The conundrum of present Ethiopian foreign policy—in search of a roadmap for Ethiopia’s foreign and national security policy and strategy

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The conundrum of present Ethiopian foreign policy—in search of a roadmap for Ethiopia’s Foreign and National Security Policy and Strategy

By Dr. Tekeda Alemu

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I. Never before in its modern history has Ethiopia had more or less such a popular leadership as it has at present. No doubt public opinion is rather fickle and one cannot be confident that public support, once obtained, will persist forever—or even for very long. But still, the support of the public that the current Ethiopian Prime Minister and his colleagues are enjoying is unprecedented. If this asset is used properly, transparently and wisely—which, among other things, requires prioritizing institution building and eschewal of the temptations of self-aggrandizement—one can have confidence that it may serve to catapult the country forward on a trajectory that could help Ethiopia achieve sustainable development, democratic governance and lasting peace.

If this were to happen, there is little doubt that Ethiopia could become a formidable force for peace, security and stability in the Horn of Africa, and in Africa in general. It is also more than likely that the country’s leverage would ensure that the geopolitical situation in the Red Sea area, which is now far from being reassuring for Africa, would be more favorable and would properly reflect the interest of the countries of the Horn of Africa. This is all the more critical at present because of the momentous changes under way globally and in the Red Sea area. The global security situation is worrying and the likelihood that it might get even worse can hardly be dismissed as a doomsayer’s hyperbole.

Nor can this be regarded as not having much relevance for Africa and countries such as Ethiopia. The relationship between the major powers continues to be tense, and as a result there are indications that the global order is becoming fragile and fraying. It is not necessary to go along with the widely accepted comparison being made between the period we are going through now and the period prior to the outbreak of the First World War, marked by its recent centenary. Nor is it necessary to subscribe to the view that some countries are rising and others declining. What is critical is that the empirical reality makes it abundantly clear that relations between the major powers have become more tense and potentially more dangerous than they have been since the end of the cold war. In fact, it is possible to argue, as Secretary-General Antonio Guterres argued recently, that the current situation is even more dangerous because it is less regulated and managed, thus becoming more susceptible to reaching the tipping point beyond which is the unthinkable. That is why regional tensions are so important in all this, and why countries such as Ethiopia, though their national calling suggests caution and they should not try to punch above their weight, do have a responsibility to do their part to ensure that developments in their region do not become a catalyst for great power rivalry leading to military confrontation.

This is the general approach that Ethiopia has followed in its foreign policy for sometime, particularly over the last 27 years or so. One can consider how we were able to benefit from our friendship with China while maintaining our ties with the United States, particularly in the security sector. Some officials of the previous government
might have shown a preference for this or that government and might have been seen to be hostile to some, but all this was purely idiosyncratic, having nothing to do with government policy. It is entirely appropriate to lambast the EPRDF government for mismanaging the country’s governance, bringing the country almost to the edge of the precipice in the last three years. As we write this piece, the way matters have been handled in the past and the grievances this has engendered are seen to have provided opportunities for those who resort to demagoguery to try to wreak havoc with no concern for the country. What was done in the past needs to be treated very seriously, even mercilessly, because of the calamity that could have resulted in the country. This was avoided thanks to the new leadership of the EPRDF, which helped avoid what had appeared at the time to be a likely descent into the abyss from which it would haven been difficult to pull the country. For this alone the current leadership of the EPRDF deserves hearty commendation.

But the performance of the EPRDF leadership, particularly in foreign policy all the way through 2012, was very sound and firmly anchored in a commitment to protect the national security of the country and to promote its economic and security interest. In terms of laying out a roadmap for the implementation of the country’s Foreign and National Security Policy, perhaps not many countries have managed to do what the EPRDF government did when it produced its Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy in 2002.

It is perfectly legitimate to question the degree to which the critical tenets underpinning the approach promised in the document have been adhered to. One of the fundamental premises of this seminal document was that Ethiopia’s foreign policy must start by first focusing on the country’s internal conditions and that those internal threats, such as poverty and lack of democracy, had to be prioritized. But it has become evident in the last few years that Ethiopia’s foreign policy did not in fact have a solid domestic foundation, and as a result, what was promised in the foreign policy document has not come to pass.

Nevertheless, the foreign policy roadmap did provide a guide for conducting Ethiopia’s foreign relations with the major mission of promoting the national interest of the country, a goal that was to be advanced without shirking responsibility as a self-respecting country adhering to principles, but always mindful of the need to be pragmatic. One can look at various contentious foreign policy issues regarding which Ethiopia was called upon to take positions. While an elected member of the Security Council, our country was required to express its opinion and vote on matters that were not amenable to being handled by consensus. The Syrian chemical weapons issue comes to mind, and Ethiopia addressed this in an honorable manner but without unduly offending others. This was possible because of Ethiopia’s predictability and consistency and the effort made to explain its position in a coherent and logical manner, showing that it was guided by the merits of the case. This is how Ethiopia managed to address the Palestinian issue as well as matters relating to Western Sahara. On the other hand, the protagonists’ sensitivity and lack of tolerance for divergent opinions made handling the Yemen situation difficult.

