



## HOW TO HANDLE YOUR NEIGHBOURS' CONFLICT: ETHIOPIA'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH SUDAN AND SOUTH SUDAN<sup>1</sup>

Volkert Mathijs Doop<sup>2</sup>

*Independent political analyst Horn of Africa and MENA region*

### **Abstract:**

Ethiopian-Sudanese relations have historically been founded on domestic goals of physical security, economic development and access to the water resources offered by the Nile. Apart from being an important neighbouring country, and despite a tumultuous history, Ethiopia has developed strong connections with both elites in Khartoum and in Juba. In order to promote security and economic progress in Ethiopia and the broader region, it has established an increased diplomatic profile through IGAD, the AU and the UN and independent diplomatic work. The secession of South Sudan and the demise of the long-time Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi have been the most recent catalysts for reinventing Ethiopia's approach to the region in order to prevent instability to threaten its national development.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Horn of Africa, Diplomacy, Conflict Mediation, Peace-keeping, Economic development, Nile river.

### **Resumen:**

*Las relaciones entre Etiopía y Sudán se han fundamentado históricamente en los objetivos domésticos de seguridad física, desarrollo económico y acceso a los recursos hídricos ofrecidos por el Nilo. Aparte de ser un país vecino de gran importancia, y a pesar de una historia tumultuosa, Etiopía ha desarrollado unas fuertes conexiones con las élites tanto de Khartoum como de Juba. De manera a promover la seguridad y el desarrollo económico en Etiopía y en toda la región, fue incrementando su perfil diplomático a través de la IGAD, la UA y la ONU y a través de una labor diplomática independiente. La secesión de Sudán del Sur y el fin del largo gobierno del primer ministro etíope Meles Zenawi han sido los catalizadores más recientes para reinventar la relación de Etiopía hacia la región y así prevenir toda inestabilidad que pudiese amenazar el desarrollo nacional.*

**Palabras clave:** Etiopía, Sudán, Sudán del Sur, Cuerno de África, diplomacia, mediación de conflictos, mantenimiento de la paz, desarrollo económico, Río Nilo.

Copyright © UNISCI, 2013.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.*

---

<sup>1</sup> For this article, the author interviewed various stakeholders including senior members of the mediation team, the negotiation teams of Sudan and South Sudan, a number of outside expert observers and diplomats from different western countries. The author thanks all of them. Finally, the author thanks Olivier Mukarji for his support throughout the process.

<sup>2</sup> Volkert is an independent analyst, focusing on peace, security and development in Sudan, South Sudan and the surrounding region. Volkert was part of the IGAD support team for the AUHIP mediation, travelling between Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Volkert holds a BSc. and MSc. in International Economics and Finance from Tilburg University in the Netherlands.

Email: [vmdoop@gmail.com](mailto:vmdoop@gmail.com).



## 1. Introduction and Structure

### 1.1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, two of the major countries in the Horn of Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia, underwent big transformations. In 1993, Eritrea became independent of Ethiopia and in 2011, Southern Sudan seceded from the North to become the Republic of South Sudan. These transformations have changed the relations between existing capitals and have created new ones. Both secessions were the result of extensive armed conflicts, which since the 1970s were primarily driven by internal dynamics and amplified by a pattern of mutual intervention between states.<sup>3</sup> Since 2000, the development trajectories of the different countries in the region have been markedly different. While Ethiopia managed to forge a path of economic growth and achieve certain stability, Sudan is still embroiled in conflict with its southern neighbour and is dealing with internal conflicts in Darfur, Abyei, Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains. These border and internal conflicts continue to hinder any effort to achieve security and stabilise Sudan's economy.

Ethiopia's path of economic growth followed a history of tense relationships both within the country and abroad. As the major source of the Nile River and with strong historic connections with African and Arab people in all directions, foreign interests reached from Egypt and Yemen in the north to Tanzania and Burundi and Congo to the South. Since the 1950s, Ethiopia's relations with its neighbouring countries changed dramatically as decolonization policies changed the political landscape in Africa. Ethiopia, which had been reigned by the same head of state since 1916,<sup>4</sup> needed to adapt to this post-colonial environment, while the country itself had never been colonized. The three issues which opposed Ethiopia and its neighbouring countries since then, were the following:

1. conflicts over the use or access to the region's water resources
2. disputes over the territorial and political integrity of the Ethiopian state
3. the economic development of the country

In this context, this article reviews the history of relations between Ethiopia and Sudan, and takes into account the history which ultimately led to the secession of Southern Sudan. The article will focus on the relationship between Ethiopia's leadership with the governing elites in Khartoum and in Juba.

In short, this paper's analysis of Ethiopia's Sudan and South Sudan policies is centred around two main questions:

- What are the major challenges to Ethiopian security, growth and development, emanating from the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan?
- How can Ethiopia further strengthen its regional position, in terms of diplomatic capital, economic performance and security promotion around the region through its engagement with Sudan and South Sudan?

---

<sup>3</sup> Cliffe, Lionel: "Regional dimensions of conflict in the Horn of Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, n° 1, (February 1999), pp. 89-111.

<sup>4</sup> Haile Selassie I was regent of Ethiopia from 1916 to 1930 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974.



Based on these two questions and covering the history of the most recent diplomatic relations and interests between Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, a number of observations and recommendations are put forward for the new Ethiopian government, the two Sudans and the broader international community.

Particular focus is devoted to the influence of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who established and maintained strong ties with both countries since he came to power in 1991 until his death in 2012. In addition, the article explores how Ethiopia has put to use the significant diplomatic leverage it holds in the Horn of Africa. Accordingly, attention will be given to how the country asserts itself on the international stage and has used its relationships with the governments of Sudan and Southern Sudan to promote its three primary domestic political goals: (1) retaining its access and user rights over the regional water resources, (2) maintaining its territorial and political integrity; and (3) developing its national economy.

