DIPLOMACY, THE ERITREA-ETHIOPIA PEACE DEAL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Michael ASIEDU¹

On 5 June 2018, Ethiopia’s ruling coalition, Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) under its new leader, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared that it shall accept the terms of a peace agreement with neighbouring Eritrea. The announcement came as a shock both to the international community and analysts who follow politics in the Horn of Africa. Beneath the declaration were years of silent diplomatic undertakings which have been given relatively lesser attention as the charismatic nature of Ethiopia’s new Prime Minister has taken centre stage. This Brief shall emphasize the role of diplomacy in the build-up to the announcement as well as the unique nature of Prime Minister Ahmed; in doing so, it is intrinsic to capture the historical context of the border conflict, an alternative explanation to diplomacy as well as the rewards of the peace deal and its challenges (implications). The Brief concludes by making a case for diplomacy as it still remains a viable factor in terms of conflict resolution in Africa.

Historical background of the Eritrea-Ethiopia (Badme) Border Dispute

The conflict emanated from Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea in 1952. Imperial rule in Ethiopia was toppled by the military (Dergue) in 1974 with attempts at integrating Eritrea into Ethiopia. Opposition groups in Ethiopia, including the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) who disliked the Marxist-Leninist Dergue regime, began to challenge same. Cooperation between the TPLF and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) led to the overthrow of the Dergue Regime in 1991 and brought into being a new coalition, the EPRDF. The TPLF became a giant power within this coalition.²

Subsequently, Eritrea conducted a referendum in 1993, and voters chose independence. This paved way for the two countries to formally split, thus, affirming Eritrea’s 1991 declaration of independence. What was projected to be a largely amicable separation ended in a protracted 20-year border disagreement when, in 1998, both countries asserted possession of a border town

¹ Michael Asiedu is an Adjunct Researcher with the Global Political Trends Center-Istanbul Kültür University, Turkey.
called Badme. The border dispute led to a violent conflict, which killed between 80,000 and 100,000 people with thousands more displaced.³

In 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement (Algiers Peace Deal or Algiers Treaty) and accepted that a border commission (The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission) be instituted to resolve the dispute. In 2002, based on a United Nations (UN)-backed boundary demarcation, the Commission, citing ruling⁴ by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, awarded the border town, Badme to Eritrea. This was meant to be binding. However, Ethiopia rejected the Agreement and requested new negotiations. Eritrea, on the other hand, refused any new round of negotiations unless it was handed Badme. Until the formal signing of the peace agreement in September 2018⁵, the two countries had remained in an impasse manifested through intermittent outbursts of violence at the border for decades. Each country stationed troops on its side of the border. Aside from this, there have been instances of proxy wars⁶ between the two countries.

### Chronological Timeline of Events of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Deal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 May 1993</td>
<td>Eritrean Independence from Ethiopia is formally declared.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 May 1998</td>
<td>Border war commences.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 June 2000</td>
<td>An Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities is signed by both countries.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 December 2000</td>
<td>The Algiers Peace Accord is signed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 April 2002</td>
<td>The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission announced its “final and binding” ruling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 June 2018</td>
<td>Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declares Ethiopia is willing to accept decision of the Boundary Commission.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 July 2018</td>
<td>Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia is signed by their respective leaders, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afworki.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 September 2018</td>
<td>Ethiopia and Eritrea sign peace deal at Saudi Arabia Summit in Jeddah – details still not revealed.</td>
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The role of diplomacy in bringing about the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Deal

With regards to the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Deal, some of the initial diplomatic steps happened through religious groups. In September 2017, the World Council of Churches dispatched a team to ascertain common grounds on both sides of the conflict.

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While this thrusts into the fray the role of religious diplomacy, it also reiterates the informal structures evident in Africa’s body politic, hence, one cannot talk about how the peace deal was reached without acknowledging such informal diplomatic structures.

Another key diplomat in the build-up to the peace deal was Donald Yamamoto, America’s Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and arguably Americas most experienced African hands. Michael Plaut, a Horn of Africa senior researcher with the Institute of Commonwealth Studies indicates that according to diplomatic sources, talks were held in Washington, where the Eritrean Foreign Affairs Minister Osman Saleh and Yemane Gebreab, Eritrean President’s longstanding adviser, and former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn were present. Yamamoto subsequently visited Eritrea and Ethiopia in April 2018 with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declaring his intention to implement the Algiers Peace Accord in July 2018, followed by the official signing of the deal in September 2018. It should, however, be reiterated that while next to nothing was heard about such visits, such diplomatic engagements were vital to the peace deal; essentially, they firmed up dialogue and laid groundwork creating an opportune atmosphere for Ahmed to seize upon.

