

Rewarding Eritrea's belligerency isn't a solution

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Once in a while, it is common to hear suggestions that it is time for the world to try re-engagement with Eritrea. The latest of such suggestion came in article published this month by Jason Mosley entitled "Eritrea and Ethiopia: Beyond the Impasse". The author previously wrote an article entitled "Eritrea is not North Korea" which was a disguised attempt to shift the blame to Ethiopia.

This time the writer breaks no new ground rather rehashes the usual narrative that rewarding Eritrea for its belligerency could be a solution. He wrote: "Finding ways to engage Eritrea by creating more linkages between its government, economy and the outside world will be crucial to establishing the counter-incentives needed to draw it out of a narrow rhetorical focus on the border. The deeper Eritrea's linkages outside of the region are, the more secure its position relative to Ethiopia will become (much as Ethiopia has managed its external linkages). Having both countries, and particularly Eritrea, more secure in their own international and regional positions could help move them towards a more realistic set of expectations for the eventual normalization of relations."

To make this illogical "*rewarding belligerency*" an acceptable notion the writer makes a selective presentation of the facts often manifestly misrepresentation. For example: It claimed: "Eritrea's efforts to undermine Ethiopia and its interests, and Ethiopia's attempt to do the same, as well as its steadfast refusal to comply with the terms of the Algiers Agreement regarding the border ruling, are more comprehensible."

However, as is well known, the Algiers Agreement signed by both parties in June 2000 is not simply only about border and Ethiopia didn't break any part of the agreement. Ethiopia accepted the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission's Decisions in November 2004, it has repeatedly called on Eritrea for comprehensive negotiations, for the finalization of the demarcation process and the normalization of relations. Even in the face of persistent attempts by the regime in Asmara to carry out destabilization activities, Ethiopia has continued to make it clear its desire to talk. It also called in earnest for the start of talks on comprehensive normalization of relations. The Ethiopian government has had a firm and consistent position that the maintenance of lasting peace must go beyond the settling of border disputes.

It is also common knowledge that the late Prime Minister Meles said on numerous occasions and in many fora that that Ethiopia is ready to talk with Eritrea anywhere, any time and on any issue relating to the relations between the two countries. This has been the case ever since November 2004, and there has been no policy change towards Eritrea since then. In other words, Ethiopia has never retracted the olive branch it extended in the aftermath of the bloody war fought between the countries after Eritrea invaded Ethiopia in May 1998.

To the contrary, Eritrea continued to breach the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and elements of the Algiers Agreement by engaging in a range of activities to destabilize Ethiopia, an allegation corroborated by UN reports.

Moreover, Eritrea continued to obstruct the operation of UNMEE peacekeeping forces, whose presence is a pre-requisite for conducting the border demarcation. In fact, Ethiopian forces withdrew from Eritrean territory at the end of the war was on the condition that a demilitarized zone patrolled by UN would be established in the Eritrean side of the border. However, as Eritrea's obstruction of UNMEE troops' movement picked in 2004, so did tensions in the region, thus prompting the UN Secretary General send on Ambassador Oshima, who was Japan's UN

Permanent Representative at the UN Security Council and also Chairman of the UN Security Council's Working Group on Peace-keeping Operations.

Wikileaks reported as follows, the discussion between Ambassador Oshima and diplomats in Addis representing UN Security Council members and troop-contributing countries (TCC), as well as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) Amb. Legwaila Joseph Legwaila, his deputy Amb. Azouz Ennifar, and UNMEE Force Commander Major-General Rajender Singh:

SRSG Legwaila interjected that the Eritrea's restriction on UNMEE flights prevented UNMEE from monitoring 60 per cent of the border. UNMEE could not determine whether Eritrea was now building up forces along its side, he said.

On the Ethiopian side, there was "more transparency": UNMEE knew Ethiopia had been amassing troops since December 16, 2004. He noted that UNMEE had requested satellite imagery from the United States (ref C), as "there is no other alternative" to aerial surveillance.

Without aerial surveillance, UNMEE Force Commander Singh said he would need 15 times more troops (i.e., 45,000) to monitor the border; even more would be needed if the GSE imposed further restrictions, such as allowing only foot patrols.

Oshima praised Ethiopia's "restraint" in responding to Eritrea's restrictions on UNMEE, noting that UNMEE characterizes Ethiopia's military deployments as "defensive." UNMEE officials, meanwhile, were more vocal in highlighting UNMEE's inability to monitor 60 per cent of the border, especially military movements on the Eritrean side.

