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## Assertive foreign policy in a ‘bad neighbourhood’: Eritrean foreign policy making

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### *Abstract*

This paper interrogates certain aspects of Eritrean foreign policy making processes since independence. It analyses Eritrea's actions in the region, ranging from constructive engagement to the country's various conflicts with all its regional neighbours, including the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, and Eritrea's wider global attempts at diplomatic and foreign policy engagement. The paper argues that while Eritrea's assertive and often rather un-diplomatic foreign policy overtures are partly to blame for the country's negative image as an international actor, any attempt at developing an independent foreign policy by Eritrea needs, at the same time, to be understood within the wider context of the Horn of Africa and the Ethiopian ambition to act as and maintain the status as regional hegemon. Thus, Eritrean foreign policy objectives were always bound to run into problems once they diverged from Ethiopia's own interests. In addition, Ethiopia became an increasingly important actor in the global war on terror and its manifestations in the Horn of Africa, thus its interpretation of and intransigence over relations with Eritrea became the dominant representation of Eritrea as an inherently belligerent state. Such a reading ignores that ultimately Eritrea's foreign policy engagement asserts the right of every nation to defend its own interests in light of international law and global treaties, regardless of global power dynamics.

### **1. Introduction**

When looking at the foreign policy of Eritrea as a newly independent state, one can do so from a number of vantage points. Those include an in-depth analysis of how foreign policy is deeply intertwined with the state making or state creating process of Eritrea and its ideological underpinnings (see Müller, 2006). One can also analyse Eritrean foreign policy as embedded into wider liberation movement discourse and practice, ultimately aimed at transforming international relations for Africa and in the Eritrean case most pronounced in the dream of

the Greater Horn (Verhoeven, 2016).

The focus in this paper is more modest in that it analyses Eritrean foreign policy making within the specific context of the Horn of Africa and its quasi-neighbouring states across the Red Sea. It demonstrates how Eritrean foreign policy is embedded within the wider political geography of the Horn as a region, as well as underpinned by Eritrean identity politics and long-term survival strategies in a contested geopolitical environment. In doing so, the paper provides a rationale for Eritrean foreign policy actions and moves beyond seeing Eritrea as a rogue state mainly characterised by support for ‘international terrorism’ and human rights violations.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the paper shows that Eritrean foreign policy action has a clear logic behind it and ultimately follows common foreign policy patterns in the Horn. Eritrea also provides a good example for the assertion advanced here that developments within the global system not only relegate African states to peripheral players but at the same time offer new opportunities to reorient their foreign policies in positive and constructive – or indeed destructive ways.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, the Horn as a particular environment is being introduced before the focus turns to the facet in Eritrean foreign policy making that has received most scholarly attention: Eritrea’s violent conflicts with all its neighbours. Methodologically, the paper is mainly based on the analysis of secondary sources (including, in addition to scholarly publications produced by think-tanks, WikiLeaks cables and other grey sources, as well as personal observations and encounters, where appropriate, from the years 1996-2016). The paper thus does not aim to discuss Eritrean foreign policy in all its facets, nor does it aim to provide an insight view of how major Eritrean government or military actors present foreign policy objectives themselves. The latter would in any case not be possible in any comprehensive way, as important actors have been imprisoned since 2001 and the only access to their interpretation is through interviews and conversations before their arrest (see Connell, 2005 for important insights). Rather, the paper provides an interpretation of some of the major foreign policy engagements in light of Eritrea’s assertive

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<sup>1</sup> For such a characterisation and its discontents see, for example, Simon Tisdall, ‘Eritrea: victim or newest rogue state?’, *The Guardian*, 21 September 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/sep/21/simontisdall.international>; Tanja Müller, ‘Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa’, *World Politics Review*, 17 September 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa>.

foreign policy stance with the objective to analyse how Eritrean foreign policy endeavours are grounded in common patterns of mutual engagement in the Horn, as well as driven by deeply held ideological beliefs.

