-regionalization-ethiopia-tigray-conflict/about-author>, 14-15.

14 The ENDF occupied Mekelle from November 2020 - June 2021.

15 'EHRC-OHCHR Joint Investigation Report on Tigray Conflict', EHRC, 3 November 2021, <https://ehrc.org/download/ehrc-ohchr-joint-investigation-report-on-tigray-conflict/>.

16 Ethiopia's regional states, which made a significant military contribution during the war, particularly the Amhara region, were also excluded, a fact that has contributed to the breakdown in relations and start of an armed insurgency. For more on the Fano insurgency see Atrsaw Necho and Yared Debebe, 'Understanding the Fano insurgency in Ethiopia's Amhara region', Rift Valley Institute, February 2024.

17 Reid, 'Eritrea's involvement in Tigray could backfire'.

command post. In common with Eritrea, Fano groups felt that the Amhara region was excluded from the negotiation of the CoHA, despite their heavy involvement in the conflict. In particular, they fear that the federal government may side with Tigray regarding the future of areas disputed between the Tigray and Amhara regions (Wolqayt-Tsegede, Raya and Tselemt), which are currently under Amhara administration. As well as their shared grievance over the CoHA, Eritrea may see the Amhara region as a useful ally in its quest to eliminate, or at least weaken, the threat they perceive as being posed by the TPLF, whose members control the interim regional administration (IRA) in Mekelle. To this end, it is rumoured, although difficult to verify, that Eritrea has armed and trained some Fano groups that are currently involved in the insurgency, but the scale of their involvement is difficult to determine.<sup>18</sup> However, the perception of Eritrean involvement in the Fano insurgency—if not necessarily the reality—has been a significant factor in, and outcome from, the deterioration of relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara.

### ETHIOPIA'S SEARCH FOR A SEAPORT

In common with Ethiopian leaders before him, part of Abiy's plan to re-establish Ethiopia's dominant position in the region is by (re)securing control over a seaport.<sup>19</sup> Ethiopia has relied on Djibouti port for the bulk of its maritime trade since the border war in 1998, and while it has sought to diversify its port access, including through Lamu (Kenya) and Berbera (Somaliland),<sup>20</sup> only Djibouti can currently fulfil its needs. This has made Ethiopia excessively dependent on one port, meaning that Djibouti controls rents, rates, and transit fees for goods that Ethiopia imports.<sup>21</sup>

Abiy's interest in acquiring a seaport attracted headlines in October 2023 when he made a speech that emphasized the economic struggles resulting from limited access to international trade.<sup>22</sup> Abiy also specifically referred to the Red Sea, and the 'narrow strip of land that separates us from the sea'—a reference to the Eritrean coastal strip that includes the port of Assab.<sup>23</sup> The speech was widely interpreted as a sign Ethiopia was prepared to obtain a port by force, although Abiy also stated that economic exchange through a stake in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) or the country's flagship carrier, Ethiopian Airlines, could be part of any deal Ethiopia would make for a port. Following Abiy's speech, Eritrean officials stated that their country has no intention of discussing Ethiopia's access to the sea.<sup>24</sup>

One reason for Asmara's concern with Abiy's speech, even though no specific indication was given that Ethiopia would attempt to take control of an Eritrean port by force, stems from the historical tendency

18 For a brief discussion of Eritrea's alleged role in the insurgency see Necho and Debebe, 'Understanding the Fano Insurgency', 10.

19 Others argue that under the EPRDF Ethiopia achieved that aspiration without owning a seaport.

20 Ethiopia signed an agreement with Somaliland and the Emirate group Dubai Ports World in March 2018 to develop the port, with Ethiopia taking a 19 per cent stake. The agreement collapsed in 2022 due to the reported failure of Addis Ababa to honour its original financial commitment. 'Ethiopia loses its 19pc stake in Berbera port: Somaliland minister', *The East African*, 11 June 2022, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/ethiopia-stake-in-port-of-berbera-3845366>.

