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# Borders and boundaries in the state-making of Eritrea: revisiting the importance of territorial integrity in the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, the author analyses Eritrean state-making and its foreign policy as driven by the quest for territorial integrity. The article first demonstrates the importance of creating a territorial nation-state for Eritrean nationalism. It subsequently provides an interpretation of Eritrean foreign policy through the lens of the importance of territorial integrity. The article then reflects on how this has underpinned the recent rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It ends with some thoughts on what these developments might mean for the future of Eritrea and the wider geopolitical environment of the Horn.

**KEYWORDS**
Eritrea; Ethiopia; peace; rapprochement; Red Sea

**MOTS-CLÉS**
Érythrée ; Éthiopie ; paix ; rapprochement ; mer Rouge

## Frontières et limites dans le processus de construction de l'État érythréen : une réexamination de l'importance de l'intégrité territoriale dans le rapprochement entre l'Érythrée et l'Éthiopie

**RÉSUMÉ**

Dans cet article, l'auteur analyse le processus de construction de l'État érythréen et sa politique étrangère comme étant motivés par la quête de l'intégrité territoriale. L'article démontre d'abord l'importance de la création d'un État-nation territorial pour le nationalisme érythréen. Il fournit ensuite une interprétation de la politique étrangère érythréenne à travers l'optique de l'importance de l'intégrité territoriale. L'article se penche par la suite sur la manière dont ceci a sous-tendu le récent rapprochement entre l'Érythrée et l'Éthiopie. L'auteur conclut par quelques réflexions sur ce que ces développements pourraient signifier pour l'avenir de l'Érythrée et l'environnement géopolitique plus large de la Corne.

## Introduction

At a time when the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea that took many observers by surprise seems to have profoundly changed relationships in the Horn of Africa, it is pertinent to take a step back and look at the role of territorial boundaries, real and imagined, in the history of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in particular in the

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creation of Eritrea as an independent state and its post-liberation foreign policies (Mosley 2018; Müller 2018a).

Many scholars have rightly suggested that notions of identity and belonging for people on the ground – in particular in the borderlands between Eritrea and Ethiopia but also more broadly – are fluid and hybrid in relation to everyday practices (see for example Tronvoll 1999). But, I argue in this article, this should not detract from the fact that – once Eritrea had gained *de jure* independence in 1991 – the demarcated boundaries of an Eritrean territorial nation-state became important prerequisites for the possibility of such hybridity and a fluid understanding of boundaries.

The 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia in particular, and the period of no-war-no-peace that followed and only ended formally with the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia signed on 9 July 2018 in the Eritrean capital, Asmara (Fantaye 2018), can thus be read as a challenge to those territorial boundaries as perceived and acted upon by both states. Arguably for Eritrea the issue of an internationally recognised secure border was always of greater importance. This then leads to the question of why Eritrea suddenly changed its post-2000 stance, dropping its insistence that any talks with Ethiopia could only start once Ethiopian troops had withdrawn from territory that was awarded to Eritrea by the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), whose verdict was to be final and binding in ending the 1998–2000 war between both countries, but that subsequently the Ethiopian side had refused to implement.[1] While Ethiopia's new prime minister Abiy and a statement from the executive committee of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front proclaimed Ethiopia's willingness to unconditionally accept the terms of the EEBC ruling and implement its decision on border demarcation, little has thus far happened on the ground apart from the opening of two border crossings and a withdrawal of Eritrean troops from border areas. Yet, Eritrea has signed on the dotted line, and when looking at the visual performance of this new-found peace, one would be hard-pushed to imagine that both sides were until recently fierce adversaries (Müller 2018b).

I argue in this article that a useful lens through which to interrogate the Eritrean willingness to accept the Ethiopian offer of peace is the role secure territorial boundaries play for the Eritrean leadership. A dominant focus in analysing the 1998–2000 war, and Eritrean post-independence politics more generally, has been on top-down, increasingly militarised and authoritarian leadership. The 1998–2000 war, its conduct and its aftermath are in such accounts predominately analysed as an excuse to oppose political developments towards liberalisation and democratisation of any kind (see for example Tronvoll and Mekonnen 2014; Welde Giorgis 2014). But while authoritarianism and militarisation are real, this focus fails to take into account the importance of territorial integrity and security for Eritrea. One should not forget that, once renewed war had commenced in 1998, major fundraising efforts in the diaspora not only among those loyal to the regime centred on helping Eritrea fight the war and secure its territorial integrity – not on helping civilians or for humanitarian causes as one might have expected (Bernal 2004).