It is also widely recognized that Ethiopia has been second to none in aligning its positions on all issues with those of the African Union. In this regard it was a champion in the Security Council in 2017 and 2018, mobilizing support for objectives that the AU wanted promoted. Ethiopia
has never allowed the African Union to be marginalized on issues that fall within the purview of the organization. Africa has also thus been a priority for Ethiopia’s foreign policy. While zeroing in on Ethiopia’s national interest as we conducted our foreign policy, we also made sure that Ethiopia paid attention to the interest of Africa and the common positions adopted by the organization.

Ethiopia is also part of the international community and, at that level as well, it was taken for granted that our country had a responsibility to be supportive of causes that are in the common interest of the international community. Our unqualified support for the United Nations, of which we are one of the founding members, grew out of this commitment.

At all three levels—the promotion of the national interest of the country, commitment to Africa and adherence to Africa’s common positions, and support to causes that are in the interest of the international community as a whole—EPRDF’s foreign policy of the past two decades has at a minimum been more than sound.

II. On the need to revise the foreign policy document of 2002

The world has changed in more ways than one since the publication of the Ethiopian foreign and national security policy document in 2002. At the global level relations between the major powers were not as worrying as now, and globalization, from the point of view of the document, while needing to be handled carefully, was nonetheless to be celebrated. In general, hope about the global situation and Ethiopia’s ability to make headway in economic development by exercising dexterity, though recognizing that it was indeed difficult and complex, were highlighted by the document. Populism had not yet reared its ugly head and Europe was confident, as was the west in general, about Liberal Democracy as the wave of the future, if not quite at the level of Fukuyama’s emphatic ‘end of history’ prognosis.

The US could hardly anticipate that in a little more than a decade and a half its soft power would dwindle, and apart from its military power there would be little that would recommend it as a lodestar for other states. In both the US and Europe there is now less confidence about the future, and no one can claim that they have gotten governance right. This is a period of uncertainty and bewilderment at the global level, with xenophobia and racism on the rise. What the Ethiopia foreign and national security policy document of 2002 exuded, though implicit, was hope about the global future which can hardly be defended now as a basis for foreign policy formulation.

At the regional level—particularly in the region that concerns us the most, the Red Sea area—matters could not be more different now than they were in 2002. Partly as a function of the global situation which made the utilization of proxies for advancing foreign policy goals more convenient, and partly as a result of middle powers developing the confidence to flex their muscle in the region, the Red Sea area’s geopolitical situation has been transformed so thoroughly that occasionally one sees the tail wagging the dog. For pecuniary reasons sometimes the small are observed holding the hands of the big, and the result is not more but less readiness to use wisdom in the exercise of power. Yemen is a good example and a warning of what might happen to others—not in the same way, certainly, but as a result of a variety of manifestations of the irresponsible use of power. The chaotic situation in Somalia, which has
become a theatre in which the rivalry among middle powers is on display, is another facet of this change under way in the region. None of this was visible yet in 2002. In all of this Africa and the African Union have been absent and the organization’s role is unrecognized or totally dismissed, apart from the occasional rhetorical celebration of partnership. No African country should countenance this, nor should Ethiopia’s foreign and national security policy.

In light of all this and since some of the basic assumptions on which the 2002 foreign policy document was based have been upended, there is a need for a thorough revision of the document and a new look into what is stated in the document concerning Ethiopia’s relations with many countries, including Eritrea, Egypt, the Sudan and a number of other countries. Focusing for now only on Eritrea, that interaction is proceeding in a welcome manner, but with little consideration for the framework within which the relationship should be managed and for the institutional and legal underpinnings of this unique relationship—which is nonetheless between two states with ties that may be affected by the logic of inter-state relations. Never again should the people of the two countries find themselves in a situation where they cannot avert a slide into war, among other eventualities, because relations between the two fail to be institutionalized and depend on personal relations or contacts at the party level.

### III. Deciphering the Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement

No reasonable person would fail to commend the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The ‘no war, no peace’ situation that prevailed between the two countries from May 2000 on was in the interest of neither country nor the region at large. That the logjam that impeded progress towards normalization was broken by the initiative taken by Prime Minister Abiy is obvious. The executive committee of the EPRDF blessed this during the first week of June, prior to the premier’s announcement. But there is no gainsaying that the Prime Minister set the tone. And although Eritrea’s response did not come immediately, once Asmara came on board, many looked at the speed with which relations were normalized with amazement. In light of this one must ask why it had become so difficult for Ethiopia and Eritrea to normalize their relations earlier, despite the efforts of so many to mediate between the two countries.

It is to be recalled that Prime Minister Hailemariam once declared publicly that he was ready to go to Asmara in search of peace. Eritrea did not take the offer seriously, perhaps because for Eritrea it was not the message that was critical, but the messenger. In other words, Asmara had no confidence in the previous top leadership of the EPRDF, which essentially meant the TPLF, as the Eritrean President felt he had been humiliated by the TPLF leadership in May 2000. The Badme issue is not yet resolved and redeployment has yet to take place, while normalization has advanced very far, and this makes it all the more evident that what Eritrea was waiting for was a change of leadership in Ethiopia before it accepted any peace proposal, no matter how attractive the proposal might have been. One must credit the Eritrean leadership with having been prescient and for its spot-on prognostication. The TPLF domination of the EPRDF proved to be short-lived, as the Eritrean President hoped. But it doesn’t follow that Asmara is vindicated by what has transpired. In this conflict between the two countries, which began in May 1998 with that tragic military move by Eritrea, neither side has shown statesmanship.
Moreover, there were plenty of instances, including early on and prior to the first major military engagement that resulted in a successful Ethiopian counter offensive to regain Badme, when the crisis could have been resolved peacefully. It is impossible to deny that Eritrea was at fault here. The Eritrean President was unwilling to cooperate with the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU), which played a commendable role in attempting to help the parties avert the outbreak of hostilities. And it must be noted that Asmara also rebuffed all attempts by Rwanda and a host of other African leaders, as well as a half-hearted effort by the US (we prefer to leave aside many things, including what befell the late former President of Djibouti, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, at the time), while it was very clear at that time that Ethiopia under PM Meles appeared almost a supplicant for peace.

