

Eritrea and the US: towards a new US policy

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Eritrea's relations with the US were fraught from the outset—both shaped and overshadowed by those with Ethiopia, almost always to Eritrea's disadvantage. With the exception of a brief window in the 1990s, the US has seen Ethiopia as its primary strategic ally and treated Eritrea as something between an obstacle and an afterthought to be sacrificed when its actions or interests ran counter to Ethiopia's.

This history is well known to most Eritreans, as is European complicity in Eritrea's many travails on its way to independence and now in its defense. Grasping this is the starting point for any new effort to defuse tensions and restore trust, together with an appreciation for critical current issues. The arrival of a new administration in Washington and the reexamination of EU relations with both the US and Eritrea provide an opportunity for a fresh start, but any new initiatives must overcome a weighty legacy.

First, let's step back & look at this legacy, focusing on the US

The initial encounter between the United States and Eritrea came in 1941, shortly after British-led forces defeated Italy and took charge of Eritrea, when an American company began several military projects that were taken over by the US Army once Washington joined the Allied war effort.

Among them was a communications facility in Asmara that in the 1950s evolved into Kagnev Station, for nearly a quarter century one of the most important overseas US intelligence facilities – an electronic listening post run by the National Security Agency that reached as far as the Persian Gulf and parts of the Soviet Union and was at one point staffed by more than 3,000 people intercepting radio, telephone and telegraph messages in half a dozen languages. Meanwhile, Eritrea's strategic location at the narrow southern entrance to the Red Sea, gave it a special importance. Control of this gateway was critical for keeping open the vital sea lanes connecting Europe and North America with East Africa, the Gulf and Asia through Suez.

With this as backdrop, the US became Ethiopia's main champion at the UN, which in 1950 accepted a proposal to link Eritrea to Ethiopia in a federation under Emperor Haile Selassie's ultimate control. In support of the plan, American representative John Foster Dulles, a future Secretary of State, told the Security Council: 'From the point of view of justice the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the US in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that this country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia'.

Why is this relevant? Just ask any Eritrean. I promise you: Nearly everyone can quote it.

The result was a federation imposed in 1952 that gave Eritrea nominal autonomy, a

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constitution with an elaborate bill of rights, a parliament, a flag, and two official languages, Tigrinya and Arabic – the trappings of sovereignty but not the power to defend it, for Ethiopia retained control of the police and national defense. The next year, by no small coincidence, the US and Ethiopia signed agreements that gave Washington a 25-year lease on military and intelligence bases in Eritrea and pledged the US to provide military aid and training to Ethiopia. Between 1953 and 1960, American military advisers built sub-Saharan Africa's first modern army, with three divisions of 6,000 men each, equipped largely with surplus US weapons and equipment.

During this time, with the US and current EU member states silently standing by, Ethiopia systematically dismantled the federation, dissolved the constitution and the parliament, and in 1962 formally annexed Eritrea, after detaining dissidents, shutting down the independent press, suppressing trade unions and political organizations, and imposing a highly repressive regime that was, ironically, very like what has been visited on the people of Eritrea today. And at no time did the US or any European state object.

Eritreans protested, with no noticeable impact. With all avenues for peaceful protest closed, Eritrean exiles founded the Eritrean Liberation Front to wage an armed struggle for independence, which as we all know went on for the next three decades. As it gained momentum, the US stepped up military aid to Ethiopia, which from 1946 to 1975 totaled \$286.1 million, 2/3 of all military assistance to Africa. At the peak of the relationship, there were more than 6,000 Americans there, including 925 Peace Corps volunteers, almost twice as many as in the rest of the continent. During this period, the US also gave Ethiopia more than \$350 million in economic assistance, and was Ethiopia's largest trading partner, taking some 40% of its exports, mainly coffee.

Despite all this help, by the middle of the 1970s the war in Eritrea was going badly for Ethiopia, which was itself in the throes of a devastating famine and an internal political crisis. At the same time, Ethiopia's importance to the US was declining and the Kagnew Station spy base was becoming obsolete. Given that the American public, reeling from the losses in Vietnam, lacked the appetite for another major counter-insurgency, there was no inclination in Washington to renew the 25-year treaty with Ethiopia when it expired, nor for providing the new military regime that had come to power there under the derg the resources it wanted to escalate the Eritrea war. Thus a major chapter in the US-Ethiopia relationship came to an end. The Derg closed down American bases—which by the way were already slated for closing by Washington—and then realigned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union, which pumped in billions of dollars in new arms, prolonging Eritrea's independence war another 15 years. However, throughout the next phase of the conflict, the US and EU states for the most part refused to support the Eritreans—apart from humanitarian aid during and after the mid-1980s famine. Most Eritreans have not forgotten this either, they we—especially Americans—like to think that history starts today and only goes forward.

