

# Sink or Swim together!

*By Amen Teferi 10/21/11*

## **The past**

The EPRDF government has removed the daunting historical challenges of the country and set a historic momentum in Ethiopia for a sustainable development which evidently has a spillover effect in the sub region. This remarkable process was begun by overhauling the political system of the country that has been in place for so long a time. This has created a venue where the voices of the so far marginalized ethnic groups of Ethiopia have got an unprecedented attention in defining “Ethiopianess” anew. We behold as an enticing event taking over where the deplorable situation that has engulfed the country for ages eventually started to dissipate and made Ethiopia hospitable to its citizens and attractive to its neighbors.

The political change that has effected a notable economic and social transformation not only changed the way Ethiopians view themselves, but also the perception they had towards their neighbors. With regard to the later it is worth examining the foreign and security policy and strategy adopted by the FDRE government.

The policy is not, as it has been the case in the past, formulated by recanting the objective reality and reiterating a tangentially created hollow grandeur. The new policy has insulated itself from such hypocritical vanities that characterize such policies in the past regimes. It rather has adopted a new broader definition of national security devised in an inward looking stance. Thus, its primary focus is not a military defense or regime stability; but democracy, good governance and development. In view of the policy, it is not the nature of the state in the neighboring countries that would mainly dispose

Ethiopia vulnerable to any kind of foreign aggression but the absence of democracy and sustainable development within.

As the past successive regimes of Ethiopia had failed to develop a viable political and economic formula to govern the internal affairs, they were also unable in establishing a regional cooperation in the conflict ridden Horn of Africa.

The Horn of Africa is one of the most fragile crisis regions in the world. And that is reflected in the regionalized civil wars and inter – state rivalry in this sub-region. The net result of these failures indeed was a protracted internal strife and regional instability.

The Horn used to be a very complex or hard to analyze, thus creating a confused picture in the mind of scholars who grapple with issues of the sub-region. The region was characterized by a diverse complexity of issues that would baffle even the most intelligent of the towering talents who tried to study the intractable conflict in the region. However, recent development has changed the unruly character of the Horn and it started to be intelligible. Thus scholars are suggesting an energy-led (water and oil) economic cooperation and integration would be a viable scheme to bring a lasting peace in the Horn of Africa (MedhneTaddese, 2004, p.VI). And I would say that the foreign and security policy and strategy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has in its way the same flight deck.

Before anything, the policy formulated has surely dispelled the misperceptions of the past regimes. It is also a policy informed by the objective reality of the country that would ensure the benefit of the people of Ethiopia and region.

The government, apart from ensuring the political system of Ethiopia to be hospitable to its citizen it has also devised an economic policy that has brought a fast and sustained economic growth which could be a strong catalyst or vehicle for regional security, cooperation and integration.

According to the foreign policy of Ethiopia, ending up an internal strife and regional conflict could not be possible without having a meaningful economic integration in the

sub-region. That was the message conveyed by the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in his speech at the inauguration of the power interconnection of Djibouti with Ethiopia. His message was that “the success of achieving stability in an individual country of the Horn would substantially depend on the overall stability of the Horn in general.

Of course, most of the states in the region are undemocratic and truly not representatives in nature. Therefore many of them contain within themselves the seed of internal political conflicts. Absence of democracy and good governance has indulged countries in the sub-region into intra and inter-state conflict.

For a long time the regional policy of any country in the Horn had been characterized as a policy of regional destabilization. Begging one’s neighbor is a nuanced or finely developed political art in the Horn. Therefore, past regimes of Ethiopia have adopted internal and external policies that have engulfed the country as well as the region in an intensive intra and inter–state conflict.

One of the universal features of the conflict in the sub-region is that the dissenting rebel groups of one country are starting armed struggles in other. And these rebel groups would only achieve a measure of success when they got a chance of operating in the land of neighboring country.

Hence, when EPRDF came to power it tried to stay out of any sort of conflict and made every effort not to be drawn into the regional conflict system. And it was committed to change the age-old conflict prone relations of Ethiopia with its neighbors.

It has changed the traditional analysis of the national security and foreign policy of Ethiopia based on a realistic perception of the reality with *emic* rather than *etic* perspective. And the link between democracy, development and conflict within and without is highlighted as strong.

As Professor Medhane Tadesse in his book (*THE HORN...*) has indicated “that conflict resolution strongly relies in emphasizing democratization, respect for fundamental individual and group rights, increasing the involvement of civil society in public life, a

more efficient management of the economy, fair distribution of national wealth, and above all, a leadership that is responsive, responsible, transparent and accountable” (p. 53).