The OAU Framework Agreement was approved on 17 December 1998 by the Summit of the Central Organ of the OAU's Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. As the Security Council affirmed in Resolution 1226 (1999), the Agreement provided “the best hope for peace between the two parties.” Ethiopia’s response was prompt and the Security Council duly recognized this when it said, in the same resolution, that it “welcomes the acceptance by Ethiopia of the Framework Agreements.” But Eritrea was unwilling to accept the OAU proposal, prompting the Council in the same resolution 1226 (1999) to "strongly" urge "Eritrea to accept the Framework Agreement as a basis for a peaceful resolution of the border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea without delay." But Eritrea chose to continue dithering and prevaricating, making it very clear that it was unwilling to give peace a chance. Obviously, the military balance favored Eritrea in such a lop-sided manner—a result of the EPRDF myopia about many things, including how weaknesses could invite aggression—that the leadership in Eritrea felt no need to show decency and statesmanship. This made Ethiopia’s subsequent military offensive to capture Badme, which for Ethiopia meant an effort to restore the status quo ante, inevitable. But of course Ethiopia had to go on a spending spree to beef up its military, which had by then become something of a sad spectacle.

Lo and behold, Eritrean military defeat at Badme on February 26 led to a diplomatic breakthrough when the Eritrean President sent a letter on 27 February 1999 to the President of the Security Council, expressing “acceptance of the OAU framework Agreement.” In a presidential statement the same day, the Council stated that:

_The Security Council welcomes the acceptance by Eritrea at the Head of State level of the OAU Framework Agreement and recalls the prior acceptance of the agreement by Ethiopia. The OAU Framework Agreement remains a viable and sound basis for peaceful resolution to the conflict._

It is interesting to note that the Eritrean President also wrote on the same day not only to the President of the Security Council but also, perhaps not surprisingly, to President Clinton, declaring his acceptance of the OAU Framework Agreement. But the Eritrean leadership would not accept defeat with equanimity. The crisis continued, largely because Eritrea refused to redeploy from the rest of the areas that were previously administered by Ethiopia, arguing that what the OAU Framework Agreement demanded was redeployment from Badme and its environs only. Ethiopia, taking the opposite view, stressed its position that whatever applied to Badme applied to the rest of the occupied territories as
well—a position which was valid as a matter of fact although the OAU’s sloppy formulation made the Eritrea argument appear somewhat plausible.

Thus, despite the diplomatic breakthrough which the bloodletting in Badme made possible, the crisis between the parties continued, leading to the attempt by Eritrea in June 1999 to recapture Badme which failed miserably. At the mid-July OAU Summit in Algiers where the Modalities for the implementation of the Framework Agreement was approved by the OAU leaders, Eritrea had no choice but to accept that it withdraw its troops from the rest of the occupied Ethiopian territories. It should be recalled that the then Chairman of the OAU, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, had made the same demand in May 1999, through his Foreign Minister who met President Isaias on May 11 to deliver the message. That bold attempt was, however, left hanging, with no one, including the US and the Security Council, wanting to back the Chairman of the OAU officially. And incidentally, though the Eritrean side has always misrepresented this, the US was never on the Ethiopian side and the role Washington played left much to be desired. Particularly during the initial period of the crisis when the US could have made a real difference and did not, its role amounted to an abdication of responsibility as a major power. The US thought the military balance favored Eritrea. Washington must have concluded that there was no use appearing to side with Ethiopia, which had seemed at that time a feeble giant ready to collapse. Better to be with a winner, no matter what justice might have demanded.

As usual, a diplomatic breakthrough in the Ethio-Eritrea crisis appeared always to wait for an advance by one side or the other on the battlefield—as if (apologies for the crude formulation) the blood of the youth were a lubricant for progress in diplomacy. The tragic events on the June battlefield appeared to have changed many things. The commotion at the Algiers Summit, details of which it would not be proper to get into now, made it all too apparent that the Eritrean leadership was demoralized and had started to see the writing on the wall. No longer, they seemed to have concluded, was there a military option to sustain their refusal to redeploy from occupied Ethiopian territories. Eritrea was ready for peace.

As an indication of the lack of statesmanship that always characterized the crisis between the two parties, by August 1999 roles had decisively been reversed. Ethiopia became the party to dither and prevaricate, using all sorts of gimmicks by way of filibustering to avoid a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The military balance had shifted and population size and other factors made a difference, leading to the conclusion in Asmara that a peaceful resolution was the best option. In Addis the reverse was the conclusion.