## **2. The Horn of Africa as a challenging environment**

The Horn of Africa as a region has for decades been characterised by a number of distinct characteristics. Those include firstly contested borders between and within states, as well as prolonged periods of intra state violence and proxy wars not only threatening governments but also the survival of states themselves (Abbink, 2003; Woodward, 1996). It is thus no coincidence that the only two African states who gained independence through separation and fought for in long liberation wars, Eritrea and South Sudan, are both located in the Horn.

Secondly, with imperial Ethiopia the Horn had an “indigenous imperial state” (Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhill and Rothchild, 1992: 345) that at the same time regarded the control of its local periphery as an “historic mission or manifest destiny” (Clapham, 1984). Ethiopia assuming this role of regional hegemon had important implications for foreign policy dynamics of the wider region. It also impacted on the types of states that emerged in the post-imperial period in the Horn, perhaps in no case more so than Eritrea’s, as Eritrean independence had profound repercussions for Ethiopia’s control of the periphery not least in relation to its direct access to the Red Sea.

Thirdly, whereas superpower disinterest has been the norm in most of Africa from the 1960s onwards, the Horn of Africa has proved one of the few exceptions (the other being parts of Southern Africa) due to its strategic position. Up to the 1990s and the end of the Cold War, the Horn as a whole was “affected by a longer history of superpower engagement and competition than any other part of sub-Saharan Africa, and this in turn deeply affected the foreign policies of its constituent states” (Clapham, 1999: 84). Particularly on the history of Eritrea these outside powers had a decisive impact, even if to discuss this in detail goes beyond this paper (for a detailed discussion see Frankland and Noble, 1996; Ruth Iyob, 1997). Of late, within the international war on terror, Eritrea’s strategic importance – with its long Red Sea coastline and its proximity to Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula – has come to the forefront again.

Another entry point in order to better understand wider political dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the relationships between the Horn's key constituent states has been proposed in the latest book by Alex de Waal (2015). Largely based on his long-term experiences in Darfur, which are subsequently applied to the Horn as a whole, De Waal proposes the concept of "political marketplace" to grasp political dynamics in the Horn. He thus analyses the contested political geography of the Horn, its proxy wars, its mutual policies of destabilisation and shifting alliances as a business model in which politicians, generals and insurgents bargain over money and power in order to achieve their objectives. Power in this model rests on the ability of rent-maximisation from activities such as oil or mineral exports, aid funds, or Western military assistance for counterterrorism and peacekeeping.

This political marketplace is, according to De Waal, eroding institutions of government and is reversing previous state-building agendas. When applied to the example of Ethiopia, De Waal, who was a great admirer of the late Meles Zenawi, argues that Zenawi managed the Ethiopian post-liberation state building process successfully in centralising control over rents in his office and then use those rents for developmental ends that fostered legitimacy. In Eritrea in contrast, De Waal argues that an originally ideological state-building project has been transformed into political-business management – a claim that, as this paper will demonstrate at the end, fails to grasp the essence of Eritrean foreign engagement.

Overall, while De Waal's analysis remains too one-dimensional and superficial, his overall approach is adding a useful lens to understanding policy dynamics in the Horn. It puts the focus on material factors that often drive change instead of dwelling on cultural factors that try to explain continuities. And a focus on those material dynamics and the political marketplace that the Horn also is (if not exclusively), does allow to stress the considerable amount of agency exercised by African actors that is often ignored in the study of International Relations. The way this agency has been exercised in Eritrean foreign policy-making will be discussed in some detail in the following sections.

### **3. Violent conflicts and Eritrean foreign policy-making: from 1991 to the present**

While the main focus of this paper is on the years from 1991 onwards, a brief reminder of some of the legacies that the Eritrean state-making process and the long struggle for political independence imprinted on foreign policy priorities of the new state are important in order to more fully comprehend major foreign policy engagements. Important legacies include the sense of identity that was formed not only in the successful military struggle against Ethiopia as the Horn's hegemonic power or Eritrea's African colonializer, but also against the wider geopolitical interests and agendas of both sides of the Cold War (see for example Wrong, 2005). A visible symbol of the latter was the former National Museum in Asmara that in parts of the 1990s was inside the grounds of what is now the presidential palace: there, a comprehensive exhibition of weapons captured by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) from Ethiopian forces was displayed – and provided ample evidence that from capitalist to former socialist states wide and far, all had provided often substantial military support to the Ethiopian side – as is also attested to when visiting the so-called 'tank cemetery' on the outskirts of Asmara.

