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Rift
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Royal African Society

The Horn of Africa Group

Summary of key themes pertaining to:

Eritrea's Regional Role and Foreign Policy: Past, Present and Future Perspectives

arising from a seminar held on the 17 December 2007.

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11 January 2008

Introduction

The workshop on 'Eritrea's Regional Role and Foreign Policy: past, present and future perspectives', held on 17 December 2007, organized by the Horn of Africa Group¹ sought to explore the history and current position of Eritrea's external relations, before and since the achievement of independence in 1991. It brought together international scholars, analysts and others from the region to consider the nature of Eritrea's foreign relations both regionally and in the wider international arena.

Different sessions looked at diplomatic relations in the area of present-day Eritrea during the nineteenth century; the foreign relations of the liberation fronts from the 1960s and Eritrea's foreign policy and regional role after 1991 up to the outbreak of war with Ethiopia in 1998. More contemporary issues including the 1998–2000 war, the Algiers Agreement and shifts in regional diplomacy since 2001 were also discussed.

The workshop posed a number of questions about Eritrea's regional relationships. Were there elements in Eritrea's past that help to explain its isolationist stance? What made relationships with its neighbours so problematic and could this be changed? What kind of regional and international alliances would help Eritrea secure its wider national interests? Was there potential for Eritrea to be a strategic partner with the West?

The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule. In accordance with this protocol the following record does not identify individual speakers or the detail of specific interventions. Suffice to say that a range of differing opinions was expressed and a lively exchange of views took place. What follows is a synoptic record which extrapolates the main areas covered in the discussion.

Four major themes emerged: the historical context and philosophical roots of isolationism; problems of defining and assessing Eritrea's contemporary foreign policy; the dynamic of internal politics and external relations; Eritrea's concept of the international community and its expectations concerning implementation of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Decision. Discussion of each of these themes is outlined below.

¹ The Horn of Africa Group is a collaboration between four London-based institutions: Chatham House, the Royal African Society, the Rift Valley Institute and the Centre for African Studies at London University.

1. Historical context and philosophical roots of isolationism

Participants in the workshop were reminded that there was a long tradition of bellicose statements and 'muscular diplomacy' in the Horn of Africa. This was part and parcel of the armoury of inter-communal/societal conflict in the region and had deep historical roots. A sense of uniqueness that characterizes the Eritrean (Tigrinya) highland culture may have combined with Eritrea's historical frontier mentality to predispose the young nation towards adopting an isolationist stance.

The same traditions also contributed to a warrior culture that sees diplomacy and willingness to negotiate as weakness. Furthermore, diplomacy was never institutionalized during the formative years of the Eritrean liberation struggle. Whereas most African anti-colonial movements, and others such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, received proto-state membership and status in international organizations, the Eritrean cause was not recognized internationally. A few countries did provide support at different times but there was little in the way of enduring solidarity. The sense that the country stood alone until it achieved independence in 1993 has contributed to a deep-seated wariness about dealings with the outside world. Eritrea still appears to struggle to trust anyone in the region, or beyond, and latterly seems bent on institutionalizing its isolation.

During the struggle for independence the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) factions generally developed closer external links than the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). As a result, the ELF tended to get caught up in the political divisions of the Arab world. This encouraged the EPLF to adopt a strategy of insulating itself from external influences on how to conduct the struggle.

Up to 1993 the EPLF had no structured relations with the West and conducted its external relations outside normal channels. It relied on a network of friends and supporters abroad – academics, journalists and aid workers – who acted as Eritrea's ambassadors and spokespersons. A good deal of the support of external well-wishers has been squandered since independence. At the same time Eritrea has neglected conventional diplomacy. This has placed it at a disadvantage in a region that includes such skilful diplomatic players as Ethiopia and Sudan.

2. Defining and assessing Eritrea's contemporary foreign policy

Eritrea's fundamental foreign policy challenge was discussed in the framework of managing relations with two regional neighbours – Ethiopia and

Sudan – that are very much more powerful than it is. This could be characterized as an ongoing power struggle in the region, as a specific response to the challenge of a hegemonic neighbour or as Eritrea seeking to achieve parity with Ethiopia. In any event, Eritrea's strategic goal seemed to be to keep its powerful neighbours in thrall or divided.

