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Who will “tear down” the wall of hostility  
between Ethiopia and Eritrea?



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## Introduction

The most recent events of the kidnapping of Ethiopian citizens by Eritrean forces, and an Ethiopian military containment as a reprisal to its action<sup>1</sup>, reflect foreign policy actions of the two countries in recent years. These have largely been limited to provocations by the Eritrean government, and reactive actions by the Ethiopian government.

Provocation and (military) reprisal seem to have been the only ways of communication between the two countries that has experienced in March 2012, 2015 and 2016. It seems that these actions have replaced the official diplomatic channels and have become the only way of communication between the two governments.<sup>2</sup>

Following the end of the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict the two countries have been in a 'no war no peace' situation. Legally speaking the border dispute between the two nations is over. The border has been virtually delineated. However, Ethiopia has maintained its position that demarcation only cannot help to solve the protracted dispute between the two governments. Therefore, a political compromise is necessary to make sustainable peace between the two nations possible and to normalize their relations. This position has been explicitly indicated in the Ethiopian government's 2004 five-point peace proposal for dialogue. Eritrea, however, favors the existing legal approach to resolve the problems. Eritrea's approach to conflict management aims to reduce, downgrade or contain the ongoing conflict and minimize its negative effects. Ethiopia's approach to conflict resolution aims to resolve the conflict through constructive problem-solving, which is distinct from conflict management. Conflict resolution is an effective way to address the interests, needs, perspectives, and continued coexistence of the conflict parties. It involves identifying the underlying causes of the conflict and addressing them through solutions that are mutually satisfactory, self-perpetuating and sustainable. It is a cooperative, non-confrontational, and non-competitive but win-win approach. In contrast, the legal approach to resolving the conflict produces winners and losers.

In spite of advantages and disadvantages of its approach, Ethiopia wants to negotiate before demarcating the border between the two nations, whereas Eritrea prioritizes demarcation before negotiation. It is very difficult to imagine the current deadlock coming to an end peacefully as long as the two governments continue affirming their positions.

Against this background, it is very important to reflect on the root causes for the sustained deadlock between the two governments to be able to propose alternative policy options to make sustainable peace and stability between them possible.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article58214>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/03/2012315143918662172.html>, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17386161>

The border commission's decision on 13 April 2002 has resulted in a forced peace between the conflicting parties. First, the decision focused on preventing an escalation of the conflict. Second, the decision emphasized border demarcation. Third, the decision created a winner and a loser. Fourth, on both sides a culture of rigidity to compromise means that compromise is equated with an admission of defeat. Fifth, each side has continued to propagate that the other is on the brink of failure and that therefore there is no need to change their rigid position. Accordingly, the cause for conflict over the border has direct relation with the survival of one of the conflicting parties. The survival of regime in Eritrea is determined by not only having or losing the land that has been regarded as a flash point of the conflict, rather a good reason to have conflicting issue with its neighbor to sustain in power. Otherwise the regime in Eritrea would not have been sustained until today, the border commission's decision would have been implemented easily, and peace between the two governments would have prevailed.

### **Implications of the existing deadlock**

The existing deadlock implies that the causes of the conflict are clearly more than a single border dispute. However, so far the focus has mainly been on the consequences of the conflict, rather than on its root causes. This has opened doors to sustain the conflict, rather than closing them. The focus has contributed to maintaining, and undermining a normalization of, the current relations between the two nations. It has also reduced the willingness and courage of actors to offer incentives to build trust, and work for a sustainable peace between the two, and has hindered the implementation of the border commission's decisions.

Differences between the governments have also contributed to divergences in sequencing the conflict resolution process. As mentioned above, Ethiopia wants to approach the issue with the understanding that negotiation should come before demarcation. This means giving up control over Bademe should not come first. In effect, Ethiopia has shown its commitment to the decision of the border commission. This commitment goes hand in hand with its national interests. Ethiopia's national interests are speedy economic development, democratization, and peace.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopian government the 2004 five-point peace proposal which was approved by the House of Peoples Representatives on the Ethiopia - Eritrea Border issue on the 25th November 2004 is directly linked into Ethiopia's national interest. It states that the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea can be resolved only through negotiations, and that the root causes of the conflict can be resolved through dialogue with the view to normalize relations between the two countries, also complements and shows the consistency of its firm position.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to this approach, Eritrea does not want to talk about the sequencing of the issue. It is interested in demarcation before any negotiations can begin. This implies that the "no peace no

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<sup>3</sup> The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy, 2002, Addis Ababa.

<sup>4</sup> War or peace? ICG, the Africa Report, No. 68., 24 September 2004.

war" situation is a preferable situation for the Eritrean leadership to remain in power. Indeed, this strategy only benefits the regime but seriously hurts the country's middle class, which is left at the mercy of the regime. The protracted conflict with Ethiopia serves as an instrument to externalize the source of regime led misery and to garner political support. It also encourages a more aggressive foreign policy. It also serves to control the state's entire economic system and national wealth. It creates an opportunity for ruling elites to take advantage of the deteriorating economic conditions inside the country. Consequently, it is an important strategy for the regime to compensate and for its political losses at the expense of its own citizens.