At any rate, after Eritrea formal declaration of independence in 1993, the US became one of first to recognize the new state, after which bilateral relations grew stronger as Washington provided relief, development aid and military training. With its apparent success at transcending ethnic and religious divisions, its extremely low levels of corruption and crime and its dedication to self-reliant development, Eritrea was an attractive partner in post-Cold War Africa. The rise of radical Islamism in neighboring Sudan—which provided a base for bin Laden in the early '90s and for a raft of other Islamist extremists, including Eritrean Islamic Jihad, heightened the US incentive for aiding Eritrea, and suddenly the country was hosting a steady stream of top American military officials, along with then First Lady Hilary Clinton.

Between 1994 and 2001, Eritrea received \$6 million in foreign military financing

and \$2 million in international military education and training assistance, as President Clinton dubbed it one of several “frontline states” in the battle to contain militant Islamism. But then, just as abruptly, Eritrea’s importance plummeted with a change in regional strategy under President Bush, whose administration invested heavily in an effort to end Sudan’s north–south civil war, though the actual turning point came in June 1998 when, after war broke out again with Ethiopia, the US sought to mediate the dispute and found itself spurned by Isaias, who—surprise, surprise—would not play by accepted diplomatic rules. From this point forward, it was not possible to sustain anything like normal relations with both parties and as one American mediation effort ended in failure, the relationship steadily cooled. Worse than cooled—it was not long before Eritrea began publicly blaming the US for Ethiopia’s actions and launching polemics on its websites and through its supporters that variously argued that US aid to Ethiopia was driving the entire war and, after the fighting stopped, that the CIA was responsible for the rising chorus of dissent over the war and the reversal of progress toward constitutional government.

US criticism of Isaias’s brutal crackdown on his critics in 2001 had the effect of fueling Eritrean charges that the US was behind the dissent in the first place and in league with those arrested. And the failure of the US to use its leverage to force Ethiopia to accept the April 2002 Boundary Commission ruling on the border dispute took these relations to a new low, as Asmara blamed Washington for coddling Addis Ababa rather than pressuring it to relent. Even so, in 2003, the US provided Eritrea with \$71.6 million in humanitarian aid, including \$65 million in food assistance and \$3.36 million in refugee support. It also gave Eritrea \$10.16 million in development assistance. None of this made any difference in the relationship, or in Eritrea’s treatment of its citizens, which of course grew steadily more coercive over the next decade, or in Eritrea’s regional behavior, which became if anything more belligerent than ever before.

In the chapter of the forthcoming book on Eritrea’s regional relations from which this talk is drawn, I go into the relationship during the Bush years in detail, but I’m going to skip over this for now for the sake of brevity and because I suspect most of you are familiar with it, except to mention that the low point came in the administration’s final two years as the war of words steadily escalated, the US moved closer to Ethiopia, and Eritrea deepened its involvement with Islamist groups in Somalia and with armed Ethiopian opposition groups, notably but not only the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. US anxiety over this deepened with the rise of Islamist forces in Somalia and led to direct American military action there targeted at al Qaeda but associated in the Eritrean and Somali minds with Ethiopia’s intervention there.

Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer’s 2007 threat to add Eritrea to the US list of countries that sponsor terror, setting in motion a wide range of restrictions and sanctions fueled widespread anger at the US among Eritreans at home and abroad for what many believed was a US–Ethiopian conspiracy against them.

Towards a new US & EU policy

Today, the US and the EU have a choice of three broad policy frameworks within which to shape a common approach to Eritrea:

- Isolation and containment, designed to limit Eritrea’s ability to do damage in the region while squeezing it from without through a steadily tightening web of sanctions.
- Constructive if limited engagement, intended to salvage the few positives available, particularly as they pertain to wider US counter-terrorism interests, while encouraging incremental changes in behavior that foster regional stability.
- Regime transition, driven from within Eritrea, that would allow the country to

return to the construction of a stable, democratic state.

