



Shock therapy, Suzerainty, Hegemony or Positive-sum game? Unlocking the implications of Dr Abiy's strategy towards Somalia

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August 18, 2018

After a tumultuous period of backroom jockeying the ruling party in Ethiopia (EPRDF) appointed Dr. Abiy Ahmed as the new prime minister of Ethiopia on March 27th of this year. To avoid being labelled as another titular leader—an attribution that plagued his predecessor—the new Prime minister initiated series of policy announcements that would have been inconceivable just days before his selection.

Diaspora dissidents were invited back to the country, political prisoners were released, multiparty democracy system was promised and what could only be described as a major paradigm shift in Ethiopia's foreign policy neighbouring countries were redefined from security threats to regional allies and potential economic partners.

The speed in which the new prime minister introduced these changes is a watershed moment in Ethiopia's rigid politics and it prompted some observers to describe the rapid process as shock therapy reform strategy.



By mid-June 2018 Dr Abiy was in [Mogadishu where he signed a joint communique](#) with the President of Somalia's federal government Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo. The highlight of the agreement was allocating four key Somali seaports for co-investment. Other consequential points in the agreement included reciprocal diplomatic offices to be opened in major cities in both countries, all trade barriers to be removed and the two nations to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As far as the Somali federal government is concerned the agreement could not have come in a better time, it's no secret that Mogadishu has no national-level security

force able to assert its authority throughout the country. The government's lack of power-amplified by Ethiopia's meddling- allowed the regional para-state actors to exercise unchecked autonomy and conduct their affairs with complete disregard to Mogadishu's sovereignty and legitimacy. It is worth noting that just a few months before Abiy's appointment, Somali federal government officials watched in horror Ethiopia's 19% stake formalization of Berbera port in the breakaway state of Somaliland, the deal was finalized without Mogadishu's approval or participation.

Dr Abiy's sudden readiness to engage the Somali federal government as the absolute sovereign of the country provides Mogadishu with a rare wiggle room and much-needed ammunition to finally repossess power from the clan-based regional actors. Given the shifting phase the Horn region is experiencing, Ethiopia's fundamental foreign policy adjustment from zero-sum game to collaborative positive-sum is worthy of analytical scrutiny because of its profound implications and far-reaching consequence.

Many of those who closely follow the geopolitics of the Horn region almost euphorically believe that Dr Abiy's reforms will usher in a new era of mutual cooperation between Ethiopia and its neighbours. Somali government officials are urging sceptics to disregard the relevance of history and embrace Abiy's reforms because the memory of past animosities might entrap us into narrow nationalism they say and that might not be helpful going forward. They also call attention to the prospective economic opportunities that are attached to Ethiopia's new approach as the impetus for a new chapter in the bilateral relations.

In response to the notion of disregarding the past one must remember in international relations, history emerges with an elegant inevitability as the best frame of reference when it comes to inferring state intentions. Intent is a private business in international relations, states have good reasons to misrepresent their intentions as Mearsheimer famously argued: "talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences". Since enough is not known about states intentions they are presumed to be treacherous in nature and expected to contain destabilizing actions if past behaviour displayed these features. For example, current security concerns about Russia's resurgence is due to past active measures adopted by Russia-The Soviet Union- during the cold war; because of those past actions, there is uncertainty today about Moscow's long-term intentions.

As for the argument of economic prosperity that might materialize from Abiy's new approach, one has to admit Somalia faces a protracted road ahead in establishing an effective and legitimate state, therefore, economic incentives are indeed in great demand, just look at how Somali stakeholders were grovelling to donors at the recent conference in Brussels. But getting financially entangled with a much larger and more powerful regional hegemon who is notoriously mercantilist when it comes to trade is a proposition that also could come with great perils.

Researchers have suggested that hegemon led regional trade strategy will not necessarily result in increased economic benefits for the other members in the region.

Bhagwati, for example, suggests dominant states utilize trade as a strategy to promote their own selfish policies resulting in aggressive unilateralism. The construction of regional “hubs” and economic “corridors”-the likes Ethiopia is promising to establish in the region- has led the world bank for example to conclude would create disproportionate gains for the hegemon.

