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The Geopolitical Setting in the Horn of Africa and Building Durable Peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia

In mid-2018, the world witnessed three sudden developments in the Horn of Africa. First, the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia; second, the lifting of the UN imposed sanctions on Eritrea; and third, the signing of the tripartite agreement between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia.

These developments generated high hopes and great expectations that the era of bitter hostility and frozen conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia would come to an end and the process of healing the wounds of an unnecessary, avoidable and destructive war would begin. That reconciliation between the two countries would help promote peace, security and stability in the Horn of Africa. And that stable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia would create a conducive climate for a new relationship of political and economic cooperation in the region.

It is quite clear that the tentacles of the conflict system in the highly strategic but extremely volatile region of the Horn of Africa extend to the adjacent Red Sea Basin and the Nile River Basin. The Horn of Africa is home to fragile states and dysfunctional regimes. It is a region known for its turbulence, democratic deficit and malgovernance, producing massive internal population displacements and extreme poverty for the large majority of the peoples.

Furthermore, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Basin host the active military and naval presence of several world powers in the context of an intensifying geopolitical rivalry. The former US preoccupation with the so-called *war on terror* has given way to an increasing Sino-American competition for bases, ports and access to resources, markets and investment opportunities. There prevails a precarious alignment of forces and a constantly shifting mix of regional and international alliances.

The peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia has yet to be secured. In Eritrea, a brutal regime has brought about economic ruin, political paralysis and societal disintegration, turning the country into an earthly inferno. Ethiopia is facing the pains and pangs of transition, fuelling great uncertainty. Conflict prevails within and between regional states, fanning inter-ethnic strife and internal displacement that exert a negative impact on economic development. Structural instability looms large, with no clear strategy or national consensus on the future political configuration of the Ethiopian State.

Beyond Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Tripartite Agreement between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia has not brought the three countries any closer. The standoff between Eritrea and Djibouti remains unresolved. The government of Somalia has yet to exercise central authority over its entire national territory. Civil war and internecine killings have badly scarred South Sudan.

The popular resistance movement in Sudan, having won the initial battles, continues to face serious challenges in consolidating democratic governance.

It is against the backdrop of this geopolitical context that we must take stock of the evolution of events on the ground in the Horn of Africa, in general, and in the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as their respective internal situation, in particular. Given the lessons learned from the experience of 1991 to 1998, the apparent parallel between the personal relationships of Isaias and Meles post-independence and those of Isaias and Abiy post-rapprochement should be a cause of concern. The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has yet to deliver peace and institutionalised normal relations between the two countries. Normalised bilateral relations must be predicated on the removal of the trigger of the war, namely, the definitive resolution of the boundary issue.

Despite the public declaration on 5 June 2018 by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia's unconditional acceptance of the EEBC's boundary decision, neither the demarcation of the boundary nor the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops or Tigrayan administration and settlements from occupied Eritrean territory has taken place. The four border crossings reopened between the two countries with considerable fanfare have been abruptly closed. The Ethiopia-Eritrean Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship remains mere ink on paper.

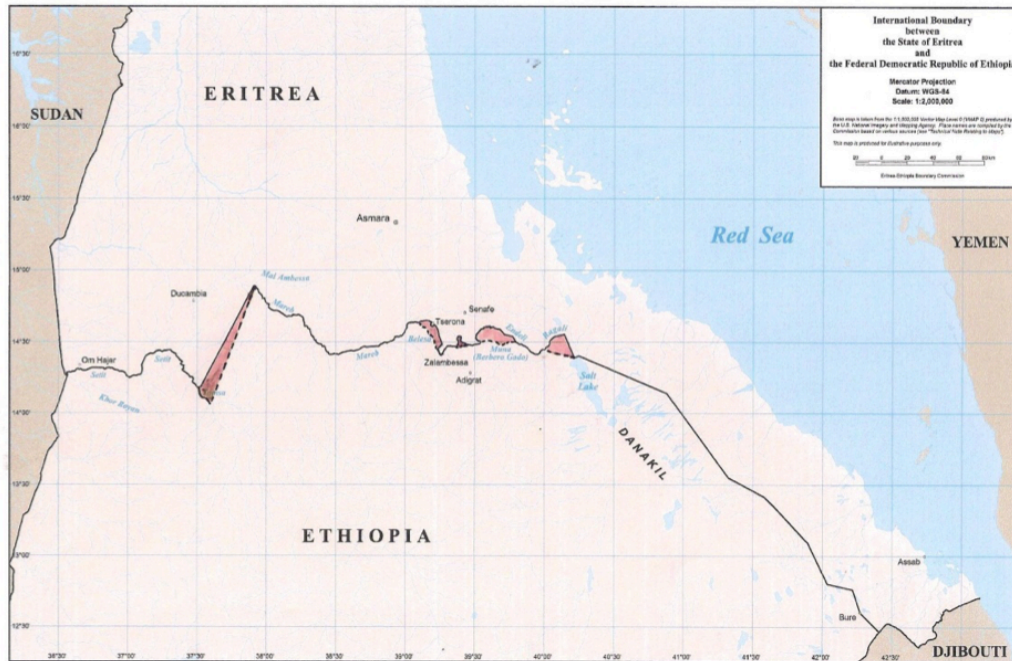
So, nearly two years on since the signing of the joint declaration of peace and friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, it seems that we are still on square one. No decisive steps have been taken to address the trigger or the underlying cause of the conflict or resolve the issue of the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The *status quo* demonstrates the precarious nature of the peace and overall relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as the structural instability of the two states in the setting of a highly volatile region.

Durable peace requires that Ethiopia recognise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea, both in word and in deed, and withdraw its troops and the Tigrayan administration and settlements from the occupied Eritrean territory as a gesture of goodwill to help build confidence and allow the displaced populations to return to their home villages and rebuild normal livelihood. It also requires that Ethiopia and Eritrea normalise and institutionalise their interstate relations. Once transparent state to state relations are set, all outstanding issues between the two countries can be resolved peacefully through bilateral consultation, negotiation or, if need be, third party facilitation.

First and foremost on the agenda items for resolution should be the boundary issue. The decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission allows the two countries to agree on their common border. Failing such an agreement, the EEBC decision is *final and binding*. In the context of cordial relations and reciprocal goodwill, a feasible solution that ensures durable peace between the two countries is possible.

Given the African norm, principle and practice of the sanctity of colonial borders, upheld under international customary law, the affirmation of the historical colonial treaty border would avail

a durable solution. It would also cause the least disruption of life, relations and national identity of the people on both sides in the borderlands. In a very real sense, settling the border issue on the basis of the colonial treaties will be a test of the federal Ethiopian government's and the TPLF's sincerity of seeking durable peace with Eritrea.



As a source of livelihood and identity, land in Eritrea is an ancestral heritage, duly codified under local customary laws. Land belongs to the village, irrespective of whether it is privately or communally owned, and each village possesses precise knowledge of the limits of its land vis-à-vis the other neighbouring villages, including the ones across the border. The physical demarcation of the boundary based on the colonial treaties can thus be informed by consultations with panels of elders in the borderland villages on both sides and facilitated by the expertise of the UN Cartographic Unit.

Today more than ever before, it has become increasingly clear that authoritarian rule in Eritrea is untenable, instability in Ethiopia is dire and peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia is precarious. Durable peace and viable bilateral cooperation require a transformed Eritrea and a stabilised Ethiopia, with both states committed to a constitutional order, democratic governance and inclusive development. It is possible to envision the evolution, in due course, of a new relationship built on common strategic interests and shared values of a future of peace, progress and prosperity for Eritrea, Ethiopia and the region at large.