

The Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict and Security in the Horn of AfricaWhat

Everybody knows; all abhor; and Nobody does Anything About

A Discussion paper presented by Herui Tedla Bairu at the conference on peace and security in the Horn of Africa, Addis Ababa, 12-13 Feb 2007 (organized by Inter Africa Group and CPRD)

Introduction

The appellation ‘Horn of Africa’ is no longer a mere geographic description; with time, it developed into a concept with historical, cultural geographic, geopolitical, and developmental significance. Initially, the name was used to denote the collectivity that included Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti; over the years, however, the term came to include the Sudan. In truth, the term Horn of Africa (as a geopolitical concept) would not be complete without the Yemen – a part of this region in every thinkable way.

1. What Everybody knows; all abhor; and Nobody does Anything About

1a. What does Everybody Know?

Everybody knows that this region has been at the center of human evolution, ancient history, and at the crossroads of the civilizations of antiquity. This is particularly true of Ethiopia, the Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Eritrea; whose history, languages, and religions have been pooled, over the ages, into a shared culture. From the developmental point of view, the region is distinguishable by the common ethnic stock that can be developed into a combined human resource, or by its shared hydrological resources that can harness the energy and agricultural potential of this region.

1b. What does Everybody Abhor?

- Internal and external wars; internal displacement; and migration of the educated stratum to the developed world.
- Bad governance
- Lack of development strategies
- Degradation of the environment and desertification
- Epidemic diseases
- Population explosion
- Flight from the countryside to urban centers
- Generational Poverty and starvation

1c. What do we do Nothing About

The first question is: are we ready to do something about what we know and abhor? In this case, the question of commitment becomes a primary element in our strategic design. Consistent and sustainable commitment is possible if civil societies, visionary intellectuals, the market forces, political parties, and governments of the region are galvanized into a movement for regional union. The first step towards such a goal has been taken by the organizers of this conference; permit me in this regard, to thank Inter Africa and CPRD for inviting me to participate to this historic conference.

Politically, the main obstacles are:

The nation building project as an obstacle to a flexible understanding of sovereignty
Ethnic and religious ‘nationalism’ as challenges to the creation of a regional commonwealth
The lack of standardization of constitutions and auxiliary laws
The lack of standardization of policy (for example education)
The lack of institution-building standards (civil and military)

Culturally, the main stumbling blocks are:

Religion as a divisive cultural issue
Language as a mobilizing cluster of symbols representing civilizational polarities

Economically, the main obstacles are:

The absence of a regionally accepted currency and derivative fiscal policies
The lack of standardization of taxation laws
The immobility of peoples, goods, and services, and
A shared strategy regarding the issue of access to the sea.

2. The Historical Backdrop to the Eritrean Ethiopian Conflict

Eritrea was the first to be decolonized in Africa: it was ultimately federated with Ethiopia after ten years of haggling among the victors of the Second World War. It can be pointed out that the early part of the Eritrean Ethiopian federation held the promise of progress and peace, as it can be pointed out that the lack of generalization of the federal principle to all the provinces of Ethiopia, and the abortion of the said federation, caused the long standing state of belligerence between these fraternal states.

2a. The African Nation Builders

The fact that European powers parceled out Africa among themselves (irrespective of culturally evolved identity imperatives) is often presented as an explanation for the present dastardly state of our continent. This African complaint is only partly true; the hard line worship of 'territorial integrity' – that was enshrined in the OAU Charter of 1963 - was stipulated by the African nation builders and not by the powers of the Berlin Congress.

The elements of sovereignty and territorial integrity mutated from the elements of development and welfare to acquire a life of their own to the detriment of the very project of nation building. In other words, African leaders became the gate-keepers of sovereignty and territorial integrity at the expense of development, welfare, and democracy.

2b. The Emperor's Nation Building Project

The continuation of the Eritrean federal solution was considered a direct anti-thesis to the emperor's unitary nation-building project. The Development Fund of the nation was denuded by the insatiable, ostentatious, consumption habits of the ruling classes, as well as the war directed at Eritrean resistance. In the end the monarchical system, and the rickety class structure over which it sat, was swept away by revolution.