Even for those opposed to the Eritrean leadership this is a prime concern, visible for example in the social media campaigns and on opposition websites that have accused President Issayas Afwerki of giving Eritrea away to Ethiopia and of being unpatriotic and a traitor after he signed the recent Declaration of Peace (see for example various posts on www.asmarino.com). Others, like eminent legal scholar Bereket Habte Selassie, go even

further, making the case that Afwerki in refusing to demarcate the border on the ground actually undermines and ultimately destroys Eritrean sovereignty (Plaut 2018b).

In this article I put forward a different line of argument, namely that territorial integrity rests first and foremost on the undisputed recognition of Eritrea's boundaries under international law, not primarily on actual border demarcation on the ground. I further argue that this neglect of the legal territorial dimension has resulted in often one-sided interpretations of Eritrean foreign policy actions. In turn, taking the quest for territorial integrity seriously allows a more nuanced understanding not only of the past, but equally in terms of considering the potential for a more peaceful future in the Horn of Africa, in particular in light of the recent rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The article proceeds as follows: in a first step it will reflect on the importance of the creation of a territorial nation-state for Eritrean nationalism. Second, based on a re-reading of some of the literature on Eritrean foreign policy, combined with insights from interview and observation data I gathered during various research and journalistic visits to Eritrea and more recently Northern Ethiopia between 1996 and 2018, I will provide a reading of Eritrean foreign policy actions through the lens of the importance of territorial integrity. The article will then reflect on how this prime concern for territorial integrity has underpinned the recent peace declaration. The article will end with some thoughts on what these recent developments might mean for the future of Eritrea and the wider geopolitical environment of the Horn.

## Creating Eritrea as a territorial nation-state

Much has been written on the controversial interpretations of the quest for Eritrean independence and its legal justification, and how it complies with or contradicts the post-colonial agreements that govern borders on the African continent (for a good overview see for example Iyob 1997; Levine 1974; Sorenson 1993). In many of these debates, allegiances of populations and colonial facts on the ground are being blurred into one another to either justify the 'Greater Ethiopia' narrative that regards Eritrea as a key part of ancient Ethiopian empires, or make the case that as a distinct Italian colony Eritrea became fundamentally different from Ethiopia. As in many other pre-colonialised parts of Africa, governance in different parts of what is now the state of Eritrea shifted over time, with some parts closely linked to Ethiopia and others experiencing different and shifting forms of governance. Most attention in the literature is commonly given to the close links and subsequent fractures between peoples on both sides of the Mereb river, leading to a more general argument being advanced that one of the key issues for the Eritrean struggle for independence was to create a national identity different from Ethiopia (Abbay 1997; Trivelli 1998). This in itself is regarded by many writers as a quasi-unnatural process due to the close cultural links and other proximity between both entities (see for example Abbay 2001).

But if one looks at the colonisation of Eritrea in line with more general dynamics of colonialism on the African continent, Eritrea did indeed become a separate territorial entity. Whether a 'national consciousness' among Eritreans did emerge or not at the same time is not really relevant for the claim to then be regarded in line with the wider politics of decolonisation. Arguably, in most post-colonial nation-states on the African continent different degrees of national consciousness were present or evolved over time,

accompanied or dominated by other more hybrid allegiances and identities. In the case of Eritrea, it was the Ethiopian victory by Emperor Menelik II at Adwa in March 1896 that led to the acceptance of the Italian possession of Eritrea by Ethiopia. Subsequently, the territorial boundaries between both countries were agreed in various Ethiopian–Italian treaties (concluded in 1900, 1902 and 1906), even if demarcation on the ground was often controversial and mostly absent, a fact that I will return to later. More generally, as convincingly argued by Chelati Dirar (2007), Italian rule in Eritrea did integrate Eritrea into a quite different political economy from Ethiopia, even if colonialism did not create a unitary foundation of 'Eritreanness' but had different repercussions for different local actors and populations. The construction of Eritrea as a colonial state is thus best described as 'a complex process of political engineering' (*Ibid.*, 262) and resulted in a political entity different from Ethiopia with distinct boundaries.