## **1.2. Structure**

Section one of this paper is the introduction. Section two of this paper reviews the history of relations between Ethiopia and Sudan. The early relations of the Derg regime with post-colonial Sudan are reviewed, as well as the time period covering the reign of Meles Zenawi and the run-up to Southern Sudan's secession and the creation of South Sudan. Section three will review Ethiopia's strategic policy goals and the implications for its Sudan and South Sudan policy. The latter will include Ethiopia's efforts in mediation and peace-keeping. Section four puts forward recommendations for the Ethiopian government, Sudan, South Sudan and the broader international community on supporting Ethiopia and the region to achieve security, growth and development. Section five is a conclusion.

## **2. History of Relations**

### **2.1. Origin of Relations: a Confluence of Interests**

The early relations between the people of the wet highlands of modern day Ethiopia and the Nile valley of modern day Sudan have been shaped by the use of the river waters. The historic relations between the regions of current-day Sudan and Ethiopia have always been founded on the continuous flow of the Blue Nile and Atbara rivers, which provided opportunities for trade but also led to frequent wars, particularly along the borders. In the nineteenth century, colonial borders started to define Sudan, Egypt and other countries in North-eastern Africa. Furthermore, beyond the colonial powers' reach was the Ethiopian empire. When the Ottoman Empire fell, Egypt, which relied heavily on the Nile for its development, sought ways to control this important water resource. At the battles of Genet in 1875 and Guta in 1876, Ethiopian emperor Yohannes IV, successfully defended his territory against the Egyptians.<sup>5</sup>

In 1891, the first protocol on the use of river waters was signed between Britain and Italy, who respectively considered Sudan and Ethiopia to lay within their spheres of influence. Several agreements were later signed between riparian states and/or their protectors. These agreements implicitly acknowledged Egypt's dependence on the upstream riparian states and sought to prevent that Ethiopia would limit the flow of the water downstream through the

---

<sup>5</sup> Swain, Ashok: "Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Egypt: The Nile River Dispute", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 35, n° 4 (December 1997), pp.675-694.



construction of irrigation projects. The last agreement, to which Ethiopia was a party, was the agreement of 1902 between Ethiopia and the United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Later agreements, including the 1929 agreement between Egypt and the United Kingdom,<sup>7</sup> as well as the Nile Water Agreement of 1959 between Egypt and newly-independent Sudan<sup>8</sup> notably excluded Ethiopia.

The 1959 agreement allocated the complete flow of the Nile River and its tributaries exclusively to Egypt and Sudan. Consequently it denied any water rights to other riparian states, the major point of contention between Ethiopia and Egypt. Although many regions of Ethiopia suffered from droughts and famines, it was not able to develop any irrigation projects without provoking the wrath of the militarily more powerful Egyptians. As a result, both the physical and economic safety of Ethiopia have since then always been under threat. Sudan traditionally stood by Egypt, its stronger Arab neighbour. Beyond the historic cultural and economic ties, the Egyptian water policy still allowed Sudan to construct dams for hydroelectric and irrigation purposes.

In 1966, Sudan completed the initial Roseires dam close to the border with Ethiopia. In order to better control and limit evaporation of the White Nile, Egypt and Sudan started the construction of the Jonglei Canal in Southern Sudan. Especially for Egypt, the Jonglei Canal was an important and potentially profitable project. Through the canalization of the Sudd swamps, the significant evaporation would be limited and the resulting additional water which would reach Egypt, would be shared equally between Sudan and Egypt. Under the 1959 Agreement, Khartoum could allocate the resulting gains in water to its northern Sudanese constituency and Egypt would receive half of the water which would otherwise have benefited (southern) Sudan.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.2. Rebellion in the South and the first Peace Initiatives**

As the resources of the predominantly southern Sudanese lands were further extracted, unrest in the region continued to fester. The proposed Jonglei Canal cut straight through Southern Sudan. And while the canal benefited northern Sudanese and Egyptians, it had detrimental effects on many parts of the primarily agriculture-dependent regions. Some of the southern rebels, Anyanya<sup>10</sup> and others, were seeking independence from Khartoum since Sudan's independence from Britain in 1956. In 1971 the first peacemaking initiative for Southern Sudan was started in Addis Ababa by Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, together with Sudanese president Jafaar Nimeiri. On 27 February 1972, Joseph Lagu of the South Sudan Liberation Army and Dr Mansur Khalid of the government signed the Addis Ababa Agreement.<sup>11</sup> This agreement provided regional autonomy for Southern Sudan and allowed for greater religious freedom for non-Muslim citizens. This was in the strategic interest of both the leaders of Sudan and Ethiopia. The strategic goal for President Nimeiri was to create closer ties with the West and Egypt's president Anwar Al-Sadat. Meanwhile, Ethiopia had an interest to be neighboured by a religiously diverse country such as itself.<sup>12</sup> This was an

<sup>6</sup> "Treaty between Ethiopia and Great Britain for the Delimitation of the Ethiopian-Sudan Frontier", 15 May 1902, Addis Ababa.

<sup>7</sup> "Exchange of Notes between Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Egyptian Government on the Use of Waters of the Nile for Irrigation", 7 May 1929, Cairo.

<sup>8</sup> "United Arab Republic and Sudan Agreement for The Full Utilization of the Nile Waters", 8 November 1959, Cairo.

<sup>9</sup> Swain, Ashok, *op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> The name 'Anyanya' was used by the dominant southern Sudanese separatist rebel movement during the first Sudanese civil war (1955-1972).

<sup>11</sup> "The Addis Ababa Agreement on the Problem of South Sudan", Addis Ababa, 27 February 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Ethiopia's population was predominantly Christian, but also contained a significant Muslim minority.



alternative much preferred to a country ruled by the Islamist Umma Party and the Egypt-oriented Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). As the Addis Ababa agreement did cater for all these different interests, the resulting compromises also brought major difficulties upon all the involved parties.

In Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie I was deposed by the Derg in 1974. The Derg, a group of junior officers in the army, established a Marxist regime with strong Soviet links in Addis Ababa. This meant the end of one of the few political constants in the politics of the Horn of Africa. Moreover, the Derg's Marxist foundation and alliance with the Soviet Union meant the end of cooperation between Ethiopia and Nimeiri's Sudan. Besides its riverine rivalry, as a country under communist rule, it now also found itself ideologically opposing Egypt and Nimeiri's Sudan.

As the Addis Ababa agreement endowed non-Muslims with more rights, Nimeiri had to fight off an increasingly militant Islamist opposition. This opposition, dominated by northerners, started to form a real threat to the Limeira presidency, which had stood for a more diverse Sudan. The Islamists had earlier fled abroad and received backing from among others, colonel Gadhafi of Libya. In order to counter this threat, Limeira brought the Islamist opposition back to Sudan in a large move of reconciliation and included them in the government. As a result, the Islamists suddenly acquired influence over how the natural resources of Sudan would be split between Northern and Southern Sudan.

In Southern Sudan, the leadership of the rebellion was splintering along with the Addis Ababa agreement. The agreement demanded the inclusion of the armed rebels into the regular Sudanese army, a contentious point.<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, the region was becoming increasingly prone to war. While Khartoum was governed by a weak coalition of secularists and Islamists and southern Sudanese groups were split over their ideological direction, the Derg moved in and decided to support the South. The Derg had neither good relations with president Nimeiri, nor with the Islamists and in the SPLA it found a way to counter the northern elites.

The decision by the government in Khartoum to build an oil refinery in the North to refine southern oil sparked the new civil war. In 1983, the southern regional assembly was dissolved and the Southern Sudan broken up into three regions. The Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA) of South Sudan, under the leadership of John Garang de Mabior, attacked the construction site of the Jonglei canal and forced the operation to a halt.<sup>14</sup>

The alliance between Ethiopia and the SPLA challenged the combination of their respective adversaries in Cairo and Khartoum. The influence of Islamists over the government in Khartoum began to pose a growing threat to the communist regime in Addis Ababa. As such, Ethiopia was supporting the SPLA to take control over Khartoum. To counter the support that Ethiopia was giving to the SPLA, Khartoum now also started to support the various Eritrean and Tigrayan rebel movements inside Ethiopia. Among these rebel groups were the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of Meles Zenawi and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) of the future Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki.<sup>15</sup> President

<sup>13</sup> Young, John (2012): *"The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process"*, First edition, London, Zed Books.

<sup>14</sup> Young, John (2012), *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Young, John: "Eastern Sudan: Caught in a Web of External Interests", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 33, n° 109, Mainstreaming the African Environment in Development (September 2006), pp. 594-601.





Nimeiri had engaged in a difficult balancing act between the secular roots of his government and cooperation with Islamists whose support he needed to stay in power. This balancing act was not going to hold. In 1985, Nimeiri's government was thrown over by another military coup under the leadership of a member of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. The interim government took power and announced elections for April 1986. The election was subsequently won by the Islamists, and brought to power Prime Minister Sadig Al-Mahdi.<sup>16</sup>

### **2.3. Ethiopia's Engagement with Southern Sudan and the Rise of the Islamists**

Although Ethiopia saw how different governments in Khartoum were unable to control the South, the Derg was not willing to accept a secession of the South, since Ethiopia itself was struggling with a rebellion in its northern Tigray province as well as a war with Eritrea, which at that time was still an Ethiopian province. In 1986, John Garang presented in Addis Ababa the *Koka Dam Declaration: A Proposed Programme for National Action*. This document, which was strongly influenced by the Ethiopians, made the case for a 'new', secular and most definitely 'one' Sudan. The strategic goal for Ethiopia was to help create a unified, secular Sudan, reflecting its own constitutional set-up.

In addition to the political support, the SPLA also received weapons, training and other military support from Ethiopia. Ethiopian borders were open for SPLA rebels, who hid out in its borderlands away from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). In November 1987, the Ethiopian army supported the SPLA when they captured Kurmuk in Sudan's Blue Nile state. In exchange for their support, the Derg stipulated that the SPLA not only had to fight the SAF, but also the Gaajak Nuer militia, the Anuak Gambella People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), groups all of whom received support from Khartoum.

The Ethiopian military, providing arms and training to the SPLA, made it impossible for Khartoum to vanquish the SPLA in the North-South war. As the battlefield got increasingly crowded with various militias and displaced communities, Sadig Al-Mahdi was cornered into talks with the SPLA in Addis Ababa, where they reached the 1988 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)-SPLM agreement. In 1989, only a year later, the agreement unravelled and the National Islamic Front (NIF) removed Prime Minister Sadig Al-Mahdi through a military coup, which ushered in Omar Hassan Al-Bashir. This coincided with the rise of the Islamists.

If the NIF wanted to win the war against the SPLA, it recognized that through supplying the Derg's enemies in Tigray and Eritrea the backbone of the SPLA's operations would be seriously weakened. Therefore, when the Derg regime collapsed in 1991, the SPLA was immediately forced to close down its operations in Ethiopia as it had lost its main political and military backer. The Cold War had come to an end, and allegiances were quickly turning.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition of armed opposition groups under the leadership of Meles Zenawi took power in Addis Ababa. As the former rebel leader in Tigray, he was grateful to Khartoum for the support he had received in the last years of the struggle against the Derg. On the other hand, Zenawi knew that if Khartoum kept fighting the south as it had done over the last decades, it posed a threat to peace inside Ethiopia. He needed to reconcile with the SPLA and prevent the Sudanese borderlands from becoming an unstable area bordering the Ethiopian regions of Benishangul-