A glorified version of this process became an important part of the foundational myth of Eritrean statehood, culminating in the narrative that Eritrea has suffered a long history of betrayal by outside powers and can ultimately only rely on itself and not least its military strength. Having achieved victory over Ethiopia and its, on paper, vastly superior army "against all odds" in the trenches of Nakfa and beyond cemented a belief in Eritrea's own military superiority over its bigger neighbour (Connell, 1997).<sup>2</sup>

The way by which Eritrea achieved independent statehood, as the outcome of a prolonged struggle from within as well as to important degrees from the diaspora, made securing and safeguarding its territory an overarching concern. In that, Eritrea can be described as a typical diasporic state where statehood was pre-

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<sup>2</sup> In this heroic narrative, there is little room for the internal dissent within the liberation movement that was brutally suppressed, nor disputes with regional allies, all of which remained important to different degrees in the post-independence period. This paper cannot engage with those issues in detail but see Pool, 2001 and Reid, 2009.

ceded by the development of a nation as an imagined political community.<sup>3</sup> In line with this, for many Eritreans the national symbol of their nationhood is the outline of the map, rather than the flag or the official national symbol, the camel. Every year on the twenty-fourth of May, the anniversary of Eritrean independence, shops all over the country, but especially so in the capital, Asmara, have congratulatory messages written onto their windows, accompanied by a drawing of the Eritrean map. A soldier in an interview with me in 1999, at the frontline of Tsorona, one of the flashpoints during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, put it this way: “The land of Eritrea, that is what we are, this earth, these trees ... if you take our land away, we cease to exist, so that is why we are here, that is what I am fighting for, that is what our martyrs died for.”

Lastly, keenly aware of the Horn as a contested environment in which shifting alliances and power dynamics play an important role, Eritrea had already during the liberation war sought out alliances in line with the EPLF's wider objectives – and those were always in flux and often shifting. Initially, the EPLF aligned itself with other states and movements rejecting Ethiopia's hegemonic aspirations, namely Somalia, Sudan and opposition movements within Ethiopia – especially Oromo movements as well as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Somalia was hostile to Ethiopia because of the question of the Ogaden and provided EPLF officials with diplomatic Somali passports – which in turn led the EPLF to develop supportive relations with Somali opposition groups within Ethiopia. Sudan, angered by Ethiopian support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan, permitted the EPLF access through its border region and the establishment of a major supply system to northern Eritrea via Port Sudan, as well as the establishment of the EPLF's major foreign office in Khartoum. Strategic relations with the TPLF were always more contested, but when TPLF led forces took over the government of Ethiopia in parallel with the EPLF's victory in Eritrea, and the new Ethiopian government agreed to Eritrean independence after a referendum confirmed this as the clear wish of the Eritrean people, a new area of foreign policy relations in the Horn seemed on the horizon (Müller, 2007; Young, 1996).

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on diasporic states, for which Israel serves as paradigmatic example, and their overarching concerns with borders and territorial integrity, see Ruth Iyob, 2000.

If nothing else, the Horn in Eritrea gained a new independent actor, ready to pursue an assertive foreign policy born out of the belief that its interests were of equal importance to those of Ethiopia and other major players. Eritrean foreign policy was thus from the start guided by a regional dimension as well as, at least in the initial years, by a recognition that the new state's own objectives were best served when they could be aligned with those of major global powers.

#### A. 1991-1993: a period of *détente*

The initial years after the end of Eritrea's liberation war, when Eritrea was de-facto independent but not a fully recognised independent state yet, saw a brief period of *détente* in the Horn and the wider region. In those years, the new leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, President Issayas Afwerki and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, but also the leaders of Sudan and Djibouti, made a real attempt to break the patterns of mutual interference into each other's affairs. An important vehicle in that was the then Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) that became the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa in 1996 (Cliffe, 1999). During those two years, through IGADD and other mechanisms, an effort was made to create a climate of mutual trust – this was aided by the fact that in the post-Cold-War era all sides had an incentive to pursue close links with the United States (US).