In line with this, Eritrean aspirations for an independent territorial nation-state were, as pointed out aptly by Jacquin-Berdal, 'emanating from their shared colonial experience' and the quest for independence was one made in relation to territorial and international legal terms, basically claiming to be treated as any other former African colony (Jacquin-Berdal 2002, 86).

Indeed, when looking at core Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) documents, it becomes clear that the starting point of the legitimacy of the liberation struggle is the quest to ascertain the territorial nation-state that was first created as a territorial entity by Italian colonial rule. The 1987 Political Report and National Democratic Programme of the EPLF for example states that 'a nation is a geographical entity with defined and recognized boundaries' (not an imagined or affective community as one might also conceive a nation to be) into which 'the colonial power introduce[d] new relations of production, gradually dismantling the social structure and create[ing] new social forces' (Eritrean People's Liberation Front 1987, 1 and 5). In a similar vein, the 1971 document *Our struggle and its goals* starts its core text with the statement that 'nobody misses the fact that we, Eritreans, belong to a country with a clearly delimited national boundary, a separate history, separate culture and tradition' (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011, 569). And while much of the discussion and controversy about *Our struggle* has centred on its role in dividing the EPLF from the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011), its proclamation of Eritrea's entitlement to territorial statehood is usually shared by all sides of the divide.[2] Indeed, under international law and in particular the *uti possidetis* principle that the then Organisation of African Unity accepted in 1964 to be applied to the African continent, and as such recognising the colonially fixed boundaries as permanent features of the post-colonial African state system, Eritrea had a strong claim to be granted territorial statehood (Habte Selassie 1988; Permanent People's Tribunal of the International League for the Rights for the Liberation of Peoples 1982).[3]

Looked at from this quest to territorial, internationally recognised statehood, the EPLF was indeed highly successful. If and in what ways it at the same time transcended the multiple identities and allegiances of the Eritrean people, characterised not only by different ethnic and religious affiliations but other complex forms of belonging, remains open to debate.

What is important for the argument advanced here is the fact that, as in many African post-colonial states, the borders of the Eritrean nation-state were created through violent

conquest by Italian colonialism; subsequently these borders were annihilated at least as international borders through the violence of Ethiopian occupation, only to then be re-established through the violence of the war for national liberation. While the first and third step in this history of violence has been present in some form or other in most African states where independent statehood followed a liberation war of some kind, two things make Eritrea different from most of these examples. First, the fact that between colonial rule and independent statehood there existed a phase of violent annexation by the regional power or hegemon. Second, the re-establishment of the colonial border was the result of a military victory (not of a negotiated settlement or any other form of international diplomacy). And while, as expertly argued by Tronvoll (1999), borders and boundaries 'mean different things to different people and in different contexts', thus are fluid and 'infused with social, political and cultural importance' (*Ibid.*, 1039), I argue here that the contours of the internationally recognised or enforceable borders of the territorial nation-state have a clear meaning beyond such fluidity.

This is in particular the case for a country like Eritrea, whose borders were created in the overlapping circles of violence described above, which in turn made securing and safeguarding the territorial border an overarching concern. During a visit to the frontline of Tsorona in 1999, one of the flashpoints during the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia, a soldier put it this way to me:

> 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. (Fieldnotes, March 1999)

The same soldier later walked with me through a recent battlefield that had seen Ethiopian human wave attacks, where some half-buried bodies of dead Ethiopian soldiers were still to be seen, identifiable by their types of boots. 'This is so sad', he continued, 'these are our brothers and now we fight them here, we are really one people' (fieldnotes, March 1999). For this soldier, there was no contradiction in fighting to secure the borders of the Eritrean land, while at the same time recognising the fallen Ethiopian soldiers not as enemies but brothers, and in doing so recognising the multiple dimensions of fluid identities.