The diplomatic role of Eritrea’s Arab allies was also significant. Eritrea President Isaias Afworki visited Saudi Arabia shortly after hosting Yamamoto. Ethiopia, cognizant of this trip, alerted the Saudi Crown Prince to get Afworki to re-start peace deal discussions with Ahmed, then the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Ahmed later indicated that he was hopeful with Saudi and US diplomatic assistance the issue could be resolved in a group conversation with the different ethnic groups in Ethiopia, as reported by Aiga Forum. Afworki also visited the UAE, where he was encouraged to work out a peace deal after which huge investments into its economy and infrastructure would be made by the latter.

The diplomatic role of the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) also contributed significantly behind the curtains. In fact, both the UN and AU had been encouraging both sides to

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8 President Isaias Afworki has been the president of Eritrea since its independence.
resolve the conflict, resulting in UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visiting Addis Ababa hours after the joint declaration. It was in Addis Ababa that he mentioned that sanctions against Eritrea could soon be lifted as they would become obsolete. The AU on its part was instrumental in reaching the 2002 agreement and also released an official statement commending both parties for the peace deal citing how the deal will affect the resolution of other conflicts in the region.

In essence, it was the joint efforts of both regional and international diplomatic community that hugely contributed to the declaration of the peace deal rather than some pre-ordained magic wand by Ahmed; albeit, his uniqueness, charisma and youthful appeal played a part. Irrespective of these, it is likely that without diplomatic efforts, there would have been no announcement of the peace deal on the part of Ahmed and Ethiopia.

Interwoven in diplomacy has also been the upward interest both politically and economically from the Persian Gulf monarchical governments (UAE and Saudi Arabia) alongside the rational-utility calculations of both Ethiopia and Eritrea to improve their economic situations. For instance, restoration of relations would increase stability in the Horn, boost the tourism sector of Eritrea, as well as help attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). Conversely, from a commercial liberalist perspective, UAE and Saudi Arabia would like to promote their trade interests and enlarge their scope of influence. The UAE since 2016 had leased Eritrea’s port in Assab, where it operates a military base. This is a financial plus for Eritrea, since it had been crippled by international sanctions. It is, therefore, not surprising to see the final deal of September 2018 signed in Jeddah.

**Alternative explanation instead of diplomacy**

A significant notion behind the dispute was not necessarily the border, rather an ideological and political difference between the TPLF-ruled government in Ethiopia under late Prime Minister

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Meles Zenawi and the People’s Front for Justice and Democracy (PFJD) government in Eritrea – this pertains to the language-based federal system in Ethiopia.17

The TPLF views the federal system as the price of its 17 years of battle to provide equality among the divergent ethnic groups in Ethiopia, including their right to self-determination. The PFDJ, on the contrary, perceives the federal system as an existential threat to nation states of Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Horn. The PFDJ opines that the federal system subverts Ethiopian national identity and provides room for ethnic identities to grow. “I am the first one to see the federal system, and I oppose it,” Afworki indicated.18 Essentially, Eritrean President Afworki views the federal system as orchestrated to promote the lordship of one ethnic group, the Tigrayans in Ethiopia. His assertion is evidenced as the slogan - “the TPLF supremacy over the rule of law” - is employed by Ethiopian opposition groups and sections of the media. Federalism could also be viewed as an instrumentalist tool and not necessarily tied in with the personal views and beliefs of Afworki.

Federalism therefore, is not the issue here but rather the politicization of ethnic borders within Ethiopia, which was and still is the issue, a supposed craftsmanship of Meles Zenawi. Thus, it could be argued that the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia had more to do with an ideational factor (ideological warfare) and to an extent, little to do with the demarcation of the border or the withdrawal of troops from Badme. This ideational battle thrusts into the fray the role charisma and unique appeal of Abiy Ahmed also had in bringing about the peace deal.

The Charisma and Uniqueness of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

Although much has not been seen on the leadership style of Prime Minister Ahmed as he is still new, he is distinct in comparison to prime ministers before him. He has charisma and a youthful appeal. For instance, unlike Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn who ascended to the reins of power due to political capital from the TPLF, Ahmed assumed power pursuant to anti-government protests19 in the Oromia and Amhara regions, which started in the latter stages of 2015 by young activists called the Qeerroo.

Thus, citizens acted as agents to influence political decisions. Essentially, Ahmed could be described as an antidote to the aggrieved protesters. A stance buttressed through his passage of popular radical reforms both in an attempt to appease protesters and solidify his base.