---

<sup>16</sup> Sadig Al-Mahdi is the leader of the Umma party and after a brief tenure as prime minister in 1966-67, returned to power in 1986. Apart from being a leading politician, he is the imam of Ansar, an important sufi sect which pledges allegiance to Mohammed Ahmed, Islam's messianic saviour, or the Mahdi, at [http://www.clubmadrid.org/en/miembro/sadig\\_al\\_mahdi](http://www.clubmadrid.org/en/miembro/sadig_al_mahdi)



Gumuz and Gambella.<sup>17</sup> Especially Benishangul-Gumuz was a strategically important region as it was the region where the Blue Nile crossed into Sudan. These areas were similar in terms of ethnicity with the Sudanese lands and also had a tense relationship with their national leaders in Addis Ababa.<sup>18</sup> What was even more worrying at the time was that the SPLA by 1991 started to disintegrate, following its expulsion from Ethiopia. Within the ranks of the SPLA a schism took place as a number of the senior SPLA leaders, Lam Akol, Gordon Kong and Riek Machar, fell out with John Garang. Old divisions over political goals and along tribal lines were resurfacing at the expense of a unified armed opposition.<sup>19</sup>

As explained earlier, it was apparent to Meles that unlike during his own experiences, while fighting the Derg in Tigray, the SPLA had barely provided for basic administration and services in the areas it controlled during the war.<sup>20</sup> As long as the SPLA did not have a coherent, united constituency and was not able to provide for the needs of its citizens, an independent Southern Sudan would soon become ungovernable and threaten regional security at the borders of Ethiopia. Additionally, Meles feared that an amputated rump Sudan would likely seek closer ties with Cairo. A combination of Egypt, the dominant down-stream country of the Nile, with Sudan would amplify the regional enmity over the river waters with Ethiopia, the dominant up-stream country. Simultaneously, as Sudan would act as a proxy for Egypt, South Sudan would again become a proxy for Ethiopia. This dynamic would all in all be very detrimental for regional stability.

Although the government in Addis Ababa had changed, the strategic interests of Ethiopia in Sudan had not. Just as before, Ethiopia wanted to neighbour a single Sudan, with whom it could develop its water resources and which would protect stability at its borders in order to develop its domestic economy. Also the new government under Meles Zenawi preferred to border a Sudan where Christians and other groups could form a counterweight against the Islamist policies in Khartoum.

As these policies intensified in Sudan after 1992, it created tensions between Sudan and many countries, including both Ethiopia and Egypt. From Ethiopia's perspective, an Islamist regime in Sudan was not likely to be a long-term strategic partner for the secular and multi-ethnic Ethiopia. Under the political guidance of Hassan El-Turabi, a long-time influential Islamist politician, Sudan increasingly supported Islamic armed groups inside Ethiopia. As a result, both Northern and Southern Sudan began posing a threat to the security of Ethiopia, and the development agenda introduced by the EPRDF.

#### **2.4. Peace Initiatives in the 1990's, IGAD Takes Shape**

Ethiopia was already well placed to take up a role in resolving the issues in Sudan diplomatically. One could say that Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi continued the earlier role as mediator started by the emperor who had negotiated the 1972 Addis Ababa. Already under the initiative of Haile Selassie in 1963, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), the precursor to the African Union, had established its headquarters in Addis Ababa.

---

<sup>17</sup> Young, John: "Ethiopia's Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 37, n° 2 (June 1999), pp. 321-346.

<sup>18</sup> The region of Benishangul-Gumuz borders Blue Nile state in Sudan, whereas Gambella borders the South Sudanese states of Jonglei to the north-east and Upper Nile to the South-East.

<sup>19</sup> The SPLA-Nasir, which the new group was called which had split away from the SPLA, consisted mainly of members of the Nuer tribe, the second largest tribe after the Dinka of John Garang.

<sup>20</sup> Based on interviews by the author with senior AUHIP officials.



When the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) was established in 1986, Ethiopia was its largest and most influential member. Through these organizations, Ethiopia was well poised to instigate and follow any discussions on developments in Sudan, without appearing to be interfering unilaterally. In 1994, an official mediation attempt between northern and Southern Sudan took place under the auspices of IGADD. The organization at the time was chaired by Kenya, but it was the Ethiopian foreign minister Seyoum Mesfin who brought together the SPLA of John Garang and the SPLA-Nasir of Riek Machar et. al. to jointly enter into talks with the Sudanese government. Additionally, Mesfin put forward the so-called IGADD Declaration of Principles (DoP). The most important feature of the DoP was that it introduced the principle of self-determination for Southern Sudan. It obligated the parties to make “unity of Sudan” a priority, but conditional on the introduction of secularism and equal wealth sharing within the whole of Sudan. This seemed a distant prospect as the NIF- government in Khartoum was fighting its ever more zealous war with the South. As Prime Minister Zenawi held strong personal ties with both president Al-Bashir of Sudan, and John Garang of the SPLA, Ethiopia could be an effective and powerful broker between the two opponents. Though the SPLA accepted the proposal, the NIF did not, and in the absence of any other credible alternative, the DoP remained unsigned on the table.

### **2.5. War of the Neighbours: Ethio-Eritrean Wars, Relationship with Khartoum**

The extent to which the Islamist drive of the government in Khartoum had alienated its neighbours became very clear in 1995, when an assassination attempt on Egyptian president Mubarak took place during a visit to Addis Ababa. The subsequent investigations by Egypt, Ethiopia and the UN pointed to the involvement of the Sudanese government, which allegedly had aided the culprits by providing them with weapons and passports. For Ethiopia, this could have been reason enough to close all diplomatic channels with Sudan. However, because Zenawi realized that Ethiopia had much to lose from severing ties with Khartoum, he decided not to close the embassy.<sup>21</sup> Despite this seeming act of goodwill on the part of Zenawi, the policies of Khartoum towards Ethiopia’s development became increasingly dangerous; Zenawi stepped up Ethiopian support for the SPLA to the extent that Ethiopian troops fought inside Sudan along the SPLA rebel fighters.<sup>22</sup> Only in 1997, after heavy losses were inflicted on the Sudanese troops did the NIF agree to sign the DoP. Nevertheless, Ethiopian troops remained inside Sudan until the war with Eritrea broke out in 1998.