More generally, this dictum, that without having clearly established borders of the state of Eritrea, 'Eritreanness' would cease to exist, has been a major driving force of Eritrea's engagement with the outside world and its foreign policy endeavours. This merits looking at Eritrean post-independence foreign policy in light of this quest to secure the territory fought for in manifold bitter struggles in order to achieve undisputed recognition of Eritrea as a territorial nation-state in the boundaries that were created between the Ethiopia of Emperor Menelik II and the Italian colonial power at the end of the 19th century. Such a lens adds an important dimension to moving beyond regarding Eritrea as a negative force in the region that entered into violent conflict with all its neighbours.

## Defending the territorial nation-state against all incursions

Contestation of the territorial boundaries on which the claim to independent Eritrean statehood hinges to an important degree first emerged during a crucial period of the liberation struggle between the EPLF and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). These dynamics have been discussed in detail elsewhere and shall not be repeated here

(see Trivelli 1998; Young 1996). For the argument in this article it suffices to recall that both sides had different interpretations of where the exact boundary between Eritrea and Tigray lay, but decided to leave any decision for the future. Thus, in a similar vein to when the boundary was established as a colonial border between Italy and Ethiopia, concrete demarcation on the ground was forgone. More surprisingly perhaps, given the importance the EPLF gave to clearly defined national borders, was the fact that the issue was equally kicked into the long grass after Eritrean independence. In the final days of the liberation war, Tigrayan forces took over some of the territories that Eritrea considered Eritrean (for details see Trivelli 1998, 279), but when Eritrea became *de jure* independent in 1993 this was initially ignored. In fact, Eritrean president Issayas Afwerki even spoke about a time when borders between both countries would lose their importance. This statement has mostly been read as outlining an agenda of close cooperation between both states, but should arguably have been read in a different way: with independence, Eritrea achieved its major objective of establishing a territorial nation-state with clearly defined boundaries. As long as those were not threatened in any way or form as the clear lines on the map, it did not matter that on the ground fluid relationships could continue, and even formal demarcation was not the most urgent matter.

But as early as 1994, when new district maps were created by the Ethiopian Central Statistical Authority, those included as Ethiopian territories areas commonly understood as Eritrean. Subsequently, the Eritrean side raised concerns with the Tigrayan authorities and a first joint commission was set up between the EPLF and TPLF to address the matter (*Ibid.*, 281). Subsequently, financed by the German Development Corporation a map of the Ethiopian province of Tigray was being produced that equally included Eritrean territory as part of Tigray in 1997.[4]

Slowly, the border that had taken so many years of violence and suffering to create, from Italian conquest to the EPLF victory, became diluted, most visible perhaps in the sharp lines of the Badme-Yirga triangle. Thus, while, as has been stated in many analyses of the 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian war, a number of closely linked issues were behind its outbreak and vehemence, ranging from economic divergence and trade policies, to political dynamics and a loss of trust, this was also a border war in its real sense of the word, at least from the Eritrean side: a war waged to establish the clearly defined border of the Eritrean nation-state once and for all as a legal entity under international law.[5]

It is in this light that one should understand the Eritrean stance in the aftermath of the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia. From the Eritrean point of view, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities that ended the fighting phase of the war, and the verdict of the EEBC on 13 April 2002 that not only delimited the Eritrean–Ethiopian boundary in exact coordinates but mandated actual demarcation (Shaw 2007), put an end to any uncertainty about the border. The non-acceptance on the part of Ethiopia of the EEBC decision that both sides had agreed on accepting as final and binding, and the insistence on the need for further talks, made a refusal of such talks the only feasible course of action when viewed from Asmara, whatever the price. After all, the EEBC had the clear mandate to delimit the boundary in line with its interpretation of pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international law, and explicitly not make decisions *ex aequo et bono* (*Ibid.*, 758), thus using the power of arbitration to potentially dispense with the law and include considerations of fairness or equity.

This stance of the Eritrean government was, in my experience, widely shared among large sections of the population, including those otherwise critical of government policy. When I raised the issue again with various long-term contacts in Asmara in 2016, that refusing to talk was usually not seen as a rational course of action in diplomacy and engagement with foreign policy, I usually received a sharp reply along the lines of: you cannot talk to those who occupy your land and refuse to leave (fieldnotes, Asmara, July 2016).

Ethiopia indeed had no justification under international law to refuse to accept the EEBC ruling, but relied on its importance as a regional partner and ally in the 'global war on terror' as well as on skilful diplomacy to avoid compliance and escape any pressure or censure from the international community (see for example Healy and Plaut 2007; Lyons 2009).