21 A study by the World Bank in 2013 revealed that 85 per cent of Djibouti's port activities are related to Ethiopia's import. See: 'Djibouti looks to Ethiopia to gauge its economic future', ISS, 3 May 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/djibouti-looks-to-ethiopia-to-gauge-its-economic-future>.

22 'Red Sea takes center stage as Ethiopia looks to assert regional presence', *The Reporter*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/36980/>.

23 Brian Kinyua, 'Ethiopia's Sea Access Ambitions Leave Neighbors Uneasy', *The Maritime Executive*, 22 October, 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/ethiopia-s-new-desire-for-a-red-sea-port-leaves-neighbors-uneasy>.

24 'Eritrea says it will not engage in sea access-related issues', *Ethiopia Observer*, 16 October 2023, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2023/10/16/eritrea-says-it-will-not-engage-in-sea-access-related-issues/>. Ethiopia's other neighbours, particularly Djibouti and Somalia, were also quick to express their opposition about PM Abiy's statement.

for Ethiopia to view Eritrea as being part of its territory.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the speech Abiy suggested that both Assab and Zeila (situated in present day Somaliland) once formed a part of historic Ethiopia. Some Ethiopians, including high-profile scholars, believe that the TPLF should have kept control of a port when Eritrea seceded in 1993.<sup>26</sup> Such arguments have made Eritrea more wary about Ethiopian overtures around port access. Other observers believe that Asmara saw Abiy's speech as a major provocation due to its tendency to interpret events in militaristic terms and its need to maintain the sense of an Ethiopian threat to justify its state of continuing mobilization.<sup>27</sup>

The Memorandum of Understanding signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland in January 2024, albeit taking the attention away from a possible Ethiopian move for Assab, served to demonstrate that Abiy is serious about obtaining a seaport and not afraid of sparking a diplomatic row in his quest to get one. In response, Isayas invited the Somali president, Hasan Sheikh Mohamud, to Asmara where they reportedly engaged in 'profound talks'—a muted signal of their shared unhappiness.<sup>28</sup>

### DIVERGENT FOREIGN POLICY TRAJECTORIES

On top of recent attempts to secure a seaport, Ethiopia and Eritrea are diverging in other areas of their foreign policy. First, following the CoHA, Ethiopia has sought to re-engage with Western countries, particularly by demonstrating a willingness to resolve conflicts, particularly the insurgency in the Oromia region. This may be partly motivated by Addis Ababa's need to secure loan agreements from international financial institutions in an effort to stabilize its ailing economy. Asmara, in contrast, has continued to pay little heed to such considerations, even officially siding with Russia in its invasion of Ukraine.

The two countries are also plugged into another regional rivalry in the Gulf: between UAE and Saudi Arabia. While Abiy has benefitted from Emirate support, including military hardware and financial disbursements for major projects,<sup>29</sup> Asmara's most significant supporter in the Gulf is Saudi Arabia, which sees it as a valuable client through which it can project power in the Red Sea region. To this end, Eritrea was made a member of the Saudi-backed Red Sea Council, which Ethiopia was not able to join due to its lack of a Red Sea coast (a point that neatly illustrates its current predicament).<sup>30</sup>

Major developments in the region not directly related to Ethiopia-Eritrea relations are also important. For example, the Sudan war has led to the development of two loose alliances favourable to the different conflict actors. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are backed by Egypt, which historically has had a close relationship with the SAF, and Eritrea, which sees its interests in eastern Sudan, including ensuring that its allies and not its enemies are in power, as being better protected by its alliance

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25 Most of Eritrea was under Ethiopian control until Italy's occupation in the nineteenth century.

26 See, for example, Belai Abbai and Zeru Kehishen, 'Meles' Assab Policy Threatens Ethiopia's National Security', 15 July 2000, [https://www.ethiopians.com/belai\\_and\\_zeru.htm](https://www.ethiopians.com/belai_and_zeru.htm).