The already existing rift within the EPRDF leadership began to widen. It was the hardliners who gradually took the upper hand to insist on teaching Eritrea a lesson, thus throwing out the window any proposal that made a diplomatic way out possible. The Ethiopian leadership resorted to verbal gymnastics concerning the clarification it demanded on the Technical Arrangements for the implementation of the OAU Framework Agreement and the Modalities that remind one of the some equivocations and evasion that Eritrea engaged in prior to June 1999 when it requested a series of clarifications on the meaning of Badme and its environs in the Framework Agreement. But now Eritrea was for peace, which only Prime Minister Meles appeared to take seriously. It did not mean much. His was a lone voice. In this connection it must be stressed that Meles was
more cerebral than muscular. It was also in that spirit that he approached the crisis between the two countries. But he had partners neither from this side nor the other—this side focused on his mother being of Eritrean descent while the other side concentrated on something unfortunate he had said about the color of people’s eyes. The rest of the EPRDF leadership, sensing additional victory, were itching for a fight, refusing to accept the Eritrean response to the Algerian mediation, in which it agreed that it would withdraw from those areas that Ethiopia had identified Eritrean troops should redeploy from.

The Eritrean Foreign Ministry statement of 8 August had made it clear that by accepting the Technical Arrangements it was now prepared to seek a diplomatic way out. Not Ethiopia, and more accurately, not the hardliners within the EPRDF. The contemporaneous comment on this episode in the diary of this writer was penned on August 9:

*This is probably the first time in the course of this crisis that we seem diplomatically a little bit less than sure-footed. Obviously, we have overall achieved a diplomatic victory, not only over Eritrea, but also over the whole international community, which spoke through the Security Council with the U.S. setting the tone. From this perspective the situation has no doubt been radically transformed. Eritrea, which used to scorn all diplomatic efforts which even indirectly suggested its return to May 6 position is now in [a] hurry to accept documents submitted to it. What Eritrea is now prepared to accept without even a murmur is something it could have accepted a year ago.*

There is no doubt that what the then Eritrean Foreign Minister, Haile Weldensae, said on 26 August 1999 to the diplomatic community in Asmara was a fair statement:

> *There is no confusion and ambiguity to know who is for peace and who is for war. My Government has showed its commitment for peaceful resolution of the conflict in words and deed. It is the regime in Addis, which is stalling the peace process and holding the OAU peace plan hostage.*

It may not be necessary to get into the details, for those can wait for another time, but the weak position that Ethiopia wanted to hold onto revolved around the issue of how the areas from which Eritrea would withdraw would be determined, and the sequencing of the signing of the cessation of hostilities agreement and redeployment of Eritrea troops. “In fact, in the first meeting with Mr. Ouyahia [the Algerian mediators],” says the comment in the diary entry of 28 August 1999, “what he was told was that a provision for a binding decision by a Neutral Commission would suffice and that in that instance if the details with regards to the time table for re-deployment were to be worked out, Ethiopia would be ready to come to Algiers and sign the document. That was also the impression that Mr. Ouyahia went to Algeria with after that meeting.” The meeting was with Prime Minister Meles, who could not deliver on the promise made, one can surmise, because of opposition within the EPRDF top leadership, which was not looking for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis. The military option was what was prioritized.

In a September 4 entry, what is said in the diary makes clear the state of paralysis within the Ethiopian leadership:
It is difficult for many not to suspect that we might be paralyzed in deciding in clear terms on our future course of action. This is probably the first time since the onset of this crisis that we have been unable to formulate a clear policy on what we wish to do with the peace process. Even people like Dr. Salim—despite his sympathy for our position—might be wondering.

It was indeed becoming obvious that Ethiopia’s position was increasingly perplexing. And it was not only the OAU Secretary General who could not understand the Ethiopian objective. As the 29 September 1999 entry puts it:

The OAU people around the Secretariat [were] making it known confidentially that they [were] not so sure of what Ethiopia wants.

But Ethiopia knew what it wanted and that led to the last major battle between the two countries in May 2000, which resulted in Ethiopia restoring the status quo ante by force and, in fact, marching deep into Eritrean territory. What could easily have been achieved through diplomatic means was attained by force, with all its consequences in terms of the bitterness caused and the consequences that continue to reverberate even today. It was thus under those circumstances that the parties went to Algiers, where they signed the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities on June 18 and the Algiers Agreement on 12 December 2000.

The first provided for the redeployment of troops by both and the creation of the Temporary Security Zone 25 kilometers inside the Eritrean territory, to be monitored by UN peacekeepers. These provisions were not respected by Eritrea and it did not take long for Eritrea to occupy the zone and to force the peacemakers to leave. In other words, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities was gutted and for all intents and purposes violated by Eritrea.

Thus when one talks about who has violated the Algiers Agreement, this should not be overlooked, because the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is an integral part of the Algiers Agreement. The very first article of the Agreement in paragraph two says, “The parties shall respect and fully implement the provisions of the agreement on Cessation of Hostilities.” They were not, but Eritrea should be held responsible for those violations. Ethiopia’s difficulty with implementing the final and binding decision of the Boundary Commission is what is widely known and stressed.

There is no doubt that Ethiopia has not been faithful when it comes to carrying out its obligation with respect to the decision of the Boundary Commission. That was a decision which allowed no room for prevarication, but Ethiopia did prevaricate and it took no clear and bold decision until the new EPRDF leadership decided to accept the verdict of the Boundary Commission, which Ethiopia had pledged to accept without any qualification. This was particularly true with respect to Badme. But all of this notwithstanding, Ethiopia’s position had evolved and it had made it clear, though belatedly, that it was ready to accept the delimitation decision of the Boundary Commission. The only qualification it had was with regard to demarcation, insisting that it instead should take place following normalization of relations, calling for dialogue between the two parties.