More generally, Eritrea's overall approach to the border dispute with Ethiopia was guided by a similar pattern visible in all Eritrean disputes of its borders, with Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti respectively. Eritrean actions, including military engagements, were essentially driven by the objective to cement Eritrean territorial boundaries under international law (for a detailed overview of these disputes see Müller 2006). Whilst this objective in the initial years after independence seemed best served by a politics of regional cooperation, visible for example in the active role Eritrea played in the then Inter-governmental Authority on Drought and Development, which became the Intergovern-mental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1996 (Cliffe 1999), once actual encroachment on Eritrean territory occurred, the use of violence was regarded as not only justified but necessary, even if to ultimately force international arbitration. At the time of Eritrea's first low-intensity violent conflict over borders with Sudan, the following statement made by President Issayas Afwerki published in the *Eritrean Profile* provides a good guide to understanding the general approach to Eritrean foreign policy and engagement with its borders:

> If countries are to coexist peacefully, they should show mutual respect. If, for example, my neighbour destroys my fence and there is nothing I can obtain by taking him to the magistrate, then I will be obliged to destroy his fence. (Quoted from Tronvoll 1999, 1046)

In particular in a geographical setting like the Horn of Africa, where borders have been established and changed through violence for centuries, such an approach might indeed be regarded as a prerequisite for territorial security – implying the means to respond to violent incursions by, to stay in the picture, the ability to destroy the neighbour's fence. Alternatively, and this in many ways is a path post-independence Eritrea has sought even if not always successfully, borders once created by violence might be secured through inter-national laws and treaties, ideally combined with frameworks that allow regional integration as well as the resolution of conflicts by other means than through violence. The dispute Eritrea engaged in with Yemen in 1995 over territory and geographical boundaries on and around the Hanish Islands, another border then not clearly defined under international law, exemplifies this double approach particularly well: Eritrea, in a swift show of military force, quickly gained the upper hand. But it agreed to and subsequently complied with an arbitration process that awarded most of the disputed territory to Yemen, a process then hailed as a model for conflict resolution (for details see Antunes 2001; Johnson 2000; Müller 2006). The arbitration process thus provided Eritrea with a solution to its main grievance behind the dispute, delimitation of its sea-border with Yemen.

The fact that a full inter-state war erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 can thus be read as a failure of such frameworks of conflict resolution through arbitration, a failure that could have been anticipated as the various contestations over the Eritrean–Ethiopian boundary since colonial times were allowed to fester. In addition, because the Eritrean question can also be interpreted as a case of inter-African colonisation or liberation from a regional African hegemon (Iyob 2000), this particular boundary and the territorial questions around it were always bound to lead to more violent contestations than other border disputes Eritrea became entangled in.[6] In addition, as analysed expertly by Dias (2012), for both sides, Ethiopia and Eritrea, the question of territory was infused with a lot of symbolic meaning and historical myth-making. For the Ethiopian side, this included referring back to the battle of Adwa and a quest to unite against any threat to Ethiopian territorial integrity, whereas for Eritrea, as outlined above, the claim to *sui generis* statehood was a core foundation of Eritrean nationalism and the claim for an independent state (*Ibid.*). Dias makes an additional important point: while non-Tigrayan Ethiopian communities saw the conflict mainly as a conflict between the political leaderships of both countries, the view from Tigray was infused with different historical connotations: Tigray was regarded as the region that in actual fact had secured Ethiopia's territorial integrity, first in Adwa in 1896 and now in Badme, the hamlet where the 1998–2000 war started geographically and whose ownership became the prime symbol for its outcome and the contestation around it (*Ibid.*, 7).

In light of this state of affairs, it becomes clear why the Ethiopian leadership, as long as it was dominated by politicians from Tigray, could not be seen to let Badme come under Eritrean control, even if overall the EEBC verdict awarded similar amounts of land to both parties and also ruled that Eritrea was at fault for having started the war, thus in theory giving a moral victory to Ethiopia (EEBC 2002).