The government is convinced that addressing the internal political conflicts would require institutionalization of the democratic system of governance. This condition would encourage an all inclusive participation of the social groups and open up a road for development. Therefore, the remarkable step taken by the ruling party of Ethiopia, in the past two decades, has transformed the political system of the country in as much as it has an immense impact on the states of affairs in the Horn.

The government believe that developing and adopting and implementing a viable political and a viable economic policy which would dry out the quagmire of poverty would surely dampened conflict within the countries. It is clearly indicated in the policy that addressing the vulnerability of the country would require ending up the internal political conflict by adopting a democratic systems that recognize the diversity of the nation and institutionalizing the democratic system of governance which encourage participation and inclusion, rather than resistance and alienation.

However, as most of the states in the region are undemocratic, regionalized civil wars and inter-state rivalry becomes the characteristic feature of the Horn of Africa. And some of the countries in the region have been engaged in exporting conflict to the other country. And this has created a politics of destabilization in Horn of Africa that led the parties to an overt and covert effort aimed at regime change.

Therefore, the corner stone of their policy was destabilizing one’s neighbor. Hence, attempt to have a common forum that would promote regional goals had been unsuccessful.

But the recent event is a tangible signal for the transformation that under gone in the geo-politics of the Horn or the north-east Africa. It heralds the opening of a new chapter in Ethiopia and the Horn as well. The notable implication of this power connection is,

that a resource which has evidently been a source of conflict become a resource that forge a strong economic interdependence in the sub- region.

As nature has it, the geographical position and formation of Ethiopia necessitates defining its developmental tasks by taking in to account the realities of its relation with its immediate neighbors. For one thing, countries in the Horn co-shared ethnic groups, natural resources, environmental problems and developmental challenges. This situation entails that countries in the Horn should have an integrated move in a selected common areas of interests.

The character of states in the Horn affects the decision making process and the conduct of foreign policy by governments in the region. Therefore, the action of the individual states has a strong impact on the inter-state relation which perpetuates the politics of destabilization in the Horn of Africa.

To my mind, the changing nature of the inter-state relation is greatly influenced by the changing nature of the government in Ethiopia. This is mainly because Ethiopia is a “core state” in the region. This is all the more, when we see the spillover effect of the things happening in Ethiopia in the recent times. Of course, every state will have its own share in the picture of the Horn region. Nevertheless, it won't be a debatable issue that Ethiopia is a big country in the sub region that would have an impact as good as its size. All the same, it will be suffice to note here that Ethiopia has made great paradigm shift after 1991/92 and adopted a policy that has effected a change of attitude towards its neighbors. And it has tried its best to harmonize its national and regional interests and play an important leading role in the regional organizations.

When positive steps are taken by creating economic bondage, old antagonism will recede and mutual confidence will eventually build up. But any regional cooperation schemes will remain to be a hollow shell so long as the parties involved are only apt to pursue their national interest and undermine the regional.

This could be reflected by the absence of a political consensus and economic bondage in the sub region. Solid cooperation on selected regional economic interests often provides much more tangible integrative ties than high level politics. The power interconnection between Ethiopia and Djibouti is one crucial step to this effect.

## **The present**

There are now new developments in the Horn. Of these, the power interconnection of Djibouti and Ethiopia is notable which has heralded the dawn of a new chapter. So this power interconnection signifies a crystal clear change in the Horn.

As Prime Minister Meles has said on the inauguration ceremony Ethiopia will soon become the power hub of the Horn. Mr. Meles also has said that the two countries will have an extensive infrastructural linkage in the future. Apart from the old railway connection, the two countries are also linked by road. Besides, there is plan to construct two modern railways that would link Ethiopia with the port of Djibouti and the soon to be built port of Tajura.

The PM has further said that Ethiopia has embarked on a huge renewable energy development program. He also declared that Ethiopia has an extensive potential for a hydro-electric power that will be enough to the sub region. “We are more than ever convinced that we in the region swim or sink together. We are determined to make sure we swim together rather than sink together. That requires that we integrate our economies get the best of each other’s potential. And this again requires that we intensify infrastructural link as the first step in regional integration. Ethiopia has broad telecommunication power grid linkage of the first rate quality. Soon it will be having the first rate railway connection with Djibouti. I think what Djibouti and Ethiopia has done in this regard can be an example for all countries in our region and beyond” Said Meles in his speech. The Djibouti president Omar Guelle has expressed the same vision.

We can unmistakably understand the significance of this interconnection when we see the fact that Djibouti is totally dependent on diesel for its energy consumption and has the most expensive energy tariff in the world.