It is perfectly possible to assume, as Eritrea probably did, that all that was part of the usual prevarications and equivocations by Ethiopia. But
on the other hand, it is not clear what Eritrea would have lost, given the fact that the final and binding decision was so clear, if it had agreed and proceeded to the dialogue. There would have been no way for Ethiopia to wriggle out of the commitment, which left no room for evasion. The real problem, perhaps, was that there was no trust between the parties, and the bitterness and the humiliating treatment meted out to Eritrea, most particularly in May 2000, may have made it impossible for Eritrea to contemplate normalization of relations with the EPRDF, which they correctly believed was led by the TPLF.

Eritrea was counting on the removal of the EPRDF government before normalization took place, never expecting that the change they were hoping for could take place without the EPRDF leaving the scene, but with new leadership. What they thought was the humiliation of those by whom they believe they were humiliated made it possible for Eritrea to embrace normalization of relations with Ethiopia without the prior demarcation of the boundary, thus raising a host of issues with respect to whether the border dispute, which caused so much bloodshed, has ever been the real problem between the two countries. The role of outsiders, from the Middle East or other regions, might have helped, but this may not have been all that critical.

What needs to be emphasized, while looking at the whole Ethio-Eritrea saga, is that no one was a saint. Neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia has shown statesmanship from beginning to end. Therefore, the way rapprochement was achieved may be credited to the new Ethiopian leadership, but no one directly involved in this saga could legitimately claim vindication. The crisis could have been nipped in the bud right from the start if the Eritrean leadership had been wise; and the tragic events of May 2000 could have been avoided if the Ethiopian leadership had not begun to be arrogant, puffed up by the prospect of military victory.

There is no doubt that Ethio-Eritrean relations are now at a crossroads. They need to be conceptualized properly, and the real basis for the rather unique relations between these two states must be articulated in a realistic manner, and in a way that will help avoid the mistakes of the past, which have been so costly. These are relations between two states, subject to the vagaries that inter-state relations are normally exposed to. Attempts were made in the past to defy the Realist prognostication of the behavior of states. A price was paid in blood. This should not be repeated.

The rapprochement between the two countries also needs to be based on some fundamental values that go beyond shared convictions about facing a common adversity, which might prove to be ephemeral. In general, with respect to our relations with Eritrea or with any other country or entity, we need to have a clearly formulated roadmap based on what we believe is called for by our national interest to guide our foreign policy. It must be emphasized that we are not talking about tactical maneuvers in foreign policy designed to blind side a foreign or domestic adversary. Nothing is wrong with resorting to such tactics and maneuvers if there is a need to advance the national interest. If such tactical initiatives were conducted within the framework of a strategy aimed at promoting the economic and security interest of the nation, and this proved to be the only option that the country had, it would be difficult to be against such a move. But one needs to be careful here, all the more so when relations between entities and nations are affected by negative emotions and feelings which might lead to the prioritization of tactical
considerations which are not necessarily congruent with the long-term interests of nations.

One hopes the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea will avoid such pitfalls. Failure in this area would be in the long-term interest of neither party. There is one matter which experience has shown is fundamental to ensure healthy relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This has to do with the fact that this relationship must be consistent with the principles that govern inter-state relations.

As already alluded to in the previous paragraphs, the failure to ensure this and regularize their relations was one of the main causes of the conflict between the two countries. The two countries are no doubt close, the bonds between the two peoples are indeed strong, and the historical reasons for all this are obvious. That needs no elaboration. Nonetheless, these are two states that should behave towards each other on the basis of known rules that govern relations among states. In this regard, refraining from involvement in each other's business is something that needs to be considered as absolutely critical. This is particularly germane in connection with sensitive matters that impact the unity of the two countries as well as the political situation in the respective states.

IV. A few thoughts on building blocks for Ethiopia’s Foreign and National Security Policy

Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The case for putting America’s house in order came out in 2013. On the other hand, Ethiopia’s Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy was made public in 2002. Richard N. Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, authored the first; the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles published Ethiopia’s Foreign Affairs and National Security document. Haass’s book came out eleven years after the Ethiopian Foreign Affairs and National Security document had been published. Haass looked at the challenges of US foreign policy and argued that these challenges begin at home and that US foreign policy would succeed when the country managed to put its house in order. Foreign policy begins at home, he argued. That was precisely what the Ethiopian document stated. This probably applies to all countries. The only difference, perhaps, is that for countries such as Ethiopia, putting our house in order is an existential challenge, one that has to do with ensuring the very survival of the country. Making sure that the challenges of poverty are overcome, that democratic governance takes root and other social vulnerabilities are addressed, are priorities for Ethiopia, which serve as foundations for a successful foreign and national security policy.