Despite the fact that the TPLF of Meles Zenawi and the EPLF of Isaias Afewerki had formed a close coalition against the Derg during the late eighties, the interests between the two groups started to diverge when in 1991 both came to power respectively in Addis Ababa and Asmara.<sup>23</sup> When Eritrea obtained formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, an increasingly heated border dispute again threatened security in the region. The government in Khartoum had tense relationships with both Ethiopia and Eritrea as they helped and sponsored the SPLA. At the same time, the NIF supported Jihad rebels in Eritrea and armed groups inside Ethiopia.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Based on interviews by the author with a senior AUHIP official.

<sup>22</sup> The NIF’s policy of Islamization in East Africa was besides focused on secular Ethiopia, also on Marxist Eritrea. Therefore, also Eritrean soldiers were fighting along at this front against the SAF.

<sup>23</sup> Young, John: “The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: a History of Tensions and Pragmatism”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 34, n° 1 (March 1996), pp.105-120.

<sup>24</sup> Young, John: “Eastern Sudan: Caught in a Web of External Interests”, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 33, n° 109 (September 2006), pp. 594-601.





In May 1998, after a number of armed incidents along the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, Eritrea forcefully took the area of Badme. This incident in the disputed border town triggered other incidents and the dispute developed into the Eritrean-Ethiopian war which would last until 2000.<sup>25</sup>

For Ethiopia and Eritrea the borderlands in eastern Sudan, an area close to the borders of the two countries were a strategic area. Khartoum had tense relationships with both the countries which had earlier supported the SPLA. Meles could not afford to have Sudan potentially aiding the Eritreans and as Khartoum recognized that Ethiopia was the bigger threat to its security it reconciled with the EPRDF. This was helped also by the fact that the United States had strongly turned against the Islamists in Khartoum and had demanded that it stopped its support for terrorist activities. It was also Hassan Al-Turabi who had provided shelter to Osama bin-Laden from 1992-1996. The continued pressure on the government in Khartoum forced them eventually to let go of Turabi from government and shed a part of its Islamist identity. As Sudan and Ethiopia were reconciling their differences, the Eritrean Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ, the successor to the EPLF) continued to support the various opposition groups in Sudan.

When the war ended in 2000, Ethiopia could now, without having any troops inside Sudan, and a tacit agreement with Khartoum not to aide any armed groups, take a more balanced approach to resolve the Sudanese civil war.

## **2.6. The Second IGAD-Mediation: The Machakos Protocol and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)**

In 2001, under the auspices of IGAD,<sup>26</sup> Kenya became the mediator in Sudan.<sup>27</sup> The IGAD summit in January 2002 had called for ‘rejuvenating the IGAD Peace Process’ and Kenya invited the parties to resume negotiations in Machakos. Kenya’s appointed mediator on behalf of IGAD was General Sumbeiywo. He was a close confidante of President Daniel arap Moi and had known the SPLA well since 1991. That year, after the fall of the Derg, the SPLA had to leave Ethiopia back to Southern Sudan and did so through Kenya. The Khartoum government was at first reluctant to accept the reinstatement of IGAD at the helm of the peace initiative. But as the US threatened Khartoum with further sanctions, the NCP had to take part in the Machakos talks, which resulted in the Machakos Protocol (2002). The Protocol leaned heavily on the IGAD DoP from 1994, which included the right for self-determination for the south. A decisive difference was the choice to leave out the all-important and significant provision insisting on the development of a secular state in Sudan. Thereby, the Machakos Protocol paved the way for the secession of Southern Sudan, as it left little meaningful prospect for reform in Khartoum. In addition, the Machakos Protocol failed to address the issues of the three areas of Abyei, Southern Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains, areas that would later be of great concern to Ethiopia and other mediators.

<sup>25</sup> Plaut, Martin; Gilkes, Patrick: “Conflict in the Horn: Why Eritrea and Ethiopia are at War” *Chatham House Briefing Paper, New Series*, No.1 (March 1999).

<sup>26</sup> In 1996, IGADD was renamed the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), comprising the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea (admitted to the organization in 1993), Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

<sup>27</sup> Conciliation Resources, “The mediator’s perspective: An interview with General Lazaro Sumbeiywo” (2006), at <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/mediator%E2%80%99s-perspective-interview-general-lazaro-sumbeiywo#sthash.0GNrylml.dpuf>.



The Machakos Protocol became the first chapter of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Although the Sudanese government was initially reluctant to continue with IGAD as leading the process, eventually the whole process was concluded under its auspices. Part of Sudan's reluctance can be explained by the fact that IGAD was also representing many governments hostile to Khartoum, including Eritrea and Uganda.

The CPA provided Southern Sudan to hold a referendum on secession from the North in 2011. As mentioned, apart from the fact that parties were required to make unity as attractive as possible, there was no conditionality on reform of the governance system in Sudan. Many observers considered very likely that the south would break away after the 2011 referendum. Despite that Garang made a convincing bid to become the president of a united Sudan, the fact that Khartoum would never give in on secular demands, always made this a distant likelihood.

## **2.7. Beyond the CPA, a Role for Ethiopia**

For Ethiopia and for Meles in particular the CPA was a very unattractive proposition. Through the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, it had lost its leverage over Sudan at what became a decisive period of time. Now that secession became increasingly likely, Ethiopia needed to engage even more to prevent a badly governed South Sudan from becoming a danger to stability at Ethiopia's borders. The regions of Gambella (bordering Southern Sudan's Jonglei state) and Benishangul-Gumuz (bordering northern Sudan's Blue Nile state) were still areas of unrest and the nearby presence of SPLA could stir unrest towards the government in Addis Ababa. Secondly, Ethiopia would need to manage its relations with Khartoum carefully to prevent it from turning towards Egypt for support. Ethiopia was also on its way to create an extensive dam-building programme for the purposes of developing hydro-power and to a limited extent also for agriculture. It would need Sudan for developing these resources.