What the regime in Asmara does not have is the will to take constructive actions. It ignores the interests of its own people, and expects the Ethiopian government to be more willing to make concessions than it is. Displaying one-sided interests has not worked so far. As the Eritrean says the life time leader in Asmara is interested in the state's geopolitical and military posture, which has led to wasting assets to demonstrate the capability of the nation.

As a consequence, the Eritrean defense budget is bleeding and is using the resources needed for economic diversification and the delivery of public services, which is also necessary to pacify and meet the increasing demands of the population. On the other hand, Asmara's aggressive foreign policy has caused the IGAD members to be more united than they have been for a long time; defense and security cooperation in the region is very high. This is because that most scholars argue that the IGAD member countries have suffered from terrorist attacks, which have been supported by the regime in Asmara.

Moreover, Eritrea's inflexible position is directly connected with the rise of terrorist group Al-Shabab in Somalia in 2006. This Islamist terrorist group has posed a serious security threat to Ethiopia and caused its military involvement in Somalia, while Eritrea took the side of the Islamist group. The rise of Islamist groups in Somalia has further exposed Eritrea's motives in the region. In 2008 America declared Eritrea a "state sponsor of terrorism", thereby curtailing US trade and investment in Eritrea and imposing travel sanctions on its leaders. The Eritrean regime's facilitation of the transit of arms to Al-Shabab has caused the UNSC to also impose sanctions (1907) on it in 2009. Since then, the Eritrean regime has become to be seen as a 'pariah' of the region.

The existing anger, tension or fear between the two states can be addressed through improved communication and a better understanding of each other's point of view. Ethiopia holds arrows in one claw and an olive branch in the other. The arrows represent Ethiopia's willingness to use force to deter aggressions that threaten its national security. The olive branch symbolizes its desire as a nation to seek peaceful solutions to the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy, 2002, Addis Ababa.

Furthermore, an effort that aims to resolve the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict beyond the border issue needs to take into account polemical and polarized sentiments among the political elites on both sides. These sentiments have played a role for the protracted conflict to prevail. Indeed, sentiments can make the battle more violent and bitter. It is very important to work on this social aspect to help the political leadership and citizens of the two nations to move forward. A necessary and major next step should be to work on this clear frontier that has prevailed for so long.

Basically, this means that the mental trench that is imbedded in the minds of people on both sides needs to be addressed. Image building that is based on an “us and them” mentality has contributed to mistrusting one another. Understanding and addressing this mentality requires digging into history to then start on a fresh page, which has never been emphasized as an essential step by those involved in the conflict resolution process.<sup>6</sup> Due to this gap in understanding one another, elites on both sides have been encouraged to base their arguments on faulty historical narratives. Both sides draw on a constructed and politically motivated history to confirm their opposing political goals, for instance the notion of Eritrean independence versus the Ethiopian idea of unity. In Ethiopia, nationalism has found two contradicting ways to portray Ethiopia-Eritrea relations: Pan-Ethiopianism, which claims that Eritrea belongs to Ethiopia, and a xenophobic rejection of Eritrea as a sort of eternal trouble-maker. An imagined shared history, which does not recognize pluralistic historical realities, sometimes includes, sometimes rejects the other.<sup>7</sup>

The leadership in Asmara has used these images as tactics for indoctrination and mobilization. In addition, it propagates that the Eritrean people have been betrayed by the whole international community throughout their history, and that only a policy of self-reliance can help Eritrea to overcome all the challenges it faces. This is an aspect that ignores the root causes of the problem and emphasizes on emotional narrations in Eritrea.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to the inflexible positions of the two governments, emotional and historical claims<sup>9</sup> have played an unnecessary role in sustaining 17 years of hostile relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. To tear down the wall that has been created due to political differences between the two governments, the Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development (EIIPD) organized two conferences in Addis Ababa in 2013 and 2015 to facilitate contacts and discussion between

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<sup>6</sup> Reid, Richard (2007), ‘The Trans-Mereb Experience: Perceptions of the Historical Relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:2, 238-255, DOI: 10.1080/17531050701452523.

<sup>7</sup> Smidt, Wolbert (2012), ‘History, Historical Arguments and the Ethio-Eritrean conflict: between xenophobic approaches and an ideology of unity’, *Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien*, Nr. 22/2012, 12.Jg., 103-120.

<sup>8</sup> Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd (2012/13), ‘Nation-building Challenges of the Post-Independence State of Eritrea and Its Regional Domino Effect’, *Journal for the Study of Peace and Conflict* (2012-2013), 21-36.