Rarely have foreign and security policy documents diagnosed so clinically a country’s underlying maladies as the 2002 Ethiopia foreign policy document did. But then those who penned it failed miserably to carry out their domestic responsibilities, though they had said in the document that this was critical for the survived of the nation. Yet what is said in that document about how to ensure the survival of the nation, which is the primary task of the country’s foreign policy, is still extremely relevant. As this is being written the country appears to be on the cusp of a major democratic transformation while at the same time facing potential dangers that could tear the country asunder. The primary goal of Ethiopia’s foreign policy at present and in the foreseeable future is to contribute to the forging of greater unity among the peoples of Ethiopia and to protect the country from all threats—particularly from external parties that seek to
drive a wedge between different sectors of society. No approach to foreign policy would be worth defending if it failed to contribute to making the country strong internally. This would mean making it possible for the country to complete the journey it has begun in this historic democratic transformation. It would also mean mobilizing support for the country’s economic rejuvenation and contributing to making that sustainable. But it would also mean shielding the country from efforts aimed at creating misunderstanding among the people of Ethiopia. It would be totally anomalous for parties and sectors within a given nation-state to have deeper and more trustful partnerships with those belonging to other states than with their own compatriots. That would be an indication that citizens have failed to coalesce around the country’s national interest. Ethiopia needs a patriotic foreign policy. That would not make it an exception because this is what all states do.

This is all the more critical now, at this juncture in world history, when, as mentioned at the beginning of this piece, the global political and security situation is so unpredictable and narrow-mindedness has become the order of the day. As they say, context matters. Both the global as well as the regional contexts are fundamentally different from those that prevailed when the 2002 foreign policy document was prepared. The time is not suited for ad hoc foreign policy decisions, if there are ever times when that would be proper. Ethiopia’s national interest demands that its foreign policy be crafted carefully, with a view to having normal relations with all countries, and with the national interest of the country serving as a guide. This is not so difficult to determine. The country needs support for economic development, for job creation, and to address the challenges of poverty. The new US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs was right when he said, “Africa is facing a demographic tsunami.” He couldn’t have been more to the point, and what he said is entirely relevant to our situation. Whoever is ready to help in this area may be the country’s reliable partner. In all this, what the country does needs to be consistent, predictable and transparent. What the country seeks and what its foreign policy should be in pursuit of is mutual benefit. The country also needs partnership in the security area, and all those who wish to pursue this in a mutually beneficial manner would have to be partners. This is not as easy as it sounds, but the transparency with which the policy is carried out would help minimize the complications. Our relations with the US, Russia, China, the EU and others with leverage on global and regional security and political matters would have to be handled in this manner.

Those with great geopolitical ambitions might—and, more often than not, do, in fact—follow a highly politicized foreign policy imbued with ideological proclivities. Ethiopia must shun an approach that even remotely resembles this. Pragmatic humility should be our clarion call.

The Red Sea region will continue to be a challenge for the countries of the Horn of Africa, and though we are not a Red Sea littoral country, for Ethiopia as well. There is no doubt that matters have changed in the region and the Red Sea is becoming a magnet, pulling toward the Horn of Africa diverse interests making the geopolitical situation there dicey. This is a worrying development that Ethiopia cannot afford to observe with disinterest. Here as well, our approach would need to be careful and pragmatic. Our situation and the magnitude of the challenges our country faces do not allow us to risk attracting the enmity of any country, least of all those with the resources either to help or to
cause damage. But this should never entail abandoning the principles, which govern inter-state relations. Insisting on respect for your sovereign rights means, in concrete terms and among other things, demanding serious consideration for matters that affect, or are likely to affect, our security interests.

Ethiopia has a security interest in what takes place in the Horn of Africa. Those parties that are now and are becoming involved in a region of which we are a part have an obligation, if they claim to be friends of our country, at a minimum to consult with us and inform us of what they might be up to if their engagement is of a military or security nature. It would be naïve to ignore that and would amount, if it were to happen, to shirking responsibility for the long-term security of the country. The geopolitical situation around Somalia and inside the country, as well as in the Red Sea region, is becoming a serious potential challenge to our national security. It is not clear at present how much the ad hoc foreign policy activities we have been conducting in a scattershot manner are fully aligned with our security interest.

One might not be blamed if one felt our policy towards Somalia perhaps exemplified this condition. While it is impossible to say whether we have a coherent policy that we really own and have authored, it would also not be all that unfair to suspect that our approach to Somalia might have gone haywire. One hopes the whole thing has not turned topsy-turvy, gutting the whole edifice that had been built over years. This is not to say that the previous policy does not have defects, particularly with respect to the way it was implemented. Many aspects of the way our policy in Somalia was conducted could hardly be viewed with a sense of satisfaction. That change was needed has been self-evident. But that failure to make a change could cause a major setback to our national security was also obvious. However, the general thrust of the policy was sound and the fact that we managed to safeguard our country from terrorist attacks for as long as we did should in no way be swept under the rug. Moreover, throwing the baby out with the bathwater is totally unwarranted.