The Bush administration began with the second, and then, as relations deteriorated, migrated towards the first. Within a few short years, it became an axiom that it was impossible to influence Isaias's behavior because he was too personally obtuse to change direction, so with regime transition appearing out of the question owing to the absence of a viable alternative, the Bush administration sought to isolate and contain Eritrea. How well this worked is perhaps best illustrated by the continuing crises in Somalia and Djibouti. As this became more and more clear in Washington, frustration with Eritrea grew, expressed in occasional rants that did little more than provoke similar rants from Asmara. Against this bleak backdrop, both the Obama administration and the EU need to reassess both the situation and the policy options, excluding nothing.

Throughout, it is essential to keep in mind that Isaias will not endure forever, nor will his regime. Whether he will ever change his character is beside the point (he will not); how to weaken his grip on unchecked power is one key issue. The other is how to strengthen those who will come after—and to foster a democratic, rights-based culture among them. This is necessary because the potential for chaos in Eritrea in the event of a sudden change, however it comes about, is enormous. This would be the case in any situation in which despotic rule has so thoroughly impoverished the political environment and prevented the emergence of viable successors, but particularly in Eritrea.

At the very least, American & EU policy ought to support democratic forces, now based outside the country but with significant if largely invisible support inside, for an eventual return to contest for power in a more open political arena, with or without Isaias, who sustains his position by claiming that Eritrea's very existence is threatened by any sign of weakness or dissent while keeping the population as isolated as possible from alternative sources of information and perspective. And it is precisely this combination of perceived threat and actual isolation that needs attention and action, for removing the border issue and breaking down Eritrea's North Korea-like internal isolation are the keys to bringing about change there. Without this investment in the levers for change, Eritrea's future is likely to be defined by increasing political violence directed at the population there and at Eritrea's neighbors. A collapse at the centre before there is a viable, democratic opposition prepared to fill the vacuum could push the country into civil war or anarchy, as significant fault lines – regional, religious and ethnic, and also political and personal – lie under the surface. That said, the fact is the deeply divided opposition, which includes more than a dozen distinct parties or fronts, numerous civil society formations in the diaspora and clandestine but largely unorganized forces in Eritrea, is no more ready to step in today than was the Iraqi opposition in 2003.

Under these rather dire circumstances, the promotion of a coherent opposition built on democratic principles and committed to a clearly defined, stable transition should be a high priority for the US & the EU, however long it takes to develop and however remote that may appear, coupled with substantial and sustained efforts to increase the flow of news and information into the country to break the state's present monopoly. Rushing such a process, or trying to control it, would be a terrible mistake because that would reify existing fissures under a façade of paper unity. But there are ways to show commitment to multiparty politics in Eritrea and to promote a non-violent transition from a distance while leaving it to the Eritreans to accomplish.

Direct support for any one of the alliances, parties or NGOs in the opposition would exacerbate divisions rather than heal them, stigmatizing them as the instrument of foreign powers. However, conferences that promote dialogue among them and greatly enhanced support for web- and radio-based media that carry news and information to

Eritrea would make much-needed contributions to the evolution of both the organized opposition and their political culture. The first requirement for a modest move towards a future democratic transition is to map the existing opposition. This starts with the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), a loosely defined umbrella organization for groups of widely varying ideological orientation, size and internal coherence, some favoring violence, some renouncing it. Members range from secular democrats organized into unarmed political parties, such as the Eritrean Democratic Party and the Eritrean People's Party—now in merger talks—to armed religious and ethnic movements such as the Islamic Party for Justice and Development and the Kunama-based Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea, with a full spectrum between them.

But there are also many Eritreans who distrust the existing parties, most of which are led by people who have fought among themselves to dominate the national movement since the 1960s and 1970s. The younger generation, many of whom have spent time outside Eritrea and experienced democratic societies at first hand, has declined to join EDA affiliates in significant numbers, focusing instead on building human rights organizations and NGOs. This trend too needs to be mapped and to be treated as an integral part of the emerging alternative to the present despotism.