However, Ethiopia remained steadfast in her commitment to peace, dialogue and reconciliation.

Similarly, the writer misleads readers by drawing a false equivalency between Ethiopia's peace-making role and Eritrea's destabilization efforts in Somalia. The write said:

"...Eritrean and Ethiopian involvement in the conflict in Somalia, particularly in the south of that country. Ethiopia's engagement there is far larger, driven by national security objectives related to its own Somali population and the perceived threat of militant Islamism spilling over from Somalia."

The truth was that the Ethiopian military mission was not against Somalia. As far as the United Nations and most members of the international community are concerned the legitimate government of Somalia is the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which was established in 2004 in Eldoret, Kenya, after protracted negotiations among representatives of Somali clans, sub-clans and the civil society, including the Somali diaspora. And, that government of Somalia – the TFG – requested Ethiopian military intervention and also approved in advance virtually all major undertakings.

Of course, the TFG didn't have effective control of all the territories belonging to the republic of Somalia, though it had a firm legal status as the only legitimate authority. The northern half has long proclaimed itself a Republic of Somaliland and the Puntland autonomous region, which ascribes to the TFG as its federal state. Both Somaliland and Puntland have intimate relations with the Ethiopian government.

The rest of the central and southern Somalia was controlled by various warlords. The seat of the TFG was in Baidoa city, while an opposition alliance, consisting of warlords, dissident TFG Ministers, certain businessmen, occupied the capital city, Mogadishu.

In mid-2006, a new group called the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), started to control most parts of Mogadishu and southern Somalia. UIC soon started advancing on the strongholds of the TFG. According to TFG Prime Minister Gedi, UIC had issued an assassination list against him and several other TFG leaders.

UIC's progress was indeed alarming – as former leaders and operatives of Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya, such as Sheikh Aweys and Hassan Al-Turki, held key places in its leadership. In fact, UIC leaders proclaimed a 'Jihad' on Ethiopia – to annex the Somali speaking territories of Ethiopia. Further, a UN Security Council report confirmed the presence two Ethiopian insurgent groups among UIC fighters and its link to half a dozen countries, inc. Iran, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and, of course, Eritrea.

The second half of 2006 passed with UIC declaring cease-fire one month and attacking TFG bases the next month. The Horn of Africa's grouping, IGAD, and its member countries tried in vain to negotiate the UIC and TFG. A proposal to send peace keeping mission IGASOM (IGAD-Somalia) that consists and/or accompanied by Ugandan troops couldn't get UN blessing until December, while the issue of was not touched yet.

Ethiopia also held several secret talks with UIC leaders from June to Dec, while dozens of ENDF officers were stationed in Baidoa (as military advisors or force protection or training teams or whatever they call them).

However, in December 2014, however, about a month after the Ethiopian parliament authorized 'all necessary measures' to to thwart the 'clear and present danger' posed by the UIC and following a request by the TFG parliament, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) attacked UIC bases inside Somalia.

With regard to Eritrea, the story is completely different. And, that was unequivocally attested in the 6674th Meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Dec. 5, 2011.

In that meeting, President of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed said that his people had been suffering from terrorism. His Government had tried to reconcile with those groups, but interference by the Eritrean authorities had prevented that. Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaida had the support of the Eritrean Government by sea, land and air. The Eritrean regime had the ability to deliver assistance to Al-Shabaab from Eritrea to Somalia.

He said that although Somalia had no direct borders with Eritrea or a history of bad relations, current circumstances had caused much suffering in his country from the actions of Al-Shabaab. He had tried to resolve problems with Eritrea, including with common friends, such as the late Muammar Qadhafi, who had called upon them to leave Somalia and reconcile. That proposition had been rejected. Mr. Ahmed said he had also attended a Sahel country meeting. Eritrea had not.

He had called on Mr. Qadhafi to convince the Eritrean President not to intervene in Somalia. That request had also been rejected. Embassies in Kenya and elsewhere were aware of financial transactions and of military advisers being sent to Somalia to conduct training and attacking African Union forces. The regime in Eritrea had insisted on terrorizing the Somali people, and diplomatic talks had been rejected, he said.

Similarly, the representative of United Kingdom expressed concern about Eritrea's disruptive activities in Somalia and the region, and its non-compliance with previous Council resolutions, particularly resolution 1907 (2009). He underlined the Council's readiness to consider additional measures in the event of further non-compliance.