Indeed, the new leaders of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda and Uganda in particular were hailed as a new type of African leaders by the US, leaders who would pursue a new style of politics more broadly (Ottaway, 1999). From the US point of view this relationship was an important strategy to isolate the so-called Islamist government in Sudan, where Omar al-Bashir had become President in 1989 and in fact attended Eritrean independence celebrations in 1993. US interests and the benefits of a potential alignment with those already indicated that the *détente* would in all likelihood be short-lived. For Eritrea, contradictions arose soon enough between to either side with US interests or retain a focus on more regional dynamics. One might have expected the continuation of amicable relations between Eritrea and Sudan, given that the Sudanese government had been the most important regional ally of the EPLF in serving as a staging base, conduit for arms and aid, and providing refuge for hundreds of thousands of



Eritrean refugees. But the first partly violent conflict between Eritrea and one of its neighbours occurred with Sudan.

## B. Violent conflicts of differing intensity: Sudan, Yemen and Ethiopia

### *i. Low-intensity conflict with Sudan*

In the conflict with Sudan, a low-intensity conflict by regional standards, in line with subsequent conflicts with its other neighbours, Eritrean actions were guided by the overarching objectives to secure its borders and maintain independent decision-making power against any foreign country.

Political tensions between Asmara and Khartoum developed already in 1992, even before Eritrea was officially independent. In the western lowlands of Eritrea, in the border area with Sudan, an armed insurgency group called the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) tried to infiltrate Eritrean territory but were fought back by EPLF forces. The Eritrean side was from the beginning suspicious about involvement of the government in Khartoum in supporting the EIJM, a charge Khartoum denied. After Eritrean independence tensions between Eritrea and Sudan intensified. In response to renewed battles between members of the EIJM and Eritrean government forces in 1993, Eritrea lodged an official protest against Sudan with the UN Security Council (UNSC). In December 1994, Eritrea finally broke off diplomatic relations with Sudan and in the following year a conference of Sudanese opposition groups was hosted in Asmara. In due course the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Sudanese anti-Islamist opposition made up of nine organisations, the most important of which being the SPLA, established its official headquarters in Asmara, on the premises of the former and by then defunct Sudanese embassy. At the same time, Eritrean president Issayas Afwerki announced his preparedness to support Sudanese opposition groups intended on overthrowing the government in Khartoum (Lefebvre, 1995).

In many ways, Eritrea's reaction presented a harsh move, as the EIJM had few followers in Eritrea even among those critical of the EPLF/PFDJ government, and never posed a real threat to Eritrea – even if Eritrea was wary of the wider Islamist message as it might spread to its own Muslim population groups. More

importantly at the time, Eritrea wanted to prove to the US its support of the anti-Islamist agenda – Sudan was on the US list of terrorist states since 1993.<sup>4</sup> In a further step in relation to this show of strategic support, Eritrea (and Ethiopia), together with only three other African states (Uganda, Rwanda and Angola), joined the so-called Coalition of the Willing against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003, a move that was also financially beneficial (see also Fisher, 2013).

Eritrean relations with Sudan remained strained until the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia war, a war that changed wider constellations in the Horn in profound ways, not least because both, Eritrea and Ethiopia, now courted Sudan as an ally (Africa Confidential, 1999; Plaut, 2013). Eritrea reached a reconciliation agreement with Sudan in 2000 followed by a visit of President al-Bashir to Asmara. Sudanese opposition groups were told to keep a low profile from then on and move to the coastal town of Massawa, and Eritrea subsequently played a constructive role in the Sudanese peace process that culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 that paved the way for the independence of South Sudan.

*ii. Violent clashes over territorial boundaries with Yemen*

The second more violent conflict Eritrea was involved in relates in a more direct way to boundary issues and territorial integrity. It was a conflict with Yemen over the Hanish Island, located in the Red Sea between both countries, though exact boundaries had been vague since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The islands had been used by local fisherman of both countries without any problems, but then became important in the context of potential benefits from economic exclusion zones. In addition, geopolitical ambitions by various external actors, including Saudi-Arabia and Israel, brought the islands briefly into the limelight (Lefebvre, 1998; Stansfield, 2001).