Then there is the other side of the coin, the subtle properties of coercive power embedded within the economic dependency configuration. Several scholars have been coming to the conclusion that economic coercion is as a useful tool as a military force when utilized in the context of regional interaction. Daniel Drezner of the University of Chicago even suggests since the use of force and the use of economic coercion have similar dynamics; economic coercion might have more appealing virtues than military force in the context of regional interaction considering how using force perpetuates regional insecurity. Addis Ababa has indeed learned how effective economic coercion can be, it applied it to Eritrea, and the outcome was devastating for Eritrea’s economy.

Background

Somalia and Ethiopia have historically endured a difficult relationship that is marred by suspicion and antagonism. The conflict between the neighbouring countries reached its zenith during the late 1970’s when direct inter-state war between the two nations took place. The genesis of their contention has been consistently blamed on Somalia’s irredentist ambitions and the security equation of the two nations is generally accepted to be concerned with the right of Ethiopia’s self-preservation versus the right of Somalia’s self-determination. To a certain extent and within the context of a specific periods in both nations history, this assessment is not entirely misleading, however, if a serious attempt to capture the whole picture in a perennial sense is made; other factors for the perpetual bad blood between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu would come to the surface, Ethiopia’s pursuit of regional hegemony is one of these factors.

In his book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” John Mearsheimer proposed the offensive realism theory as the required lens to understand why states pursue regional hegemony as their final goal. Mearsheimer suggested that this is due to the fact that global hegemony is almost impossible to achieve. In an anarchic international system where there is no higher moral arbiter, the need for security and ultimately for survival compels state actors to focus on the more achievable regional hegemony. States-who are rational actors-will ceaselessly pursue power says Mearsheimer because they are uncertain about the intentions of others, states achieve regional hegemony by maximizing their power and minimizing that of their regional competitors.

Ethiopia’s foreign policy towards Somalia has consistently displayed rational aspirations for dominance through power maximization and marked by bidding for hegemony. For example, Ethiopia’s determined efforts to foment friction between Somali clans, a practice that was a standard operating procedure just days before

Abiy's appointment, can be traced back to the 18th century. From the mid-19th century onwards, successive Ethiopian Emperors particularly Tewodros, Yohannes, Menelik II and Haile Selassie expanded the country's boundaries by dismembering and swallowing areas inhabited by the Somalis. The colonial partition of the horn in the late nineteenth and twentieth century was characteristically unique when compared to the rest of the continent says Jeffrey Lefebvre of Department of political science at University Connecticut Because "one of those conquering imperial powers was a local actor--Ethiopia--driven by its own geopolitical imperative" he concludes. The analytical significance of the consistency, intensity and the efficacy of Ethiopia's policy of undermining Somalia in the post-colonial period cannot be underestimated according to Belete Belachew, a senior researcher for the Center for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation. Recently unveiled Ethiopian foreign ministry archives reveal the plans to destabilize Somalia did not always correlate with assessed levels of Somali threat to Ethiopia's security, meaning the policy was not defensive in nature. It also means all the regimes that governed Ethiopia whether Imperial, Derg or the EPDRF irrespective of their differences in terms of political philosophy unanimously saw safety in the total disintegration of Somalia. Assessing Somalia's situation today it is safe to conclude Ethiopia's age-old zero-sum game policy successfully achieved its objectives at the end.

The question that begs to be answered at this juncture will then be why would Dr Abiy Ahmed pursue a different approach, why would the new prime minister bypass the long-held notions of zero-sum game foreign policy that worked so well for Ethiopia's national interest and aspirations for regional dominance. The simple answer is there are no rational reasons which then lead us to ask the right question; what are the inherent features and objectives of Dr Abiy's new approach. Also going forward how the new approach would affect the power dynamics between the two countries in the long run.

Risking of sounding like a voice in the wilderness this paper categorically rejects the benign nature of Dr Abiy's new approach towards Somalia. Accordingly, the paper predicts Dr Abiy's new foreign policy of rapprochement, economic collaboration and mutual respect is, in fact, a dominant strategy. A pragmatist approach that still steeped in realist thought, one that is marked by suzerainty and will have the absolute best outcome for Ethiopia because it's modelled on a set of options that creates the highest disproportional gains- economically and politically-for Addis Ababa and highest risk ratios for Somalia. Objectives of the new strategy are to anchor and consolidate Ethiopia's position as the hegemon in the Horn region by exerting a mix of hard, soft and sharp power to weaken Ethiopia's neighbours and advance its national interest.