He urged Eritrea to comply with this and all other Council resolutions, and he urged all States in the region to end conflict, demarcate borders and work

together to find peaceful solutions and protect civilians, with the aim of delivering peace and security. As today's resolution stipulated, the Secretary-General and the Council would keep Eritrea's actions under continuous review, adjusting them in light of its compliance or non-compliance.

Susan Rice, United States' Ambassador to the United Nations, noted that resolution 2023 (2011) extended a message to Eritrea that it must cease all action threatening peace and security in Africa. Recalling events leading to today's adoption, she noted that two years ago, the Council had adopted resolution 1907 (2009) in response to Eritrea's continued arming of groups in Somalia.

Targeted sanctions had been imposed, but the Council had continually received evidence that Eritrea supported armed groups in the region, and had not resolved its border dispute with Ethiopia. Additionally, the Monitoring Group had provided evidence of an "appalling" planned attack on the January 2011 African Union Summit.

She said that, according to the Monitoring Group, Eritrea was funding its activities through its diaspora tax. The Council had responded by imposing tougher sanctions that showed Eritrea that it would pay an ever higher price for its actions. The Council was also concerned by the use of mining funds to finance violations of sanctions. The guidelines called for in the text would provide best practices to help countries protect themselves from unintentionally contributing to Eritrea's violations.

The resolution provided further opportunity for Eritrea to show its good faith, including through releasing information on the status of Djiboutian combatants missing since June 2008, she said. Eritrea must also cease all activities to destabilize the region and to support armed groups in the Horn of Africa. The United States hoped the text would convince Eritrea to reorder its priorities.

She said that Eritrea must confirm through its actions that it was ready to re-emerge as a law-abiding State. Until that time, the Council was committed to robustly implement the sanctions it had applied. She hoped Eritrea would not squander that chance.

Despite all these explicit and universally shared views on the belligerency of Eritrea, the writer claimed that:

"Eritrea has developed a reputation as a regional spoiler and exporter of instability; the result of a decade of dispute, smouldering tension and proxy conflict between the two neighbours. This oversimplified model [is] actively promoted by Ethiopia".

After such a nonsensical accusation of Ethiopia, the writer delivers his proposal of "rewarding belligerency". He said:

The inducement of eliminating UN sanctions is a practical example of a step towards efforts to reengage. Another is Western influence on Ethiopia and the other members of IGAD to facilitate Eritrea's resumption of its place in that bloc.

The writer went a ridiculous extent of insinuating that: "From the perspective of Addis Ababa, the past few years have represented a significant success: Eritrea's isolation is seen to be in Ethiopian interests."

However, this is contrary to what Prime Minister Hailemariam said a few months ago stressing that restoring peaceful relations with Eritrea goes beyond avoiding tensions. He underlined that both countries could both benefit a lot from the peace dividend that would follow the normalization of relations. Ethiopia certainly envisages economic regional integration with all its neighbors, including Eritrea, to allow the Horn of Africa to thrive in this competitive global market.

In a world where interdependence is the hallmark of regional and international relations, regional integration provides the obvious strategy to maximize the benefit to be derived from development. IGAD is an African Union Regional Economic Community, and Ethiopia takes this principle seriously. Indeed, it is spearheading regional integration and has long made the extension of an olive branch to Eritrea a central element in this.

In case, the writer of this "rewarding belligerency" article is unaware of Ethiopia's consistent and principled position, we shall quote from Wikileaks what the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi when Eritrea invaded Ethiopia in 1998 in a meeting with American diplomats.

The telegram on Wikileaks summarized Meles' explanation as follows:

The root issue is that President Isaias Afewerki does not even understand the "rules of the game" and is not a rational decision-maker. Like Saddam Hussein and the invasion of Kuwait, Isaias may not be able to back down now because it would be at variance with his understanding of the realities. Meles places the Eritrean invasion in the context of conflicting economic visions. Eritrea was clear from 1991 on that it wanted to be Singapore and would need the support of the "hinterlands".

Ethiopia, no hinterland, undertook a route to its own economic development that stymied Eritrea's, and economic disagreements simmered for some time. Meles hypothesized that Isaias invaded Badme, the trigger for the current conflict, in part to warn Ethiopia of Eritrean capabilities should the GFDRE continue to stand in the way of the Eritrean economic vision.

There is no much change in Eritrea's illusions. At the same time, Ethiopia remains steadfast to the principles peaceful coexistent and good neighborliness.

It is Eritrea that has to change its belligerent foreign policy, not the world and certainly not Ethiopia.

"Rewarding belligerency" has never been the path to peace and stability.