To lay more concrete claims to the islands and their economic potential, Yemen started a tourist development on one of the islands, and in response Eritrean

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<sup>4</sup> I have had my own personal experience with behind-the-scenes US influence in Eritrean-Sudanese relations: I was in Tessenei on the border with Sudan when Eritrea officially closed its border to Sudan, and encountered under-cover US Special Forces who operated in the region. Subsequently, during the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, many of the maps of the region used by the UN were based on CIA-produced maps.

troops occupied the island in December 1995 to prevent a *fait accompli*. After swiftly gaining military control, Eritrea readily agreed to international arbitration. The Eritrea-Yemen arbitration tribunal completed its work in December 1999 and both sides accepted the ruling – Yemen was awarded the main group of islands but traditional rights of fishermen from both countries were upheld in the ruling (Reisman, 1999: 2000).

More generally, the fact that Eritrea, the country that had won the conflict militarily, readily accepted the ruling was then seen as an encouraging sign for future conflict resolution mechanisms in the wider region (Johnson, 2000). It also supported the Eritrean assertion that Eritrea in fact based its international claims on treaties and international law, and was not *per se* pursuing a militarized foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> This assertion is in many ways important to understand Eritrea's stance in relation to the major violent conflict in its short post-independence history, the conflict that in many ways has determined its foreign (and domestic) policy since the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia.

### *iii. The 1998-2000 periodically all-out-war with Ethiopia*

The 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia has in many ways become a defining moment in Eritrea's post-independence history, not only in relation to foreign policy dynamics. Much has been written about the conflict and its underlying dynamics, and shall not be repeated here (see for example Tekeste Negash and Tronvoll, 2001; Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, 2005). What is noteworthy, though, are some of the main dynamics behind the outbreak of the war and its conduct, as these go to the core of Eritrean identity and how it regarded itself within the wider geopolitical environment of the Horn (Trivelli, 1998). In essence, Eritrea saw itself as an important regional actor that could compete with Ethiopia on equal terms. This was bolstered by its buoyant economic performance, visible not only in high rates of economic growth (as far as this could be verified as no national accounts exist or are made available) but also the fact that it could negotiate funding from multilateral donors like the World Bank on its own terms (Fengler, 2001). Lastly, there was a powerful belief, fed by the memory of victory in the liberation war, that Eritrea would ultimately prevail in any military (and political)

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<sup>5</sup> For a different analysis that regards Eritrean foreign policy as predominately aggressive and militarized, and sees this stance mirrored in domestic policy, see Salih O. Nur, 2013.

contest - a belief also held by the Ethiopian side (Michael Woldemariam and Young, 2016).

Having started in the small hamlet of Badme, the war was fought in various bouts of heavy fighting that included World War I style human-wave attacks by the Ethiopian side, interrupted by various attempts in between to come to a negotiated solution aided by outside powers, including the US and Rwanda. Ultimately, following the last major offensive of the war, Eritrea lost the war in military terms. Even though the Eritrean leadership disputes the latter, claiming the fact that Ethiopia had marched through its defences in western Eritrea and occupied almost a third of Eritrean territory did not make Eritrea the loser, as Ethiopia had not achieved its alleged war aims of conquering the capital Asmara and the port of Assab, that same leadership signed a settlement in May 2000 far worse than any of the negotiated solutions that were on the table earlier on.<sup>6</sup>

The 'Algiers Accord', the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities signed in June 2000, paved the way for the appointment of an independent Boundary Commission tasked with delimiting and subsequently demarcating the contested border based on colonial treaties and international law. Similar as the arbitration process with Yemen, it was hailed as another model accord for such kinds of conflict, in particular as both sides had agreed to this international arbitration and to accept the verdict of the Boundary Commission as final and binding. In its ruling in 2002, the Boundary Commission – while avoiding direct reference to the now highly symbolic town of Badme, did award the town to Eritrea. With this, it technically vindicated the Eritrean claim that Eritrea had in fact acted in defence of its territory, even if the investigations into actual dynamics in May 1998, the outbreak of the war, found that Eritrea had clearly overreacted in sending in troops of the strength it did. One could thus say both sides got something from the actual verdict (Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, 2005; Müller, 2006).