The Politics of Water-Underlying reason for a paradigm shift

In an effort to respond or at least contain Ethiopia's massive hydro-power project on the Nile river Egyptian leaders have reportedly been actively approaching Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti to procure a military base in their soil, however, in 2017 it was Eritrea who obliged. Eritrea by then had already leased its port town of Assab to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to establish military bases there to

facilitate their coalition battle against Houthi rebels in Yemen. Adding Egypt to the list made Cairo the third Arab country to build a military facility at Ethiopia's doorsteps and the only one that has a clear national interest of undermining Ethiopia. Since the realist zero-sum game conflict resolution approach dominates the calculations of Ethiopia's policymakers they understood the Arab presence in Assab threatens Addis Ababa's geostrategic security, national interest and regional hegemony. They also understood the Arab buildup offered Eritrea a pathway to end its isolation and re-enter the geopolitics of the Horn again as a balancing power.



Officials in Addis Ababa were also aware the geopolitical value of the Horn to U.S. policymakers largely depended on America's strategic position in the Gulf. If the US presence in the gulf is free from other great power challenges then Washington might not be that keen to look to the Horn as a function. That is to say, as long as the middle east system remains U.S.-centric Washington sees the Horn strategically redundant and will remain reticent about Arab activities in the region. The Trump Administration is focused on the Iran dilemma unfolding in the middle east at the moment and it appears Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt have a more free hand to push their agenda in the Horn.

As a result of the Arab military build up in Eritrea decision makers in Addis Ababa had to accept two interconnected realities, First, Eritrea will come out of the woodwork with a leverage and most likely cause all sorts of problems if not contained with a new pragmatic approach. Second, lack of warm and cordial relationship between Ethiopia and its neighbours is the Achilles heel of Ethiopia's regional security, one that adversarial foreign powers can and will exploit. Therefore, Ethiopia must find a different approach to its highly securitized foreign policy, Addis Ababa must warm up to its neighbours without compromising the local hierarchy of the region in the process.

Accordingly, the first pragmatic step Addis Ababa took under the circumstances was sidelining the titular leader Hailemariam Desalegn and appointing a new leader with a different mindset and new vision. Notwithstanding the tensions between the Somali and Oromo communities still raging in Ethiopia, all the other internal dissents begin to lose intensity as Dr Abiy took office so he immediately paid attention to the external matters unfolding in the region.

Eritrea

Ruth Iyob identifies the divergent roles Eritrea and Ethiopia came to play in relation to power dynamics in the region “the one Eritrea as a diasporic state, the other, Ethiopia that of regional hegemon” as one of the main culprits for their conflict. Put it differently, Eritrea, like Somalia, finds itself dealing with the pitfalls of Ethiopia’s pursuit of regional hegemony.

Following the UAE-Saudi agreement with Eritrea to use Assab port for the Yemen war efforts there was little doubt that Eritrea shook off its isolation. On July 8th 2018 Dr Abiy Ahmed delivered his pragmatist approach to containing Eritrea when he landed in Asmara and brotherly embraced Eritrea’s leader with hugs and kisses after fully accepting the 2002 peace deal terms with Eritrea. He also promised improved relations and economic integration between the two countries which in return he got promises from Asmara that Eritrean soil will not be used as a stage to undermine Ethiopia’s security.

Somalia

As it stands UAE and other Gulf countries have a military presence in Somaliland and Puntland, Ethiopia’s military is also present in Galmudug, Mogadishu and all the way to Southwest regions. Turkey is also militarily present in Mogadishu, Kenya is consolidating its grip on Jubaland and the surrounding regions while the US has drone base and undeclared personnel somewhere in the country. Not to mention the firmly



implanted military presence of AMISOM. Simply put, unlike Eritrea, there are not a lot of political leverage in the hands of Mogadishu, yet Ethiopia’s new prime minister calculated Somalia too should be offered detente but not removed entirely from the security policy, Abiy has no intention to withdraw Ethiopian troops from Somalia any time soon. The aim is to ensure Mogadishu remained “comfortable and hopeful” under Addis Ababa’s sphere of influence rather than the usual feeling of being held in a choke hold.