From June 2008, Ethiopia has been the chair of IGAD and currently still holds the position. Mainly from the background, Ethiopia has been able to leverage this position and obtain access to all the parties. Other international parties, including the United Nations, the United States and others have also embraced this position for Ethiopia in order to involve them, without asking all neighbouring countries to join the process. The fact that Ethiopia does not provide opportunities for other countries to take over the IGAD-chairmanship, which usually rotates, does create some tension with other IGAD members, waiting for their moment in the limelight.

In October 2009 the African Union also established its own framework for the implementation of the CPA. To this end, and based on the existing structure of the African Union Panel for Darfur (AUPD), the African Union High-level Implementation Panel for Sudan (AUHIP) was created. After the referendum for southern secession, the AUHIP was also tasked to help the parties achieve an orderly secession process. After the independence of South Sudan, the AUHIP<sup>28</sup> became a de facto mediation in resolving outstanding issues between the countries after the secession as well as conflicts emanating from the implementation of certain parts of the agreement.

In January 2011, while Southern Sudan voted overwhelmingly for secession, the people of the Abyei region did not get to vote on their own referendum which, as part of the CPA, was scheduled on the same day. Through this referendum, the Abyei voters would be allowed

---

<sup>28</sup> In 2012 the AUHIP was renamed "African Union High-level Implementation Panel for Sudan *and South Sudan*", to reflect its mandate for the new country as well.



to vote on whether their area would be part of the northern or southern part of the country. As the government and the SPLA were not able to agree on who was eligible to vote, the Abyei-referendum never took place and it resulted in major unrest in the area. In May 2011, the SAF moved in and occupied Abyei, where until then only Joint Integrated Units (JIUs)<sup>29</sup> were allowed. When fighting ensued, international partners under the leadership of the AUHIP brought the parties together to stop the fighting.<sup>30</sup> In the background Ethiopia had also been closely involved. On 27 June, only seven days after the agreement between the SPLM and the government was reached, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 1990 which established the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). This peacekeeping mission was staffed completely by the Ethiopian army and was under Ethiopian command. Now, in addition to being the seat of the AU and the chairman of IGAD, it now also held a UNSC mandate to send its own military in a crucial Sudanese border region. According to some leading experts who were familiar with the negotiations, prime minister Meles insisted that any outside military intervention would need to be a United Nations mission under UNSC mandate, rather than an African Union mission under a AUPSC<sup>31</sup> mandate. A UN mission would be more likely to financially support the mission and through the endorsement of the UNSC, Ethiopia would have the explicit support for its mission by all major western powers as well as Russia and China.

Ethiopia created an interesting precedent by providing military support to the peace process. It was now actively exercising a dual role as a peace mediator and a peace-keeper. It also managed to align itself with the major global players and get their endorsement. In particular the support of the United States was important for Ethiopia as it is needed in relation to the development of its domestic economic agenda, which primarily involved the development of the dams programme. By showing this commitment to the process in Sudan – Ethiopia has never had any other active engagements in peacekeeping around the world- it also gained a lot of respect from other international partners and was reaffirmed in its leading role in the region as a mediator and peace-keeper. Finally, the fact that both Sudanese parties have accepted Ethiopian soldiers in Abyei is a display of how this bordering country has now cemented its role as a neutral and impartial arbiter in the Sudanese conflict.

### **3. Ethiopia's Strategic Policy for Sudan and South Sudan, 1991-2012**

#### **3.1. Meles' Vision for Sudan**

Under both the Derg regime and under the EPRDF coalition, Ethiopia held important interests in keeping Sudan unified. Meles strongly favoured a unified Sudan, despite that the concept of self-determination, and so the possibility of a South Sudanese secession was put forward in the DoP by one of his own ministers. According to an observer, the concept of self-determination was included in the DoP for two particular and critical reasons:

---

<sup>29</sup> JIUs were an implementation mechanism which brought together the SPLA and SAF to control the border areas, including the three areas.

<sup>30</sup> "Agreement Between The Government of the Republic of Sudan and The Sudan's People's Liberation Movement on Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security of the Abyei Area", Addis Ababa, 20 June 2011.

<sup>31</sup> The African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) is the major decision making body of the African Union on matters for Peace and Security.



- to assure a certain measure of governance in the south, for Meles held little faith in the coherence and the quality of the SPLA leadership;
- to prevent a smaller, more Islamic and embittered regime in Khartoum to seek closer ties with Ethiopia's nemesis, Egypt.

In November 2002, the Ethiopian government put out the "Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy" (*the Strategy*).<sup>32</sup> This document comprehensively describes the foreign policy objectives of Ethiopia, and emphasizes the importance of security and the development of "*rapid economic growth that will build our capacity to withstand internal and external threats*".<sup>33</sup> The Strategy seems very aware of the effects that certain foreign political developments can have on achieving domestic development goals, touching upon all regional countries and regional diplomatic forums.

Considering the vast interests that Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia have in regional peace and the leverage they possess in terms of destabilizing the region, it is worth looking at the three principal areas where their interests overlap.

### **3.2. Water Resources**

Ethiopia's development has always been subject to the country's ability to extract its natural resources, which mainly consist of its large annual rainfall. Feeding the Blue Nile, Atbara and Sobat rivers, Ethiopia is the source of 85% of the Nile waters.<sup>34</sup> In line with one of the main strategic drivers of Ethiopia's engagement is Ethiopia's goal to exploit its potential to develop the resources of its river waters without jeopardizing its physical security for the sake of economic development. With regard to both the Nile and the Atbara rivers, Ethiopia would like to see that these waters are used for the production of electricity in Ethiopia and irrigation in Sudan, which in turn would provide opportunities for the export of agricultural products to Ethiopia, as well as Egypt.