Meanwhile, the US and the EU must articulate a set of objectives for the Horn as a whole and pursue policies towards Eritrea that arise from and are consistent with those objectives rather than react piecemeal to problems and opportunities that wax and wane in each country. An effective strategy for preventing any country in the region from becoming a haven for terrorists, for example, demands closer coordination among all of them. As does a strategy for promoting economic development to strengthen the common stake among these countries and peoples in peace and stability among them. These states are too intertwined to do otherwise. Such a strategy must be based on settling disputes, promoting democracy and destroying emerging terrorist threats, without which sustainable interstate cooperation is impossible, but also in building regional infrastructure and promoting commerce and trade among these states, not just within those we favor politically at the moment. Publicly articulating such an approach would help to isolate those who stand in the way and would facilitate linked incentives and penalties for advancing policy objectives.

Linkage between movement on the border dispute and on democratization – leveraging one in order to achieve the other – is critical. The US & the EU should move aggressively to end the confrontation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, with the US taking the lead. In terms of historical engagement or current influence, no former colonial power, nor any other state or multilateral institution, is able to play this role. And no other objectives can be effectively dealt with until this issue is taken off the table. But the US should not act on this in isolation from other objectives, and it will not secure the cooperation of Ethiopia if it tries to do so. In fact, making clear the US commitment to democracy and respect for basic civil and human rights in Eritrea is the key to winning Ethiopia's agreement to resolve the border dispute once and for all. It is the key because it addresses the growing alienation among the Eritrean population and the descent into despotism, and it enables that population to refocus on its own political agenda. Ethiopia needs to understand this and to allow the United States to make the effort.

This starts with pressuring Ethiopia to implement the Boundary Commission findings as they are, with no hedging. It also necessitates offering incentives to both sides to make the ending of their confrontation not only palatable but also essential to each of their constituencies. A new initiative should be coordinated with the AU, as well, both to strengthen its impact and to signal an intent to work within multilateral frameworks. Coordination would underline the risk of serious isolation for both states if they drag their

feet. But that message must be backed by a credible threat of sanctions with more than symbolic value. Demands without punch carry no weight with either antagonist.

Making an aggressive approach to reversing the suppression of rights in Eritrea the centerpiece of US & EU action while pushing Ethiopia to accept the Boundary Commission's findings without fudging the details (including Badme) would blunt charges that the rest of the world is appeasing Eritrea at Ethiopia's expense. In doing so it would address Ethiopia's major concern – that placating an unpredictable state that is trying to break Ethiopia up into weak microstates would allow Isaias to claim victory and step up his destabilization efforts without restraint by strengthening the Eritrean people's ability to be that restraint.

All else turns on defusing the border dispute, whatever Isaias may say to the world about its now being irrelevant, and it must be addressed first. The US & the EU should also offer material incentives for progress and define a sequence of gradually escalating penalties for blocking it. These opportunities and penalties should be publicized as widely as possible to the populations of both states, through diplomatic channels and the global media, to generate pressure from below to accept a settlement, and the US and the EU should provide assistance to alternative media directed at Eritrea from outside the country to expand that population's access to such information.

To promote an open democratic political arena in Eritrea that will make the country both less conducive to terrorist threats and less threatening to Ethiopia and other of its neighbors, Eritrea should be pressured to immediately implement the constitution ratified in 1997, bringing all its laws into line with it and releasing or bringing to trial all political prisoners, including the surviving members of the G-15 reformists, jailed in 2001. Eritrea should also be pressured to grant amnesty to opposition movements based outside the country, allowing them to renounce violence and compete on a level playing field with the ruling PFDJ, and it should be pushed to permit the re-establishment of a free, independent media, including broadcast as well as print outlets, as well as to provide legal protection for all religious groups and take prompt legal action against those who attack members of minority faiths. All this should be part of an effort to lay the groundwork for free and fair, internationally- monitored national elections.

Though it is extremely unlikely the government of Eritrea will act on such reforms so long as it is headed by Isaias, strong, coordinated US & EU support for these measures – if communicated to the people of Eritrea – will strengthen the democratic forces inside the country and in the diaspora who favor them by publicizing their common program and giving the people of Eritrea a clear idea of what awaits in the event of a change in Asmara.

But new avenues for Eritrea to resolve problems and promote its interests must be available for this to be credible. Who can blame Eritreans for doubting the good faith of the international community in the face of their history of betrayal at every turn? As I have insisted, there is simply no chance of being taken seriously on any of these questions or issues unless there is first a clear, concerted and ultimately successful international initiative to resolve the border dispute as per the Boundary Commission's 2002 ruling.