But as soon as Ethiopia's new prime minister Abiy Ahmed instigated the process that led to the signature of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between both countries on 9 June 2018 in Asmara by formally accepting the EEBC verdict and promising compliance, Eritrea in essence had achieved its ultimate war objective: recognition of its border with Ethiopia in clearly defined coordinates as laid out by the EEBC.

In fact, when looking at various post-2000 Eritrean foreign policy initiatives over time, they can to different extents be interpreted as one means to find allies in the international community to put pressure on Ethiopia to comply with the EEBC ruling, or at least to retain room to manoeuvre in light of the refusal of the international community to do so, as Ethiopia was deemed too important a geopolitical actor (Müller 2006, 2018a). These initiatives include to lobby the United States to host the permanent base of its Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa in Eritrea – that in the end went to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti; the Eritrean alliance with Qatar, a country that also became an important mediator in Eritrea's border and political disputes with Djibouti; and more recently (post-2015) the Eritrean shift towards the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) axis in the war with Yemen and beyond (Müller 2018a).

This then leads to the question of what the longer-term outcome of the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might be, in light of the wider geopolitical dynamics in the Horn and in relation to the Arabian peninsula, as well as in relation to actual border demarcation, future relations between both countries and internal political dynamics.

## The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and prospects for the future

When looking at the wider Horn of Africa, the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has already triggered a number of other diplomatic initiatives with the stated objective to usher in a new period of cooperation in the Horn. The years of no-war-no-peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia were characterised by proxy wars and often indirect interferences in each other's affairs in a quest for destabilisation from within. Eritrea in particular reverted to the Horn's 'tried and trusted methods' to undermine Ethiopia by providing support to (armed) Ethiopian opposition groups. The last months, in contrast, have seen various declarations of ending such opposition and in some cases a return of exiled opposition leaders to Ethiopia (Abbink 2003; Maasho 2018a; Mosley 2014; Shaban 2018).

Both countries had also stepped up their efforts to counter each other's influence in the wider region (Mosley 2014), and for Eritrea this involved a constant battle to retain geopolitical importance.[7] When Saudi Arabia and the UAE thus assembled an alliance of Arab states in order to wage war against the Ansar Allah movement (commonly referred to as the Houthi) in Yemen, Eritrea saw a unique opportunity to cement its importance in providing the port of Assab and training grounds for allied Yemeni forces – even if in turn this meant Eritrea had to abandon its close relationship with Qatar (de Waal 2018; Soliman 2017).

Ethiopia, throughout its history suspicious about Arab influence in the Horn, received reassurances from the UAE and its allies, not only in diplomatic terms but equally in relation to economic linkages. The war in Yemen more generally, combined with the wider agenda of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to counteract the influence of Iran as well as the Qatar–Turkey axis in the region, has played an important role in efforts of both to broker the peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The latter was demonstrated by the symbolic act of conferring the highest civil honour of the UAE, the 'Order of Zayed', on both leaders at a summit in Abu Dhabi, and the signing of a second peace agreement at a summit in Saudi Arabia that was also attended by UN Secretary General António Guterres on 16 September 2018. The latter agreement is no different in intention and lack of concrete substance to the agreement signed in Asmara in July (*Addis Standard* 2018; Eritrea – Ministry of Information 2018), thus it seems mainly a visible demonstration of changed geopolitical dynamics across the Red Sea.

Indeed, concrete details of the actual role played by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the rapprochement are hard to verify, but economic considerations undoubtedly played a key role, and not least the Eritrean coastline is of vital importance for the blueprint of future economic integration between the Arabian peninsula and the wider Horn (Manek 2018; Styan 2018).

But a focus mainly on economic aspects, in line with a more general analysis of political dynamics in the Horn as a 'political marketplace' where politicians, military leaders and insurgents bargain over money and power to achieve their objectives via rent-maximisation (de Waal 2015), fails to understand the ideological underpinnings of state-making in the Horn, that the case of Eritrea and its foreign policy since independence brings particularly to the fore (for a broader discussion of this framing see Müller 2006). While Eritrea's siding with Saudi Arabia and the UAE can be partly analysed as driven by rent-seeking behaviour or related to economic considerations, Eritrean foreign policy more broadly is driven by ideology and notions of national identity that are, as outlined above, strongly

connected to territorial integrity. In fact, Eritrea's insistence on the adherence to international law in its dispute with Ethiopia was in many ways the opposite of rent-seeking behaviour, as it was one key feature in the decline of its economy as well as the trigger for the introduction of, in theory, unlimited national service that has resulted in large out-migration movements from Eritrea (Kibreab 2013).