Similarly, economic and trade relationships between Sudan and Ethiopia could be further strengthened by better use of the deep-sea port of Port Sudan. This port is an important potential point of access to the sea for the northern areas of Ethiopia. Since the road network in Ethiopia is currently still in a very poor condition, imports destined for Addis Ababa are being imported over the sea and railroad via Djibouti. Since the independence of Eritrea, the country has become landlocked and to have an alternative connection to the sea, besides Djibouti, would prove very valuable to Ethiopia.

### **3.3. Territorial and Political Integrity**

Over the years, many threats have been levelled at Ethiopia. As mentioned before, already during the nineteenth century, competition between Ethiopia and Egypt was fierce. Egyptian threats during the 1970s and 1980s were also backed by Sudan. This was only until Nimeiri lost power in Cairo and Egypt fell out with Sudan. In that sense, Sudan has always been caught between these two riparian powers. Indeed, Sudan is very dependent on these two

<sup>32</sup> FDROE, Ministry of Information, "Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy", (November 2002), <http://www.mfa.gov.et/docs/Foreign%20Policy%20English.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Cascão, A.E.: "Changing power relations in the Nile river basin: Unilateralism vs. cooperation?", *Water Alternatives*, vol. 2, n° 2 (June 2009), pp. 245-268.



countries for both its economy and security. Although Ethiopia lures Sudan with economic incentives for cooperation, it is difficult for Sudan to not stand by Egypt, a militarily and economically considerably more powerful country than Sudan. Moreover, culturally both Northern and Southern Sudan have been exposed significantly to Egyptian culture as the independent Sudan was born out of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium.

During the 1990s, support from the NIF fuelled domestic rebellions in Ethiopia and posed a clear threat to the government in Addis Ababa. The alliance between the EPRDF and SPLA later caused also regional upheaval between the central governments and the regions which faced many detrimental effects from the ensuing military camps and refugee camps popping up along the border. Now that wars are still raging in the Blue Nile and inside South Sudan, it is clear that these threats have not completely receded. The border integrity between Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region and Sudan's Blue Nile state is still under threat.

Additionally, both the war for Eritrean independence and the Eritrean-Ethiopian war of 1998-2000 have clearly demonstrated that the physical and cultural proximity of Eritrea can pose a threat to Ethiopia. In particular since the border dispute which was at the heart of the war for Eritrean independence (1961-1991) has not been resolved since the end of the war. This dispute will continue to be a threat to peace in the region. The role that particularly Khartoum has played in supporting the various armed groups including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)<sup>35</sup> has throughout been a concern to the Ethiopian government.<sup>36</sup>

### **3.4. Economic Development**

Observers of the career of Meles have pointed that he was indeed quite aware of the regional political dynamics and the threats that other countries could pose to him. The threat that these quarrels posed to Ethiopian access to the sea and the development of its water resources, were in fact threats against the economic development of the country and thereby against his position in power. A self-taught graduate in economics,<sup>37</sup> he focused primarily on economic development and all foreign policy was put around that agenda.

From 2004-05 to 2011-12, Ethiopia achieved an average GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per year growth rate of 9.9%. Most of this growth can be attributed to a growing agricultural and services sector, primarily producing for the domestic market.<sup>38</sup> Given their relatively small and undeveloped markets, Ethiopia's foreign policy strategy plays down the role that its poor neighbouring countries (Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and Sudan) can play in the economic development of the country.<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that the Strategy also plays down their role in this respect, it does mention a number of areas where the two countries' geographies and industries can complement each other. Relative to the region, particularly northern Sudan is still a potentially significant market for Ethiopian produce and according to the Strategy: 'has the potential to go far in development'.

---

<sup>35</sup> The OLF and ONLF are rebel movements inside Ethiopia which respectively fight for the rights of the Oromo people and the independence of the Ogaden region in eastern Ethiopia.

<sup>36</sup> Cliffe, Lionel: "Regional dimensions of conflict in the Horn of Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, n° 1, (February 1999), pp. 89-111.

<sup>37</sup> In 1995, Meles obtained an MA in Business Administration from the The Open University in the UK; and in 2004 an MSc in Economics from the Erasmus University of the Netherlands.

<sup>38</sup> World Bank Country Report Ethiopia, (2013), at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview>.

<sup>39</sup> FDROE (2002), *op. cit.* p.60





The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Benishangul-Gumuz, which is being built with support of the World Bank and various other international partners,<sup>40</sup> is another incentive to further develop the Ethio-Sudanese relations. When power will eventually be produced, scheduled for 2017, Sudan could be a substantial and nearby export market for its electricity. Some observers have been sceptical as to what extent Ethiopia and Sudan will be able to build their cooperation on mutual trust. The recent construction of the Merowe Dam in 2009 and the heightening of the Sudanese Roseires Dam in 2013 (only 20 km from the Ethiopian border) indicate that Sudan would be reluctant to become dependent on Ethiopia for a significant part of its power supply. One analyst quotes a national intelligence official that it would be considered a matter of national security to be dependent on Ethiopia for the import of electrical power. Finally, the spoils in terms of e.g. the construction contracts for the Sudanese dams will benefit particular groups close to the centre of power in Khartoum.<sup>41</sup>

The dictatorial regimes and wars in the region have caused many displacements across the borders over the last decades. Most Ethiopians who had moved abroad, moved to Sudan. And of those, many have settled there and established themselves among the working class. These people are still sending back remittances to their families which provide an increasing level of foreign currency income to Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately there has not yet been much data that has been broken down between Sudan and South Sudan. It would be interesting to see how the diaspora of Ethiopians is coping in respectively South Sudan and Sudan. The fact though, that remittances are a growing source of foreign currency income, still ought to be a good reason to further develop and sustain the relationship with both Sudans.