No doubt for sometime now this has been our way of doing things during times of transition. One recalls what was done by the EPRDF on many fronts, particularly during the first few years of its rule, and the most damaging to our national interest and national security was the way the defense sector was handled. Many patriots were deeply offended by that. This has left deep wounds in the Ethiopian body politic, and these have continued to resonate until now, making it difficult for the EPRDF to win the full confidence and the hearts and minds of many Ethiopians. We need not repeat that with respect to other matters that might be equally damaging to our national security interest, least of all in the Horn of Africa where our role as linchpin for regional security cannot be second-guessed. This may be pooh-poohed by those who have never wanted to see Ethiopia secure the role in the region that it deserves. But the region also needs an Ethiopia that knows where it is heading. Not only does that destination have to be agreed upon by regional partners, which was one major defect of the implementation of the previous approach, but the journey has to be joined by others, convinced that it is in their interest to do so. It is, however, imperative that we have clarity with regard to our policy. It needs to be a policy that dovetails with our present and long-term interests. If our present policy is driven by hostility toward those deemed to be authors of the previous policy, one would be inviting disaster in a region that is so critical for Ethiopia’s national security. Let it be
emphasized that unlike others who might show interest in Somalia, we, like Kenya and Djibouti, share common borders with Somalia. That factor is ignored at our peril. Incidentally, it would also be equally damaging to ignore the value of Sudan for Ethiopia and how much that country is so vital for Ethiopia’s strategic interest in the region regarding a variety of issues.

That is why this is not a matter that can be postponed for another day. As already reiterated, the Horn of Africa region is in the process of radical transformation. It is no longer possible to ignore the Arabian Peninsula when one crafts a policy toward the Horn of Africa. The fact that the relationship is asymmetrical requires no elaboration. It is as clear as noonday. There is indeed the expectation, which is encouraged by a transactional approach to foreign policy, that the countries of the Horn should play second fiddle on matters that affect their own national security interest. This must be regarded as a major challenge.

Ethiopia’s new foreign policy makers would make a great mistake if they failed to take this into account and did not try to seek ways of developing a modus vivendi that provides a basis for mutually beneficial relations based on mutual respect with the countries on the other side of the Red Sea. A tall order indeed, but nothing less is expected from those with the opportunity to lead this historic country with so many attributes to help it avoid being taken for granted. One important matter is decisive here: It is the internal strength of the country, which can be achieved only when we foster the unity that makes others take us seriously. This is the real challenge before us as this is being penned. To be specific, the tensions between our Federal Government and our regions—all regions—should be addressed, and addressed as expeditiously as possible. That is when we will succeed in our foreign policy. Ethiopia has also great responsibility for enhancing the role of the Africa Union in regional politics. Not only has this been Ethiopia’s foreign policy tradition, but doing so is in our interest. We benefit when the collective voice of Africa is behind us whenever we face threats to our security. Marginalization of the Africa Union can never be in our interest. Ethiopia cannot even appear to be endorsing any such approach.

Africa is entering a period when its ability, readiness and resolve to act in the interest of the people of the content is going to be tested. The global tension that was referred to earlier on is making urgent the development of a common African position on shielding the continent from major power rivalry that might have damaging consequences. Ethiopia, as one of the most prominent countries of the continent, has a responsibility in this exercise. Africa needs partners. No outside power can claim to have the mandate to choose partners for the continent. The continent’s interest in economic development and its integration, in the growth of democratic governance and its peace and security, must be the criteria for developing partnerships with others.

Africa benefits when there is amity among nations, most particularly between the major powers, for it is those countries that have the means to mess things up for others. Their cooperation is beneficial, for opening up possibilities for the creation of better opportunities for international cooperation for development financing, among other things. This is in the interest of all African countries. Whatever small hope might still be left for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, will be thrown out the
window if Africa allows the region to be a platform for the rivalry between the major powers that morphs into military activities which are manifested in a variety of ways, including through proxies. The Horn of Africa is very susceptible to weaknesses that make it vulnerable to these types of dangers. The Africa Union has a great responsibility to follow this emerging danger closely, and Ethiopia needs to play an active role to help the AU discharge its responsibility in this regard. It is in its national interest to do so.

Ethiopia’s interest also lies in contributing to the many global agendas the United Nations pursues. The climate change agenda is one major concern. Ethiopia should continue to be an active participant in the efforts to further promote international consensus on the matter. That Ethiopia and those like it are the most affected by climate change without making any significant contribution to the problem is self-evident. These countries deserve assistance as a matter of international obligation. Ethiopia should continue and further enhance the cooperation that it has had with those countries that attach great importance to the problem.

There are a host of issues—security related, economic and social—that Ethiopia should cooperate on with other countries within the framework of the United Nations. But we need to enhance our capacity for effective participation in these forums so that our country can benefit from these activities while contributing its share to the efforts being made. That Ethiopia has great capacity to contribute in the security sector must be taken for granted. The rapprochement with Eritrea has opened up new vistas for a greater role for Ethiopia in making the Horn of Africa region more stable and secure. The implications of this for Ethiopia’s economic development cannot be understated.

Ethiopia needs to take a few things into account when it considers its foreign and security policy strategy. No longer is it possible to make a clear distinction between global security concerns and those that pertain only to specific regions, including Africa. It is in the truest sense of the term that the emerging big power rivalry has become global. As recent pronouncements have made clear, Africa is on the verge of being in the vortex of this rivalry. Ethiopia needs to be fully cognizant of this. The crude formulation of the demand made by the major powers in terms of being “either with us or against us,” which was witnessed occasionally in the past, might confront countries such as Ethiopia in a very challenging manner. Though difficult, this is not a problem that cannot be overcome. But it requires resolve and clarity of thought, which can be obtained when foreign policy is guided by well articulated organizing principles, which are essentially embedded in national interest considerations. What is attributed to Lord Palmerstone, that countries have no permanent friends and permanent enemies but permanent interests, might very well sound crass, obnoxious and vulgar. But it is difficult to deny, if one is honest, that it contains a lot of truth.