To achieve comfortable and hopeful Farmaajo’s government has been offered by Dr Abiy enough room to exercise the one thing that eluded successive Somali governments for so long due to Ethiopia’s meddling; federal sovereignty over the country’s regional para-state governments. Somalia has also been offered economic incentives through the promotion of investment and free movement of goods and services between the two countries.

Keeping Mogadishu comfortable and hopeful will in return ensure Mogadishu’s unwavering loyalty as a vassal state and gives Ethiopia access to four Somali ports

absent the legal headaches attached to it if the ports were acquired from unrecognized breakaway state or the regional para-states especially since one or two of these ports will eventually end up hosting Ethiopian naval force.

Djibouti

When the bilateral relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia collapsed in 1998 Djibouti became the only access point to sea for Ethiopia. The new railway line from Addis Ababa to Djibouti which went into operation in January this year indicates how far the levels of economic integration between the two countries have grown. However, Ethiopia is aware that Djibouti is a hot-spot for global geopolitics, major powers like France, USA, Japan and China, have set up strong military presence in the country. Moreover, traditionally hostile regional actors to Ethiopia such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are pursuing a presence in the strait of Bab el-Mandab through Djibouti, and there is the strategic dimension of the delicate internal political struggle between Affars and Issas within Djibouti. All of these elements make Addis Ababa nervous about relying solely on Djibouti's port as trans-shipment hub for its imports and exports, moving to diversify its port traffic by establishing new hubs in new locations in the region makes perfect sense for Ethiopia's security. However, Ethiopia is also aware that it must diversify its port portfolio without alienating Djibouti, especially after Addis Ababa acquired an unspecified stake of Djibouti's port in May this year.

The Qatari Dimension

Qatar's breakthrough into the international system matured around the mid-2000s when it was primarily accepted as one of the world's most active mediators of conflicts, both in the Middle East and in Africa. Doha considered mediation as a feasible strategy with lower costs and a mechanism for characterizing itself as an international reliable actor and regional powerhouse with a proven public diplomacy track record says Ben O'bright. But Qatar, in its pursuit to realize that objective, appears to lose its critical balance of neutrality along the way, plunging further towards supporting Islamic organizations like Al-Shabab and sanctioned states like Eritrea which exacerbated Addis Ababa's security concerns and led it to sever its ties with the Gulf state in 2008. However, in 2012 bilateral ties between the two countries resumed under Hailemariam Desalegn regime with Qatar heavily investing in Ethiopia's infrastructure as a form of appeasement.



At the moment Abiy seems to publicly reaffirm the good relations but his cozier interaction with the Emaritis could spoil the relationship with Doha once again. Overall, there is no doubt Abiy is aware of the benefits of bidding the bickering sides of the gulf states-UAE & Saudi versus Qatar-against each other to extract the best outcome for Ethiopia.

In sum, Ethiopia's new approach centres on one sacred pillar; it recognizes being the state that is able to dominate other states to achieve its objectives without encountering serious military threats to its survival is preferable, in other words, Abiy is pursuing hegemony. The difference between the new Prime Minister and his predecessors is Abiy recognizes pragmatist approach mixed with realist management yields far better results than the rigid win-lose framework. The pragmatist part will assume cooperative and benevolent attitude with the neighbours while the philosophy behind the realist management pushes the subordinated states in a position where they have no desire of challenging the regional hegemon because they are comfortable and hopeful about their economic prospects under the hegemon's leadership. Put it differently, hard power gives way to soft power which then eventually assumes a steely sharp power substructure. If that is achieved then the security dilemma in the region is eradicated completely as the subordinated states accept their secondary position and trade their sovereignty for peace and prosperity.

Dominant Strategy

Constructivists have always been open-minded about the rationality of the pragmatist approach more than the other schools of thought in international relations. Proponents of the theory accept the variability of state interests and the ability of policy-makers to learn from the mistakes of the past and adopt new strategies. But most importantly, constructivists of different stripes have always been willing to consider the prospects of a political breakthrough that is not exclusively reliant on the rigid scenarios of realists assumptions.