27 Richard Reid, 'Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Ethiopia-Eritrea Case Study', Stabilisation Unit, February 2018, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c19105eed915dob753d1560/Ethiopia\\_Eritrea\\_case\\_study.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c19105eed915dob753d1560/Ethiopia_Eritrea_case_study.pdf).

28 Ministry of Information, Eritrea, Press Statement, 9 January 2024, <https://shabait.com/2024/01/09/press-statement-63/>.

29 This allegedly includes the building of the Chaka palace complex in Addis Ababa.

30 Somaliland, Turkey and the UAE were also excluded. The Council theoretically deals with matters such as the development of port facilities, security, and irregular migration in the Red Sea area, all of which are concerns for Ethiopia, but has been slow to operationalize this agenda. See, Desirée Custers, 'Red Sea Multilateralism: Power Politics or Unlocked Potential', Commentary, Stimson Centre, 7 April 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/red-sea-multilateralism-power-politics-or-unlocked-potential/>.

with the SAF, rather than the RSF.<sup>31</sup> Ethiopia, in contrast, has appeared more friendly with the RSF (also allegedly backed by UAE through weapons supplied via eastern Chad<sup>32</sup>), including a one-to-one meeting between Abiy and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti', the RSF leader, in December 2023 as part of the latter's regional tour.<sup>33</sup>

Another key regional dynamic, which has influenced the relationship between Addis Ababa and Asmara, is the long-running Egyptian opposition to Ethiopia's construction of the GERD. Fearing that the dam would impact its control over the Nile, which Cairo sees as an existential threat, it has attempted to destabilize Ethiopia through the backing of proxy-forces, including some that were given safe-haven in Asmara prior to the rapprochement in 2018.

## CONCLUSION

Relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara have taken several significant shifts since Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia in 2018. This started with an initial, tentative rapprochement; blossomed into a fully-fledged military alliance to defeat the TPLF; and then rapidly deteriorated post-war and in the face of Abiy's pursuit of a seaport. The reason for these rapid shifts may be connected to differences in what the two countries see as being of fundamental importance in their relationship. For Asmara, the main driver of its relationship with Addis is its desire to combat the TPLF, which it continues to see as an existential security threat in the region. This, by extension, has driven it towards closer relations with the Amhara region, which has its own dispute with Tigray. Addis's considerations, however, are not so narrow, with Abiy needing to factor in his national political objectives, including combatting opposition in Amhara and Oromia, plus the international imperative of sustaining a peace deal with Tigray. In a sense, the fundamental drivers of the relationship have not changed very much since 2018, even if the short-term context has. This suggests that volatility is likely to be baked-in for some time to come, particularly as the Horn of Africa in general, and Ethiopia specifically, experience a period of tumultuous change and widespread conflict.

31 Since late 2023, SAF and Asmara have worked together to establish new military forces in eastern Sudan intended to protect the area from RSF attack, and potentially participate in a future offensive against the group.

32 'Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Sudan', January 2024, 11-14.

33 Abiy wasn't alone amongst regional leaders willing to meet Hemedti. The RSF leader has also met with Presidents Ruto of Kenya, Museveni of Uganda and Kiir in South Sudan. Pre-war, the relationship between Khartoum and Addis was antagonistic without ever being explicitly hostile. The most significant flashpoint was the disputed Fashaga region on the two countries' shared border, which SAF took control of during the Tigray conflict. Both sides have also had some engagement with the other's armed opposition groups, including the TPLF, which Khartoum permitted to operate rear bases in eastern Sudan, and opposition groups in Benishangul-Gumuz region, whose activities were facilitated by Sudanese military intelligence. For more on this see: 'Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil war and fragile peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's borderlands', Rift Valley Institute, March 2023, 32-33.

## CREDITS

This research paper is based on research carried out by Firehiwot Sintayehu, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University.

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