2c. The Derg's Nation Building Project

The Derg saw itself as the absolute gate-keeper of the elements of sovereignty and territorial integrity by virtue of its military profession, while it neglected the elements of development, welfare, and democracy in the package of nation building; in addition, it fortified its military monopoly of power by adopting the totalitarian Stalinist ideology. To the Derg, the emergence of the Tigrayan revolution, in addition to the then existing Eritrean revolution, made the ideas of development and democracy irrelevant. The Derg rummaged into the Soviet lexicon of nationalities and produced the tired idea of regional autonomy as a solution to the armed conflict; needless to say, the EPLF and the TPLF did not even stop to consider the idea. The two-pronged attack of the EPLF and the TPLF against the Derg resulted in the independence of Eritrea and the seizure of political power by the TPLF in Ethiopia.

3. The Eritrean - Ethiopian conflict

Once again, Eritrea and Ethiopia find themselves locked in a war of: “it is either me or you”; let us consider the official versions of the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments:

3a. The Eritrean View of the Conflict

The Eritrean government sees the conflict as a matter of accepting the decisions of international arbitration, and drawing the colonial borders on the ground.

3b. The Ethiopian View of the Conflict

The Ethiopian government sees the conflict as matter of sovereignty and requires that certain adjustments be made - via negotiations - in order to remove the causes of future tensions.

3c. International Arbitration Versus Face- to-Face Negotiations

The boundary question took its present form because both Eritrea and Ethiopia decided to submit the border dispute to international arbitration. An alternative course could have been eyeball- to- eyeball negotiations between these two neighbors. An agreement reached via this diplomatic method could have been presented to the relevant UN bodies for international legitimation. This type of negotiation, if successful, is known to lead to a reasonably stable peace, while decisions reached by international bodies tend to lead to the argument: “you accepted the conditions of the game willingly, now you need to accept the results”.

The peace plan of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Mr. Meles Zenawi, is to be commended because it rejects war in favor of negotiations, and accepts the decisions of the Border Commission - in principle - leading to mutual corrections of sticky issues.

The question is: with whom is the Five Point Plan to be negotiated? With Afewerki? Even if it is argued that the Eritrean dictator is willing to accept the Ethiopian offer, it is doubtful that the results would secure a peaceful future. Preliminary negotiations may be made with genuine representatives of Eritreans living outside Eritrea; after all, approximately half of the Eritrean people live abroad. The first step towards this objective may be to help establish a caretaker Eritrean government (in exile). Such a government supported by the Sana’a Forum and the IGAD may show surprising results.

4. Steps Towards Peace

The discussion regarding the elements of nation building (made above) is not an argument in favor of the demise of sovereignty and territorial integrity. It simply raises the question of what the elements of sovereignty and territorial integrity would look like seen from the perspective of democracy, development, and welfare? The confederal formula is presented as a possible solution to the long standing conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Confederation understood as a political association of sovereign states, where these states surrender parts of their sovereignties to a higher confederal sovereignty, tends to be economically backbreaking as it may be fraught with ethnic and religious minefields. Furthermore, for the confederal solution to succeed, it needs to be generalized to the whole of Ethiopia - so that it may not die the painful death of the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation.

4a. The Coal and Steel model

The alternative may lie in Eritrea and Ethiopia developing a political space to be developed jointly. The coal and steel model that led to the European Union may be applied in resolving the issue of 'access to the sea' as a shared resource. The need to discuss Assab as a joint project between Eritrea Ethiopia - on the basis of equal partnership - grounded upon an internationally guaranteed corporate, juridical, personality, may open up a dialogue that may benefit all concerned.

Another bone of contention is Ali Tena and its environs. Eritreans are sensitive to the fact that this area leads to the Red Sea port of Arefaile via a canyon that is hard to defend. Even here, the 'coal and steel model' may be applied for the joint benefit of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Even the Badume conflict may be resolved within the framework of cooperation in the Tekezie-Setit hydrological basin.

4b. Redesigning the Concept of Sovereignty

- The establishment of constitutional, civil, democratic, state of rights may be a pragmatic step to be pursued.
- The replacement of the single party by a multi-party system may help in enhancing peace and security.

- The concepts of 'sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' may need to be redesigned in order to accommodate the **Coal and Steel Model** and the political space that may ensue from it.
- The concept of external sovereignty needs to be divested of its exclusivist significance in order to encourage regional union.