It is worth mentioning here what Ato Jilal Abdullatif has cited in this regard. Talking to the Sheger he recounted that “a shopkeeper whom he knows is paying an electric bill of 20-30 thousand Birr per month. The poorest family in Djibouti should pay close to 2 thousand Birr per month for a small electrified ventilator. This will create a high cost of production which will in turn greatly hinder the country’s industrialization and its ability in job creation.”

He further explained that, “the cheapest electric power from Ethiopia would consequently be a fortune to Djibouti. The same is true to Somaliland, Southern and Northern Sudan, Eritrea including Egypt. An industrialization process in these countries would be better facilitated with the cheaper electric power from Ethiopia. Apart from Djibouti, Kenya has already signed an agreement with Ethiopia. Somaliland and Southern Sudan are ready to buy this electric power.

The power interconnection would be a tool that would strengthen not only the relation of the two neighboring countries, but the whole of the Horn as it is evident in what has happened when Sudan becomes an oil producer and exporter. Sudan has indicated that change in the economic order of a given country in the region would transform the relation of countries in the Horn.

When Sudan becomes an oil exporter its relations with its neighbors, notably Ethiopia, begin to transform. It also encourages the development of a strong economic interest among Sudan’s neighbors. Medhane has preferred to call this development, “the emergence of oil diplomacy” in the region. Now, with regard to Djibouti, we are witnessing the emergence of “water diplomacy” in the Horn. This is a resource that will prove to be most critical in the future relation of the countries. No doubt, security will continue to be an important variable in the relations of the two countries. Nonetheless, it will be based on a new vision and ambition.

Energy-led integration also stimulates a deeper economic co-operation in other areas of infrastructure. Energy will be a new variable that could change the whole configuration of the relation and politics in the Horn. Oil pipelines, corridors to the sea and expansion of hydro-electric power line across the region will substantially alter the strategic environment.

What has been seen as another key source of conflict in the region over the past decades was competition over water. So far, competition over water resource is widely seen as a key source of conflict in the region. Water, which thus far happened to be one of the contentious and volatile elements in the region, is now seen to be a potentially key factor that refurbishes a room for regional peace and cooperation. As it stands today, Ethiopia's use of its water resources will be a key asset for encouraging and consolidating peace in the wider region.

Ethiopia has managed this in a marvelous commendable fashion. Its use of water rather has created a new attitude in its relationship with her neighbors. This curiously positive development that emerged in the past few months should be harnessed very carefully. The most important move in this regard was the news of construction of the "Grand Hidase Dam." We have seen that some of the psycho – political hurdles surrounding the use of Nile water is broken and opened up a new chapter in the relation of Ethiopia and Egypt.

The Nile basin which was assumed as the most dangerous resource has now changed and shown a very encouraging development. Nile Basin initiative (NBI) has gone a great length in breaking some of the psycho-political hurdles surrounding the basin. The recent events have helped us to realize that Nile has a great potential in regional integration. We can envisage the possibility of having a grand scheme of regional water development with the full consent and cooperation of all parties concerned. A development plan that would be supported by a general consent of the riparian states will help them to work out a common plan and remain engaged in a constructive dialogue. The antagonistic relation will give way to a cooperation that took in to account



the political realities of each country. As such water would lead to on a co-centered conflict resolution at a regional level.

What must be underscored is that even the age-old animosity and mistrust and interstate rivalry that characterize the Ethio-Egyptian relation has significantly transformed and opened up a venue for a warm friendly ties.

The new approach of the policy created fresh vista where the destructive elements become redemptive to Ethiopia and the sub-region. This progress is primarily dependent on what is happening in Ethiopia. As indicated in the policy, Ethiopia's foreign policy is a replica of the goals and objectives of the regional organization of the countries in the Horn- IGAD. Every effort being made to address the important national interests of Ethiopia would at the same time be a addressing the important goals and objectives of the IGAD.

Some scholars argue that the economic aspects of the Horn's geo-politics are receiving considerable attention as a result of primarily oil and water. These scholars are anticipating, that water, and infrastructure issues will substantially alter the strategic environment of the Horn. It is believed that new energy-led relationship will change the long standing assumptions about choke points and economic interdependence.

In general a more diverse energy routes could definitely reinforce economic interdependence and help to dampen the potential for conflict where energy revenues and pipeline fees are at stake. One thing to be noted in this regard is that the major producer of energy will not have the luxury of enjoying its economic benefit without a peaceful and cooperative relation with their neighbors. Energy revenue and pipelines fees that will be at stake will help to dampen the potential for conflict.