Regardless of potential economic benefits, it is hard to imagine that Eritrea would have responded positively to Ethiopia's offer for peace if its core condition had not been met: recognition of its border with Ethiopia as handed down in the EEBC judgement, and with it as firm as possible a guarantee of its territorial integrity under international law. Once the commitment was given to implement – and no longer contest, as Ethiopia had until then done – the EEBC decision, affirmed in article four of both peace agreements signed in Asmara and Jeddah respectively, renewed cooperation across the region became possible.

Still, the two agreements signed and the various meetings that have been held between the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, and across the wider Horn and Red Sea region, leave many issues unanswered. While seasoned commentators have focused on the impossibility of demarcating the border along the EEBC-defined coordinates but advocated flexibility in making border adjustments on the ground in order to deal with the justified concerns of residents and communities (Plaut 2018a), I would argue that would be precisely the wrong approach. In fact, accepting the border as virtually demarcated by the EEBC as uncontested and fixed was the key prerequisite for the Eritrean side to sign up to peace. In turn, this acceptance can allow for flexible arrangements on the ground that can accommodate local grievances of border communities. Indeed, virtual demarcation might make actual demarcation unnecessary, if legal and administrative frameworks for future collaboration are clearly spelled out, thus a reluctance to push for such demarcation by President Afwerki should not be seen as an act of betrayal of the Eritrean cause. In actual fact, innovative cross-border practices have long existed along the Eritrean–Ethiopian border that can provide valuable inputs into such frameworks (see for example Massa 2018; Riggan 2011).

But here also lies the Achilles heel of the current rapprochement, a process that has many similarities with the time of Eritrean independence: then as now, jubilant people from both sides could be seen dancing in the streets, hugging each other and being simply overjoyed. At one of the open border crossings, in Zalembassa, soldiers from both countries who not that long ago faced each other across hostile trenches sit together in local bars drinking Ethiopian beer (conversation with former soldier at the Zalembassa Front, Mekelle, 5 October 2018). In parallel, we see the leaders of both countries in hugs and smiles, going out of their way to praise each other, as was the case in 1991 – the main difference being that in the case of Ethiopia, we have a new leader, while the Eritrean president is the very same person. The latter may serve as a powerful symbol of how little might have changed in the structures underpinning the relationship between both countries.[8] But apart from vague declarations of peace, friendship and future cooperation, even less detailed than the Asmara Pact from 1993, which was to settle the multiple issues of partition but ultimately remained a mere declaration of intent (Tekle 1994), little has changed in reality, at least as seen from the Eritrean side.

Whereas in Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy apologised for past human rights abuses and released political prisoners, in Eritrea the only visible change is that people at the moment cross the border with Ethiopia usually freely and without an exit visa (that legally would be required to leave the country). At times, the border at the main crossings was closed again

by the Eritrean side, for hours and sometimes a few days at short notice, but then reopened and border crossings swiftly resumed (*The East African* 2019; Skype conversation with Eritrean crossing the border, 19 January 2019). People cross in large numbers both ways, some to stay in Ethiopia or move further afield, others to simply look for and stock up on items hard to buy in Eritrea (see Müller 2018c for more details). In addition, new national service recruits have reportedly been told that their service will terminate after 18 months as originally stipulated, but this really happening is far from assured at this point (Maasho 2018b). More importantly, an opportunity has been missed by the Eritrean president to follow the lead of his Ethiopian counterpart and release at least those political prisoners who were detained for their critique of the way the 1998–2000 war was fought, and in doing so provide a form of internal closure alongside the external peace process.

Also in relation to trade and wider economic relations, little concrete detail has emerged, beyond a number of declarations on taking economic opportunities by the Eritrean president. For the latter, it is equally unclear if those opportunities will fall to private businesses run by Eritreans or outsiders, or mainly to the ruling party, as has been the case for most of the last 17 years. If the latter is the case, the rapprochement is bound to disappoint many within Eritrea who wait for some form of economic dividend as a result of peace.