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<sup>6</sup> This narrative, that Ethiopia lost the war as it did not achieve the ultimate prize of conquering Asmara and Assab, something the Ethiopian leadership had denied throughout were its aims, was repeated again by various members of the audience, including a high-profile Eritrean government official, at a discussion of this paper at the International Conference on Eritrean Studies in Asmara, July 20-22, 2016. This indicates a troubling failure to recognise battlefield outcomes on the ground by key Eritrean actors even with hindsight.

In spite of the supposedly final and binding character of the verdict, Ethiopia has refused its implementation, and the result has been a stalemate with numerous repercussions since. With hindsight, the Algiers Agreement thus proved to be not the model accord to end this and potentially other border disputes as had been hoped in 2000, but has been a key factor in the destabilisation of the wider Horn.

### C. The post 2000 stalemate and the Global War on Terror: From charm offensive to isolation to renewed engagement

Even before the actual Boundary Commission verdict, the repercussions of having been forced to sign the Algiers Accord were felt shortly afterwards within Eritrea: Critical voices from within, partly from high-ranking government and military officials, were silenced in a wider crackdown on any form of dissent in September 2001. This crackdown was followed by a number of domestic measures aimed at enforcing loyalty to the present leadership. This paper is not the place to discuss those in more detail, as here the focus is on repercussions in relation to foreign policy dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

The 1998-2000 war happened at a time when the Horn of Africa had become a site of major strategic importance again, not least in the wake of the attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and subsequently the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US, that within Eritrea coincided with the visible start of the Eritrean crackdown on any internal opposition. At the same time, Eritrea was aware of the importance to have international allies, not least in the hope that major international actors would put pressure on Ethiopia to abide by the border ruling as it was obliged to under international law.

Eritrea thus started a charm-offensive in 2002, particularly in relation to the US, offering help in the global war on terror and access to its military bases. It even hired a Washington-based lobbying firm to push for being made the location of the permanent base of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA).<sup>8</sup> The task force moved to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti and Eritrea felt

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<sup>7</sup> I have written on these dynamics in the past, see for example Müller, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Washington Times, 'Tiny desert nation bids to host troops', 12 December 2002, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2002/dec/12/20021212-105006-7941r/?page=all>.

increasingly betrayed by an international community that not only failed to put pressure on Ethiopia and in doing so ignored international law, but equally did not recognise its own efforts to fight terrorism that were going back to the early 1990s in its then fight against Jihadist movements from Sudan discussed above. The feeling of being betrayed once more by the international community gained ground, and a turn towards self-reliance and one's own strength, the values the liberation war had taught those now in power, was one result. This was combined domestically with the erosion of any political space, making it impossible for an increasing number of citizens to combine citizenship obligations with personal aspirations or even a normal life (Hirt and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammed, 2013). In parallel, in relation to foreign policy engagement, Eritrea reverted to the Horn's "tried and trusted methods" to undermine Ethiopia by providing support to Ethiopian opposition groups (as did Ethiopia to Eritrea's), and both countries stepped up their efforts to counter each other's influence in the wider region (Mosley, 2014). These intensified politics of destabilisation drew two countries specifically into the frame: Djibouti and Somalia. In both cases, this had wider implications on Eritrea's foreign relations more broadly, resulting in engagement with new actors and the ostracizing of Eritrea by the international community at the same time.