<sup>9</sup> The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy, 2002, Addis Ababa.

people separated through the conflict. The conferences highlighted popular sentiments about the need to consider the interests and desire of the people to continue their relations with people of the same racial stock, and to give citizens of both nations a chance to play a constructive role in resolving the conflict, in areas which have eluded formal discussion. The two conferences clearly demonstrated the interest of citizens from both nations to secure relationships between their people. The conference was also organized to serve the interests of both nations.

In particular, the conference confirmed that there is a strong desire of people on either side of the divide to communicate and interact freely, and to keep alive a historical harmony in the new context of two neighboring states. Most participants appreciated this kind of public discussion as an indispensable tool, not only to normalize relations between the two nations, but also to understand reality on both sides.

The conferences were termed crucial and timely in a situation of extreme tension, where the failure of external arbitration has left the two states in a deadlock and with collapsed diplomatic channels. Participants stressed that action by the people to reinforce grassroots relationships can prevent impending catastrophes.

The young participants from Eritrea described their amicable contacts in Ethiopia as an eye-opening experience, which contrast with the anti-Ethiopian propaganda with which they had been fed in their homeland. Fortifying people-to-people relations is considered an important tool that will help to enhance peace, harmony and cooperation. It is of paramount interest and the desire of the people to communicate the way they have lived with the divide for generations. Eritrean participants recalled that during the colonial rule relations between the two nations did not deter them from joining their kin in Ethiopia, as well as from normally travelling to be ordained as priests in Axum, “the Vatican” of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.

On the Ethiopian side, some confidence building attempts are observed as contributions to promote fraternalism, even though the Eritrean government sees an Ethiopian institution hosting that kind of event as a tool to weaken public support of the regime in Asmara. In 2011, the Ethiopian government introduced a new decree that aims to bring durable solutions. This includes an “out-of-camp scheme”, which allows Eritrean refugees residing in Ethiopia to live anywhere they choose across Ethiopia and even to attend universities, provided that they sustain themselves financially or live through the support of relatives. This was noted as a positive input to strengthen the relations between the two nations. Furthermore, the Ethiopian university scholarship offers for Eritrean refugees that started in 2010 are a remarkable contribution. In addition, Ethiopia has opened its doors for Eritrean refugees. According to a UNHCR report in 2015, Ethiopia is hosting 821,700 refugees, of which 131,660 are Eritreans.<sup>10</sup> Ethiopia’s decision

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<sup>10</sup> 2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Ethiopia. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483986.html>

to release Eritrean insurgent group members who were imprisoned <sup>11</sup> in 2012 also indicates a strong desire to revamp relations between the two brotherly states. Contrary to this the Eritrean regime has been using Ethiopians mainly for its adversary objectives. It has been using for insurgence movements.

In spite of the Eritrean adversary role the Ethiopian government has also established an office under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is accountable for facilitating and promoting the protection of, reimbursement for, and follow-up on Eritrean properties and issues which is related to the 1998 Eritrean repatriations. This further implies that despite a prolonged difficult relationship, the Ethiopian government and people have a strong desire to rectify all that has been damaged. The sincere goodwill that exists among citizens, if enhanced through fresh opportunities for discussion, can contribute to the stabilization of relations and relieve political tensions. Contrary to the regime interests in Eritrea there is a strong will from the side of Eritrean citizens to enhance trust through engagement. Many Eritrean entrepreneurs have been investing in Ethiopia. From 1993 to 2015, 24 Eritrean investors have engaged in various investment activities across the country.

### **What is the way out?**

It is very important to support government initiatives that enhance trust building activities. Citizens' engagement in this regard plays a great role, as where there are great tensions in a political conflict, a leader may fear to take risks for peace without his constituents being prepared. Therefore, citizen participation could also help to build the trust of a leader that he would not lose his political base by engaging in dialogue.

Furthermore, in times of political tension, leaders seek political formulas or scenarios which may satisfy the basic needs for security and esteem of the parties in a particular dispute. In such an environment, citizen engagement can promote a political environment where public opinion can be aired and that would make it safer for political leaders to take risks for peace.

Once a government is agonized with its neighbor and faces difficult decisions, and at the same time fears a policy change might challenge the regime, it wants to hear other points of view.

Eritrea's provocative actions and Ethiopia's reactions cannot ensure that the security interests of both sides are met. Both parties need to pursue a holistic approach. The general public and think tanks need to be able to play their role by having consistent discussions and mobilizing themselves to influence their respective governments, which will make mutual benefits possible. The international community needs to work for win-win results of official negotiations, for a sustainable peace to prevail between the two nations and in the region in general. Regional and international influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be rooted in the ability of states to cooperate with

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<sup>11</sup> <http://bahrenegash.com/index.php?p=news&ref=231>, <http://www.awrambatimes.com/?p=3826>

other states and non-state actors alike. A continuation of provoking and retaliatory action will maintain a hostile environment, in which the disconnection between nations can be fostered and insecurity sustained.