It was emphasized that Eritrea's fear of Ethiopian domination was very real. This stemmed from the war of 1998–2000 and Ethiopia's subsequent reluctance to implement the boundary decision. In the light of this threat, containing Ethiopia could be seen as a legitimate aim of Eritrean foreign policy. Within the region Eritrea's strategy was depicted as trying to alter the balance of force by supporting insurgents in neighbouring states. Such a strategy had borne fruit for the liberation struggle in the 1970s. It was questioned whether the same strategy could still deliver good results in the different and more complex post-independence setting.

The meeting considered Eritrea's relations with Sudan between 1991 and 1998. The absence of a clear foreign policy-making process had made the relationship appear erratic and unpredictable. But it was argued that there was a clear inner logic, driven by the need to curb Turabi's aspirations to extend Islamist radicalization in the Horn and destabilize Eritrea (Hassan Al-Turabi was the driving force behind the internationalist wing of the Sudanese National Islamic Front at the time).

Eritrea had tried to advance its goals in Sudan through associations with opposition allies such as the Beja and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). It was doing much the same with Somali groups. The dominant philosophy of radical nationalism removed any ideological constraints. There were no permanent alliances – only effective and ineffective allies – meaning that you trusted no one but also could ally with anyone.

Questions were raised about Eritrea's foreign policy objectives in relation to Ethiopia. Unsettling the big power by all means possible was only a tactical and reactive response to Ethiopia. It was less clear what Eritrea's foreign policy targets were and how they fitted with other national policies such as economic goals.

Examples were suggested of cases where Eritrea's foreign policy choices appeared not to have been effective in protecting national interests. It was argued that the 1993 Treaty of Friendship with Ethiopia had not provided an adequate framework for managing inter-state relations. The precipitous military action in the case of the Hanish islands, which lie between Eritrea and

Yemen, (1996) and at Badme, a small town on the Ethiopian / Eritrean border (1998) was also questioned. Other examples of opportunities lost included the failure to use normal diplomatic channels of protest about the circulation of the Tigrayan (expansionist) map preceding the conflict with Ethiopia and the rejection of the US/Rwanda peace offer in 1998 which might arguably have averted war or at least called Ethiopia's bluff. It was argued that Eritrea might achieve more of its foreign policy objectives if were to reconsider its rejection of diplomatic struggle.

3. The dynamic of internal politics and external relations

Discussion on this theme centred on a fundamental dilemma. It was argued that Eritrea could only mount a successful challenge to Ethiopia's hegemonic aspirations if it achieved internal reconciliation. At the same time it was argued that Eritrea could only achieve internal reconciliation when the threat posed by Ethiopia had been neutralized and border demarcation had been implemented.

If these core problems could be overcome Eritrea could be a catalyst for conflict resolution in the region. Eritrea had demonstrated that it could play a positive role in Sudan. One of the key goals of foreign policy should be to achieve economic security. Eritrea's economic prospects would be greatly enhanced if neighbouring countries could use its ports. A well-managed regional policy, grounded on solid principles of economic cooperation, would be of benefit not only to Eritrea but to the region as a whole.

The interdependence between internal and external policies was considered. It was suggested that up to 1998 the rule of the People's Front for Justice and Democracy had been based on revolutionary legitimacy and depended on transforming the lives of the people. Such legitimacy was compromised as a result of the second war with Ethiopia and the militarization and social hardship that followed in its wake. This loss of internal legitimacy had made the government more intransigent in its dealings with the outside world and consequently had undermined Eritrea's international legitimacy. It was also argued that governance and human rights problems had contributed to Eritrea's isolation from the family of nations.

Some participants questioned whether the militarization of Eritrean society was really warranted by the threat from Ethiopia and whether the government had created the right kind of army for any threat Eritrea was likely to face in the future. Others insisted that the threat from Ethiopia was imminent and real, made demobilization impossible and required the highest levels of

military preparedness. There could be no regional peace unless and until the border decision was implemented.

4. The international community and the border

Attention was drawn to the complex nature of the issues behind the 1998–2000 war. Outside actors often failed to appreciate that it was not simply a conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia; there was also a more deep-seated Eritrea/Tigray dimension. It was argued that Eritrea's introduction of the Nacfa currency in late 1997 was a key trigger for the conflict, putting paid as it did to Ethiopia's hopes of a political federation. Nonetheless, more might have been done to avoid the outbreak of hostilities and take greater advantage of the mediation that was offered.