### *i. Contesting Djibouti*

Minor border clashes with Djibouti had already occurred as far back as 1996 and 1998, and the relationship between Eritrea and Djibouti deteriorated during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, as Djibouti was seen as a clear supporter of the Ethiopian cause. Renewed border clashes broke out in 2008, as the border between both countries more generally is vague in similar ways as the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, based on a 1901 Franco-Italian protocol. Clashes started when Eritrean troops allegedly occupied a disputed border area, which in turn led to Djibouti fortifying its side of the border with French military help. Subsequent efforts by Djibouti to come to a mediated solution through the African Union (AU), IGAD and the UN were futile – not least because Eritrea did trust neither entity to be impartial. In contrast, in front of the UN, Eritrea unsuccessfully tried to link its dispute with Djibouti to the Eritrean-Ethiopian border issue and UN failure to enforce Ethiopian compliance. The stalemate was only broken in 2010 when Eritrea agreed to Qatari mediation – Qatar being one of

the few outside actors trusted by both sides and a process was agreed upon that would eventually result in border demarcation and a Qatari-maintained buffer zone (Berouk Mesfin, 2008; Frank, 2015).

The conflict with Djibouti is, however, about more than a contested border, but has more to do with regional power dynamics in the Horn. Not only has Djibouti become a key component in the US strategy in the region since hosting CJTF-HOA, it has also gained considerably not only in its international standing but also economically from the fall-out of the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war and Eritrea's isolation (Styan, 2013). In agreeing to Qatari mediation, and having applied to reactivate its IGAD membership (whose secretariat is located in Djibouti), Eritrea has signalled its willingness to re-engage with the international community in constructive ways.

*ii. Somalia: a tactical move with wider repercussions*

In contrast to the comparatively rather low-key conflict with Djibouti, Somalia became a major focal point in the proxy wars between Eritrea and Ethiopia, with widespread repercussions for Eritrea. In 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), a movement that provided the only brief period of inclusive government in Somalia for many years and enjoyed widespread public support then, took over power in Somalia (Menkhaus, 2007). Perceived radicalisation of the UIC led to an Ethiopian military offensive with tacit support from the US within its wider war on terror strategy, and to the eventual establishment of a dysfunctional Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia, kept in power by troops from an African Union Mission (International Crisis Group, 2011; 2012). Eritrea had provided support to the UICs. With the set-up of the TFG, regarded by many Somalis as de-facto Ethiopian occupation, the UIC gave way to the more radicalised Al-Shabaab movement, partly because it seemed the most effective fighting force against Ethiopian 'occupation'. Eritrea initially continued its support to the new movement – not out of any sympathy for al Shabaab's Islamist agenda, rather the contrary: this was a purely tactical move in the politics of mutual interference, but it left Eritrea on the wrong side of Western powers and the international community (Müller, 2016b).

This resulted in the establishment of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea by the Security Council and subsequently a number of sanctions on Eritrea, partly on evidence provided by Ethiopia whose own disruptive activities in the Horn are under no scrutiny (UNSC 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; see also Plaut, 2013). In spite of the fact that the latest UN Monitoring Group report found no evidence of continued Eritrean support for Al-Shabaab in Somalia, nor that Eritrea's relationship with Djibouti was a threat to regional security, sanctions remain in place (UNSC, 2015). This state of affairs raises a more general point: regardless of actual Eritrean policy actions, Eritrea's room for manoeuvre is to an important degree determined by the 'bad' neighbourhood it finds itself in, and its wider geopolitical importance. Within that neighbourhood, Ethiopia has been highly successful in promoting its version of political instability in the Horn that regards Eritrea as the main problem, a narrative that has been supported by the often un-diplomatic engagement of the Eritrean side with the outside world grounded in the conviction that Eritrea has been 'betrayed' by major international powers throughout history.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion: Transforming a 'bad neighbourhood'?**

This leaves the question on how to overcome that impasse and transform a 'bad neighbourhood' into regional co-operation, akin to the early post-independence years of Eritrea. The main obstacles to such deeper regional cooperation remains the impasse over the Border Commission ruling with Ethiopia, coupled with Ethiopia's importance in the global war on terror as seen by the US and other actors. Since President Obama came to power in 2009, Eritrea has in fact tried to overcome its self-inflicted isolation and made various efforts to re-engage in constructive ways with the international community (Weber, 2015).