The recent summit between Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UAE held in Dubai to celebrate the peace between the two African nations showcase the realist-pragmatism of Dr Abiy's strategy. Ethiopia's measured appeasement approach to UAE despite Dubai's fixation on Eritrean ports displays a strategy of vigorous economic diplomacy to maximize opportunities presented by the current Middle Eastern geopolitical scramble to the Horn. Over the last decade, Middle Eastern operational investment in Ethiopia delivered permanent and temporary employment for over 60,000 people according to Makonnen Tesfaye and that number is believed to increase in the coming years, not to mention "The value of remittances to Ethiopia that originates from the Middle East is close to \$US 1.5 billion per annum" according to Tesfaye.

In political terms, both UAE and Ethiopia under Abiy seem to agree now on few things like the Qatar issue, confronting Iran and its proxies in Yemen and disrupting Djibouti port's monopoly on trade operations in the Horn. However, They differ on how to achieve the latter, UAE is pushing an agenda which will see all trading volume in the area moved from Djibouti's port to Assab port in Eritrea. But since Ethiopia is

not entirely certain about Asmara's intentions, in the long run, it believes it is imperative Somali ports to be considered as well.

As it stands now, Ethiopia has secured undeclared stake in Djibouti's port, 19% stake of Berbera's port and locked a deal to co-invest in four key ports in Somalia as well as access to Eritrean ports, Abiy's realist-pragmatism has already paid off some serious dividend. All is remaining is to foment friction between the subordinated states in the region to really consolidate the dominance, their division ensures their weakness and prevents them to present an allied front capable of challenging the hegemon. Eritrea and Djibouti's relationship is already turbulent, all that remains is to ignite a dispute between Somalia and Djibouti. President Mohamed Farmaajo's recent snafu in Asmara where he called on the international community to lift the sanctions from Eritrea without demanding any commitment from Eritrea to stop financing Al-Shabab and respect Djibouti's territorial integrity demonstrated how useful but expendable the Somali Federal Government really is to Ethiopia's strategy of division.

By dangling the carrot of economic prosperity and using persuasive approaches and promises Dr Abiy managed in less than five months what Ethiopia's hard power zero-sum-game approaches alone could not achieve in two decades. Access to the sea through multiple ports in multiple countries, internal cohesiveness and divided neighbours.

Dr Abiy's shock therapy reform strategy might look positive-sum for now but when things turn sour anything that can go wrong will go wrong. The subversion, bullying and pressure will begin and it will make the road to Somali statehood more arduous. It could even swallow Somalia once and for all rendering it an empty space dependent on Ethiopia's will to interrupt or flow the stream of economic exchanges.

Global society is riven and, in George Simmel's neat expression, "sewn together" by mainstreaming cross-cutting struggles and societal values. In many ways, this international society can be described as an operational complex of intersecting structures of conflict, power balancing, security dilemmas, personal identities, ethical norms and human experiences. In the heart of all that lies the need for change and the prospect of finding answers outside the parameters of rational decision-making processes.

As do all societies, international society possesses binary profiles, one that is driven by conflict and pursuit of power, the other is rooted in structures that are values based where morality appears to describe society a bit more than power maximization. Notwithstanding what has been surveyed in the earlier section of this paper, there is a chance, slim that might be, that Dr Abiy's new approach has a moral dimension, one has to have the curiosity to accept that possibility.

Abiy's rapprochement to his neighbours could probably include a genuine desire based on the moral compass of the man for lasting peaceful co-existence with his neighbours. Even though this paper argued totally against that proposition, there is no

reason to give up entirely on the power of humanity, personal convictions and moral clarity even in the context of a tough neighbourhood like the Horn region.

It is worth noting over the years, specific reforms have transpired within the doctrine of realism. As a result of these changes, contemporary neorealism scholars are reacquainting themselves with game-changing ideas like morality which are concepts formerly embedded in classical realism. Classical realists such as Hans J. Morgenthau used to firmly concentrate on the moral side of foreign policy in their analysis. A.J.H. Murray even goes as far as to suggest Morgenthau's theory of international politics is in fact rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition of moral thought. Leaders do not exclusively think in terms of interests and power according to Morgenthau, but also in terms of moral values based on their belief system.

Accordingly, one has to hope and urge Dr Abiy to remember Morgenthau's principle as he assumes his role as the region's leader: "A man who was nothing but 'political man' would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. A man who was nothing but 'moral man' would be a fool, for he would be completely lacking in prudence".

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