Others suggested that the 1998 mediation effort was doomed to failure because the international community believed in the self-representation of the two actors and misunderstood the realities of the conflict. The Algiers Agreement failed to recognize it was an asymmetrical conflict and therefore provided the wrong instrument to solve the conflict. But both sides now had to live with it.

Most participants in the meeting saw it as morally and legally right for the international community to put pressure on Ethiopia to allow implementation of the border decision. It was a fundamental issue that the Eritrean people had the right to live in peace within secure borders and the decision should be upheld to the letter.

The question was raised whether Eritrea had isolated itself by choice or whether it had in fact been isolated by the actions of the international community. As an example, when a senior US representative spoke of 'dialogue for a workable boundary regime' it sounded like a call to reopen the border question. This had the effect of making Eritrea feel it was isolated and could not rely on support for its rights under international law.

At times of heightened distrust, Eritrea tended to perceive and treat the international community as an undifferentiated hostile entity, disregarding how others saw the world. This attitude has hampered Eritrea's ability to optimize its handling of external relations: success in diplomacy requires a nuanced understanding of what is important to others, maximizing the chances of trade-offs to achieve mutually favourable outcomes.

In further discussion about the nature and meaning of the 'international community' it was argued that the international community is not necessarily 'benign' but it does, on the whole, act predictably in pursuit of clearly articulated objectives. It is short-sighted to expect major powers to be neutral when they are pursuing their own interests. But foreign policy successes can be achieved by sensible calculation and understanding of interests.

A number of examples were cited of how Eritrea had missed opportunities to build good relations with the US. It was argued that US regional policy was quite comprehensible, with clearly articulated strategic interests driven by national interest. Currently the priorities derived from the war on terror and building alliances with anchor states in different regions. Since 9/11 the US had taken an interest in Eritrea and its strategic coastline. Instead of capitalizing on this, the government had taken an unbending position over a separate issue of the imprisonment of locally engaged US Embassy staff. Over time, Eritrea's official behaviour had exhausted US goodwill and alienated US Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer.

It was argued that diplomats of other nations, as well as officials of international organizations, were often mystified and eventually alienated by Eritrea's unwillingness to play by the rules of the game. Eritrea's high-handed rejection of senior international leaders, its refusal to meet mediators or to entertain dialogue with adversaries/enemies was not understood by diplomats who worked in institutions that did. The aversion to 'diplomatic struggle' appeared to be denying Eritrea one of the key advantages of its sovereign statehood.

Eritrea's unwillingness to entertain dialogue with Ethiopia was explained in terms of a refusal to reopen or renegotiate the boundary decision. This was a final and binding decision that did not require a dialogue. It was argued that implementation of the boundary decision would lay the foundation for normalization. Eritrea could then have dialogue about relations with Ethiopia and about regional cooperation based on mutual respect. The concept of dialogue to avoid renewed warfare was misplaced: Ethiopia and Eritrea are still at war – it is war by other means.

Some concluding observations

Eritrea is still a young nation. The region of which it forms a part has a troubled history and is exceptionally conflict-prone. On top of that, global issues around Islamist radicalization and the US war on terrorism now impinge heavily on this strategic corner of Africa. The early years of

independence have been characterized by difficult relations with most of its neighbours and a debilitating war with Ethiopia. In these circumstances, developing a foreign policy that will safeguard Eritrea's independence and territorial integrity, enhance its economic security and provide partnerships to support its development is no small challenge.

The renewal of war with Ethiopia and the continuing threat perceived from that quarter has been a consuming concern of the government. Appreciating Eritrea's sense of standing alone against a very powerful adversary offers a starting point for making sense of its foreign policy. Several factors propel Eritrea towards a policy of isolationism. Under pressure, the government has tended to turn inwards and draw on lessons from the past. Most of these lessons relate to military struggle and/or subversion of enemies through alignment with rebel groups. While this is common practice in the Horn of Africa, it remains outside the frame of normal interstate relations.

The pressure Eritrea perceives from Ethiopia has not helped it to approach regional relations in an innovative way. Reliance on the past has led to neglect of international practice while suspicion of the outside world has hindered the development of a forward-looking diplomacy. Looking ahead, Eritrea will need to move on from networks of personal relationships and create institutional arrangements both for the formulation of foreign policy and for the conduct of its relationships in the region. It will particularly need to explore and exploit the opportunities for regional economic cooperation.

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