We need to be uncompromising in our pursuit of what is dictated by the national interest of the country when we establish friendships and partnerships with others. This might entail establishing ties with states with which they do not see eye-to-eye because of their divergent interests, including those that are ideological and geopolitical. We should, if possible, try to be a bridge among them. If that is not possible we should at least help by what we say and do to mitigate the acrimonious relationships between and among them. The bottom line is that Ethiopia should never abandon its neutral position, in the
advancement of which it might look into the possibility of helping reinvigorate the Non-Aligned movement. This is the time when such an effort might be the best way for countries such as Ethiopia to contribute to global and regional peace and security.

V. Conclusion

A discourse about Ethiopia’s foreign and national security policy at this time, when domestic preoccupation has become so pressing, might not be considered all that urgent. But unless we handle our foreign policy right now, it is possible that the problems we have at present, as worrying as they are, may pale in comparison to what we might be facing down the road. It is by no means clear that we have a reasonably well-articulated foreign and national security strategy. As our own experience has made clear, having a well formulated policy and strategy does not mean that one will succeed in the effective implementation of what is contemplated in a document. There is no guarantee that we will get it right in practice. But one would not choose to dispense with a strategy because of that real possibility. The conduct of foreign policy without organizing principles amounts to groping around in the dark, something a country like Ethiopia should never consider acceptable. At no time have clarity and a clear guide for foreign and security policy been as critical for Ethiopia as it is today. This is called for by the global security situation, the fast-changing regional geopolitical realities, and by our own domestic situation. Rarely have cool-headedness and wisdom been as imperative at all three levels as they are today. We may not have an impact in reducing the tensions at the global level, but we can avoid contributing to their exacerbation through what we do inside our country, which in turn gives us leverage to influence developments in the region and Africa as a whole.

What we have the most leverage on is our own domestic affairs, which is greatly worrying despite the monumental change that we see the outlines of. Some of the developments are such that they warrant sleepless nights for those who genuinely care for the country. No doubt it is time for the state to have greater coherence, for its authority to be afforded greater deference by all its citizens, and for defiance of the state and state institutions to be addressed, but addressed wisely. We need to develop the political tradition of lambasting the government of the day without ridiculing the state. The chicken might come home to roost. This is where foreign input—regional and extra-regional—should, as much as possible, be kept at bay. This is a business to be handled primarily by Ethiopians. It is downright naïve to believe that there could be an absolute convergence of interests among states, no matter how close they might be. This has nothing to do with being xenophobic. It has everything to do with being guided by realism. Ethiopia is at a crossroads. It is the commitment of patriots that can help the country avoid the pitfalls and build on the opportunities that have opened up since the emergence of the new leadership. The unity of the country has become an urgent matter. The state’s ability to monopolize the exercise of legitimate use of force is becoming a pressing issue because reliable and dependable peace and security is contingent upon the state discharging this responsibility. Short of that, it is difficult to imagine economic activities reviving. Businessmen need to develop confidence about their security and the security of their business activities. Foreign direct investment can also be encouraged only when confidence grows, as witnessed in the activities of the domestic private sector. The level of comfort that already existing investors show is
critical for attracting new ones. We need to engage these investors expeditiously so that others follow suit.

Our foreign and national security policy will continue to be hobbled unless we manage to sort out our domestic challenges. The economic challenge the country is facing is huge. Job creation is what would help the country avoid the demographic tsunami that US Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy has referred to. But security needs to be prioritized so that the foundation can be laid for the economic sector to revive fully. Ethiopia’s foreign and national security policy and strategy has a great responsibility to help the country achieve this domestic normalcy, which is, with little doubt, an existential challenge for the nation. In all this, the unity of the country is critical, including among those in the diaspora. The existing fault lines are not helping the country. They need to be addressed without compromising the rule of law in any way and without legitimizing impunity. Accountability must be ensured so that confidence in the state can be secured and the necessary lessons might be drawn to avoid similar atrocities and malfeasance in the future.

All of this has to be handled with wisdom and in a transparent manner so that the unity of the country will not be undermined. It is when all this is done that we can talk about having put in place the basis for a successful foreign and national security policy and strategy.

Before concluding, we must return to what we said about the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly about the narrative that appears to have provided the linchpin for the interpretation of the genesis of the crisis and related matters. This has been grossly misleading. As has hopefully been made obvious in part III of this piece, an objective and frank look at those events shows that there were no saints in that conflict—a crisis marked by the loss of so many lives and the absence of statesmanship on both sides. This is an inescapable conclusion, which can only be contradicted by taking a jaundiced view of the whole tragedy. None of the parties can claim to be vindicated. That is why the more appropriate reaction following the historic rapprochement between the two countries should be remorse, for that was a tragedy that should never have happened. It could have been avoided. It was not inevitable, as almost nothing in political relations is inevitable. The subjective factors and human interventions are always decisive, both for good and for bad. That is why one can confidently say that the future of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea is in the hands of the two peoples. One hopes that both have learned from the mistakes made in the past.

Nothing is inevitable with respect to where Ethiopia is at present either, facing the major prospect of a historic transformation towards an effective multi-party democracy. This is an opportunity that should not be missed. We may not get another opportunity. Our foreign and national security policy and strategy should be mindful of this. It should contribute to the realization of the dream that so many Ethiopians have had and perished for—a democratic Ethiopia that treats all of its people with justice and equality.