Although some observers believe Ethio-Sudanese relations are also based on oil imports by Ethiopia from Sudan, there is little evidence to back this up. Over the last years, Ethiopia has received petroleum products from Sudan at below cost price.<sup>43</sup> However, these imports were quite limited in scale and because of the bad road connections between the two countries, these products largely still need to pass through Djibouti to reach the industrial centres of Ethiopia.<sup>44</sup> Since the secession of South Sudan, oil production in the region has also dropped significantly as the politics undermine a profitable extraction.

#### **4. The Future of Ethiopian Engagement with Sudan and South Sudan**

Based on what has been discussed in this article, covering the history and most recent diplomatic relations and interests between Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, some recommendations are outlined to inform discussions around the future Ethiopian foreign policy with regard to Sudan and South Sudan.

Following the demise of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in August 2012, Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn was required to immediately step up to the plate.

<sup>40</sup> The contract for the construction of the dam was granted to the Italian firm Salini and the power turbines are supplied by the French company Alstom.

<sup>41</sup> Verhoeven, Harry: "Black Gold for Blue Gold? Sudan's Oil, Ethiopia's Water and Regional Integration", *Chatham House Africa Programme Briefing Paper* (June 2011).

<sup>42</sup> World Bank (2002), "Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011", Second Edition, Washington D.C., The World Bank.

<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG): "Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile", *Africa Report*, N° 204 (June 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Central Bank of Sudan, "Foreign Trade Statistical Digest, October - December 2012" (2013).



Earlier planned negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan started immediately in Addis Ababa after the funeral. Although the prime minister was foreign minister before assuming his position as head of the government, he had limited exposure to the Sudans. He has vowed to continue the active engagement with the Sudans in the spirit of Meles.

Ethiopia is positioning itself actively in relation to the development of Sudan and South Sudan. This is enlightened self-interest. The stakes for Ethiopia are high, given the tremendous development challenges it faces, ranked as the 173 out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index.<sup>45</sup> An active engagement with the two Sudans and a constructive relationship with the international community will be instrumental to developing and managing Ethiopia's potential.

The development of Ethiopia's economy is contingent on territorial and political integrity of the Ethiopian state as well as on the ability to extract its natural resources. Therefore, Ethiopia should continue to develop its dams programme on the Blue Nile, based on an active engagement with all relevant countries including Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan and western countries for financial support. The unstable and uncertain political situation in Egypt has also relatively empowered the Ethiopian position on the development of the dams programme.

The most visible engagement with Sudan and South Sudan is the UNISFA peacekeeping mission. By making its military intervention conditional to UNSC approval, Ethiopia has demonstrated that it can play a constructive part alongside the more traditional 'international community'. The mandate area of the Ethiopian staffed peacekeeping mission UNISFA was expanded from initially the region of Abyei to include the complete border area or Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ) in December 2011. As it balances its role as a peace mediator and a peace keeper, Ethiopia carries a special responsibility. Particularly in the event when Ethiopian soldiers get wounded or killed, it will be challenged to maintain its impartiality and neutrality, as has happened over the last year.<sup>46</sup> In return, western countries will have an incentive to continue its backing to the Ethiopian dam programme and to support UNISFA on the UNSC.

Ethiopia's most significant interests are in Sudan. Through building an active and constructive relationship with Khartoum, Ethiopia will want to have Sudan's support vis-à-vis Egypt on its dam construction programme. Through offering the export of electricity and market potential for Sudanese agricultural products, this can be an interesting premise. Ideologically however, the regimes are far apart and mutual trust is not guaranteed.

With regard to South Sudan, since it is landlocked and still extremely underdeveloped, there is little it can offer. Nevertheless, an underdeveloped and badly governed South Sudan will be a threat to the security in the border regions and thereby also to the economic development. The relationship with the new South Sudan government is still very young. Meles was able to engage with the different dominant factions of the SPLA, but the new prime minister needs to rebuild those. As mentioned earlier, the lack of commercial interests and other leverage over Juba can threaten Ethiopia's engagement with the country.

---

<sup>45</sup> UNDP (2013): "Summary Human Development Report 2013 The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World".

<sup>46</sup> "Ethiopian peacekeeper killed, two wounded in Sudanese clash", *Reuters*, 5 May 2013, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/05/us-sudan-fighting-abyei-idUSBRE94405M20130505>.



## 5. Conclusions

Despite the big transformations in the Horn of Africa, the dominant drivers for Ethiopian foreign policy with respect to Khartoum and Juba have not changed. While the Ethiopian government has been able to stabilize its economy and put the country on a path of economic growth since the year 2000, it was not able to prevent South Sudan from seceding from the North.

Already back in 2002, Ethiopia concluded that Sudan (including Southern Sudan) would be of limited economic interest for the large scale consumption of its products. However, it needs Khartoum's cooperation for the development of the Blue Nile power potential, including as a place where it could market the generated electricity. Remittances are a relatively small, but growing source of income as Ethiopian refugees in Sudan have settled and have increasing disposable income that they send home.

As South Sudan is poor, weakly governed and has a small and low-skilled labour workforce, Ethiopia has more to lose than to gain in its relationship. As local South Sudanese conflicts at the borders with Ethiopia persist, the fear remains that these could become the source of wider, regional instability, which in turn might undercut Ethiopian growth potential. In Juba, there exist limited opportunities for Ethiopian businesses to develop or expand their enterprise.

Based on these interests, the former prime minister has always actively engaged with the leadership of both countries and in the capacity of IGAD chairman, played an active role as a mediator behind the scenes of the AUHIP. Additionally, it was able to back up its role as peace-maker through its role as peace-keeper. Through its active role in the UNISFA peacekeeping mission, Ethiopia has manoeuvred itself in a powerful position vis-à-vis both Sudans, as the only allowed armed force on the border. Moreover, it received much international support for its role from western countries and has become an important part of the international effort to contain conflict in the Horn of Africa.

If Ethiopia wants to maintain this role, it needs to manage its relationship with Eritrea carefully and prevent becoming part of an international conflict itself.