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18 ibid
He released prisoners (some of whom had allegedly committed national security crimes), removed banned political parties (including armed ones), privatized some of Ethiopia’s big companies, including Ethiopian Airlines, contrary to established developmental state economy, and above all, announced that he would implement the Algiers Peace Accord much to the irk of the TPLF. He also sought to end the state of emergency in Ethiopia.  

Eritrean President Afworki, on the other hand, had done everything within his remit to subvert the TPLF-led government in Ethiopia for the past 20 years. The TPLF had been the dominant power broker within the EPRDF coalition since its inception in 1991. However, with the surprise win of Abiy Ahmed after Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn’s resignation, the Oromo bloc have begun to assert power bringing about a drastic tilt in power dynamics within the coalition. Ahmed, coming to the scene without the supposed goodwill of the TPLF, strategically aligned him with Afworki. Afworki already was bitter towards the TPLF.

It is fair to say that should there have been a TPLF-elected leader, there would have been no declaration of the implementation of the peace deal, let alone a commitment to its implementation from both leaders. Next, is a brief look at the rewards and risks of the deal (implications), which explains rational choice perspective of why parties to a conflict would make peace or choose not to.

**Rewards of the Deal**

Rewards of the deal for both countries include: the opening up of each country’s airspace for the other, airlines would connect Addis Ababa and Asmara once again, families on both sides of the border would be re-united and social life, as well as religious ceremonies - some of which date back many centuries - would be reignited. For Ethiopia, the peace deal would also ensure that there is a détente along its northern border, thus it would be able to use Eritrea’s port, a natural outlet for its sea transactions due to its landlocked situation, and diplomatic relations would resume in both countries. Eritrea also stands to gain, as indicated earlier on, a boost in its tourism, attraction of foreign direct investments etc. Despite the gains, the downsides of the peace deal cannot be ignored.

**Challenges to the deal**

For Eritrea, its president Afworki is in a tight corner. The peace deal means he has no excuse of a national security threat to continue postponing and shifting the debate on basic freedoms in Eritrea. Additionally, should thousands of conscripts engaged in indefinite national service be permitted to return home, it is intriguing what job prospects they would have.

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20 See (n. 16)
Afworki would also have to deal with challenges, such as when Eritrea would roll out an operational constitution, free elections, and independent judiciary, media, etc. It also remains to be seen whether political prisoners in Eritrea would be released as Ahmed has done in Ethiopia. The peace deal has opened the Pandora box of Eritrean internal politics.

Risks of the peace deal for Ethiopia means the TPLF, which used to be a force to reckon with within the EPRDF coalition until the election of Ahmed, has been relegated to the background. It was their disagreement with the Eritrean government that actually stoked the flames of the border conflict. Ethiopia, therefore, faces stiff internal opposition from the TPLF regarding sensitive territorial concessions - it is the party most affected. Going forward, while the TPLF has lost much ground with regards to Ethiopian politics, including being side-lined in matters pertaining to the peace deal thus far, it remains to be seen how a wounded political party on the periphery would be brought into the centre once more.

Achieving that would solidify the peace deal gains and rake in political capital for Ahmed in Ethiopia, however, it is difficult to envisage that given Eritrean rhetoric. For instance, Eritrean authorities are jubilant over TPLF’s demise calling the movement a “zombie” whose “soul has been cast into hell.” Such inflammable rhetoric is inaccurate if differences are to be holistically resolved, especially as the TPLF is still a force within Ethiopia and could stagnate the progress of the peace deal.

Conclusion

Presently, the peace deal is a positive for a region bedevilled with some of Africa’s intractable conflict including the Somalian conflict. However, the kind of impact the TPLF will have on the peace deal is yet to be seen. Meanwhile, the final details of the peace agreement are also yet to be made public. Already, there have been skirmishes. Irrespective of all these, diplomacy which has received a downward tilt lately both within Africa and globally still remains one of Africa’s best shots in terms of conflict resolution. While this Brief has demonstrated its contribution to the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal, diplomatic efforts should be increased and vigorously applied to conflicts in places such as Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya etc. Essentially, the African Union must step up its diplomatic game in its Peace and Security architecture (in conjunction with the international community) if it is to resolve some of Africa’s longstanding conflicts.

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Global Political Trends Center

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CONTACT DETAILS

Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center
Istanbul Kültür University
Ataköy Campus, Bakırköy
34158 Istanbul, Turkey
www.gpotcenter.org
info@gpotcenter.org
Tel: +90 212 498 44 76/65
Fax: +90 212 498 44 05

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