Finally, in terms of wider geopolitical dynamics, it is useful to look back at the initial years of Eritrean independence. The constructive environment in relation to regional cooperation that emerged then for a few years relied on regional organisations like IGAD playing an important role, as well as the African Union – both were quasi sidelined in the recent rapprochement, with Eritrean membership of IGAD still in limbo anyway (Andemariam 2015; Yihun 2018). These dynamics put together may urge a note of caution concerning the future.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the recent rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia through the lens of securing the territorial boundaries of the Eritrean nation-state as the main driving force behind Eritrean foreign policy. With the acceptance of the EEBC-defined border by Ethiopia, Eritrea has thus achieved its key objective in the eventual resolution of the 1998–2000 war – and arguably also its war for national independence.

Of course, it also needs to be recognised that territorial integrity is only one aspect of sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa, and economic and potentially also political integration that is beneficial to all parties involved is a key factor. Here, the role the UAE and other Arab partners played may prove more beneficial than is often assumed, not least because they provide an alternative to, for example, Chinese investment, on which some countries in the region arguably are over-dependent. And while I have argued here that economic incentives alone would not have been enough to change Eritrea's stance and make peace with Ethiopia, now that the actual border insecurity has been addressed, new forms of economic integration also across the Red Sea might indeed foster regional peace and stability around Ethiopia as an 'imperfect hegemon' (Gouriellec 2018).

Ultimately and rather ironically, in spite of the fact that Ethiopia largely escaped formal European colonialism, conceptions of boundaries and territorial nation-states that have their origins in Western political thought and practices have fundamentally shaped the relationship between Ethiopia and its small neighbour Eritrea.

## Notes

1. Much has been written about the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, what triggered it and attempts at its resolution, and need not be repeated here. Questions of nationality and economic connections, as well as diverging policies on ethnicity between both states, are all important factors but go beyond the argument of this article. For a good overview see Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut (2005) and Negash and Tronvoll (2000).

2. It goes beyond this article to discuss in any more detail the beginning of the Eritrean liberation war and the different groups involved in it. As here the main focus is on the quest for a territorial state and how this has shaped foreign policy, the focus is on the EPLF as the organisation that achieved independence by military means and subsequently became the sole ruling party, renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and as such determining Eritrean foreign policy. For a wider history of the pre-EPLF dimensions of the Eritrean struggle see for example Pool (2001).

3. Even if one should point out here that the Horn of Africa is a special case in many ways, as the nature and process of the creation of colonial borders involved not only three external powers, namely Britain, France and Italy, but also Ethiopia as a regional power or hegemon. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this is also the region in which new territorial statehood has been granted to Eritrea and South Sudan, and some form of de facto independence to Somaliland and Puntland (see for example Clapham 2017 for further discussion about some of these examples, excluding Sudan).

4. It should be noted here that not all contested parts of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia are in Tigray. There are also sections in the Afar region. Equally, different local population groups and ethnicities engage differently across the border. For a good overview see Tronvoll (1999).

5. In particular economic dynamics were of great importance in the 1998–2000 war and might become so again in future relationships. To discuss those in detail goes beyond the focus of this article, but see Müller (2018a).

6. For an overview of all these disputes within a wider framework of Eritrean foreign policy see Müller (2006, 2018d).

7. The support by Eritrea of Somali opposition groups that at some point in time included Al-Shabaab and resulted in UN sanctions against Eritrea also has to be seen in this light: as a means to counter Ethiopian foreign policy objectives in Somalia and retain room for an assertive foreign policy of its own. It goes beyond this article to discuss these dynamics in more detail, but see Müller (2018d).

8. One issue that has changed is the fact that the Ethiopian leadership is no longer dominated by Tigrayan politicians, and in particular from the Eritrean side the impasse of the last 17 years is firmly blamed on Tigrayan politicians. While it goes beyond this article to discuss this in more detail, this in itself sets a dangerous precedent, not least because only an Ethiopia at peace with itself can in the long term play a constructive role in securing peace and wider cooperation in the region. And as recent inner-Ethiopian developments have shown, Abiy's agenda is by no means uncontroversial and has its internal enemies, and a peaceful future should not be taken for granted (Bruton 2018; Woldemariam 2018).

## Disclosure statement

## Note on contributor

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