In the case of engagement with the US, documents released by WikiLeaks, including US Embassy cables as well as protocols from meetings with US officials, show the futility of such efforts. Eritrea's president is described in those communications as an unhinged dictator and Eritrean interlocutors as arrogant. Above all the prevailing view is that, in supporting extremists in Somalia, Eritrea

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<sup>9</sup> Tanja Müller, 'Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa', *World Politics Review*, 17 September 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa>



has crossed a red line and must pay for it.<sup>10</sup> These documents also confirm that Ethiopian actions in Somalia and the wider region had firm US backing from the start. If anything, the US-Ethiopian partnership has grown closer during the Obama presidency, with Ethiopia clearly the most strategically important regional partner and of late also a base for US drone operations.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Ethiopia has from 2000 onwards made a sustained and highly successful effort to lobby important international partners, most prominently the US, in order to, in Meles Zenawi's words, explain the Ethiopian position in its dispute with Eritrea and develop articles in the press which it hopes will influence the US administration. Ethiopia thus has hired a number of lobbying firms and has successfully positioned itself through public and private diplomacy as the major force of stability and security in the Horn (Müller, 2016a). At the same time, while Eritrea clearly has international law on its side in its case against Ethiopian intransigence over the border ruling and the fact that Ethiopian troops are to this day occupying Eritrean territory, refusing to engage in order to find a potential face-saving solution for both sides, regardless of what might have been signed in Algiers in 2000, does little to advance the Eritrean cause. Eritrean officials often respond to this remark that doing so would set an international precedent that powerful countries could flout international law at will,<sup>12</sup> but agreeing to mediation talks in itself, if not directly then perhaps through interlocutors trusted on both sides, does not per se reverse the Boundary Commission ruling or indeed justify Ethiopia's position.

More generally, more constructive patterns of engagement in the Horn that will ultimately depend on some form of normalisation in relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia are vital for a more viable future of the Horn and its people. Eritrea has in fact made a number of steps in that direction. It applied to reactivate its IGAD membership in 2011 (membership had been suspended by Eritrea in relation to the situation in Somalia in 2007), thus far without success, and reopened its Permanent Mission to the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2011 (Senai Andemariam, 2015). And the latest UNSC Monitoring Report on Er-

<sup>10</sup> See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/195418>.

<sup>11</sup> Washington Post, 'US drone base in Ethiopia is operational', 27 October 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-drone-base-in-ethiopia-is-operational/2011/10/27/gIQAznKwMM\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-drone-base-in-ethiopia-is-operational/2011/10/27/gIQAznKwMM_story.html)

<sup>12</sup> I have last heard this well-worked argument in personal conversations in Asmara in July 2016.

itrea clearly confirmed Eritrea's commitment to regional peace and integration and demanded the immediate and unconditional lifting of remaining sanctions (UNSC, 2015).

More generally, political dynamics in the Horn have shifted again of late, resulting in new alliances that draw new actors into the frame. This has already been discussed in relation to Qatari mediation in the dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti, and expanded in Eritrea's strategic military relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in their engagements in Yemen (Africa Confidential, 2015). And what the internal unrest that has hit Ethiopia for months now and has intensified at the time of writing will lead to in the longer term remains to be seen.

To end, I want to return to De Waal's notion of the Horn as a political marketplace as a useful device in order to understand regional dynamics. While for example Eritrea's involvement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE can be seen as partly driven by rent-seeking behaviour (as allegedly Eritrea benefits in terms of much-needed foreign currency), Eritrean foreign policy more broadly (nor that of Ethiopia for that matter) cannot be fully or even mainly explained in relation to rent-seeking behaviour in a market that attracts the highest bidder. In contrast, Eritrea's foreign policy is driven by ideology and notions of identity. The prime example here is Eritrea's insistence on the adherence to international law in its dispute with Ethiopia that determines wider regional policy in such important ways. This rather stubborn insistence on a rightful position, and not least the domestic political implications this has triggered, are in fact quite detrimental to rent-seeking behaviour. In essence, Eritrea's foreign policy engagement asserts the right of every nation to defend its own interests in light of international law and global treaties, regardless of global power dynamics. It is thus rather ironic that Eritrea is often portrayed as an international pariah state,<sup>13</sup> defined by rejecting those exact international norms.

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Harper, 'Could pariah state Eritrea come in from the cold?', BBC World Service, 28 June 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-36624375>.

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