This fact will encourage an economic interdependence that would foster overland links. The recently exhibited over land links will potentially has an important implications for regional politics. The Gondar-Gadarif route will open possibilities of overland shipment of oil from Sudan to Ethiopia. It would also open up the possibilities of direct overland

cross border trade relations among the neighborly countries in the Horn. And the movement of people would also create a broader economic interdependence.

The FDRE foreign policy has opened up a way that would make possible this kind of ventures. It all begins with the change of attitude on the part of the government of Ethiopia with a redefinition and appreciation of its national security. One of the most remarkable things, among others, in this regard is that the policy is formulated based on an *emic* perspective. And the power interconnection with Djibouti is a fruit of this policy.

Take as read, that the recently inaugurated power interconnection of Ethiopia with Djibouti has a multi-faceted implication in the bilateral relationship of the two sisterly countries in particular, and the sub-region in general. And it has created an insanely optimistic feeling in me.

### **The future**

“As in the previous decades, the dictates of statecraft in the Horn and in North-East Africa at large in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have demanded an involvement with the affairs of the neighbors. This is mainly dictated by the very complex nature of the conflict map of the region that has an interconnected character as a result of internal and external factor, particularly in the cold war period when the super power was engaged in an ideologically induced war of proxy.” (ibid)

Even some argue that due to the nature of power consolidation is too closely associated with regional politics. This situation has led states in the region to be engaged in what can be said a mutual destabilization. Every state look its neighbor as a threat to its security while others attribute it to the fault lines in the conduct of foreign policy. Here is a significant new approach by the Ethiopian government after the down fall of the Derge regime.

For one thing the Ethiopian government used to consider not only the neighboring state but also its own citizen living in the low lands areas along its borders. It has been considering the marginalized citizens living in the periphery of territories as engaged in

subversive actions, smugglers guns and weapons to the dissident groups which in short be named as great threat to the national security and sovereignty of the country.

However, this situation is changed with the coming power of the EPRDF that has taken a move that has change the overall political landscape of Ethiopia by democratizing the political system. The most remarkable thing in this regard is the decentralization process that gave a chance of self government to the marginalized lowlanders who lived in the periphery.

Countries of the region not only belong to the poorest countries in the world. Overuse of scarce renewable resources has resulted in a wide spread poverty and environmental degradation which poses a major threats of environmental security in the horn countries. Scarcity of renewable resources transforms ecological boundaries in to ethnic political boundaries of dispute. Therefore, intra-ethnic violence comes to be regarded as the natural states of affairs. The character of the state and resource allocation is also central to the problem. In almost all the group conflicts in the horn, access to natural and social resources expressed in terms of justice, fairness, equitable sharing and equal development was the primary concern of people in arms.

In the case of Ethiopia devolution of power to the regions has created a fertile ground for the pastoralists to enter in to the core of the Ethiopian life and self rule. The restructuring of the Ethiopian states after the period 1991 has virtually reversed the attempts by generation of rulers of Ethiopia to centralize the state power and pursues a bold venture of transferring authority to ethnic based regional administrations.

What is evident now is the developmental efforts made by the Ethiopian government in areas where it co- shared ethnic groups with the neighboring countries. This is attracting peoples who are living just across the border of Ethiopia. Ethnic groups in Somali, Afar, Benishangule or Gambela etc are attracting the attention of their kin who are living across the border.

Educational materials prepared by the above mentioned regional states of Ethiopia are being used by the ethnics groups in Sudan, Djibouti, and Somali.

The Economic development enjoyed by the local community along the border is lulling the others who live just across the border. Ethiopia is now centers of economic development, which attract their relatives who fled the country decades ago are now coming back. The fastest growth of the huge economy of the core state in the Horn, Ethiopia, is beginning to attract the attention of the region and the world.

This notable economic growth has a spillover effect in the Horn which would create very suitable condition for the regional peace and economic cooperation in the Horn.

The current situation region seems to have contradictory feature. We have a tendency of economic integration and cooperation on the one hand, and disintegration and a potential of armed conflict on the other. This is particularly the case we see in Sudan.

Ato Abdujelil talking on this issue to the Sheger radio said that he is optimist in the future of Sudan. After recounting the nature and cause of the civil war in Sudan, Abdujelil had said, "The cause of conflict in Sudan was marginalization. And it has eventually concluded by the separation of the Southern Sudan people from the Northern part Sudan. The people of Sudan and its government have drawn a great and hard lesson in this event. They start looking in the eyes. That was a shocking experience and a wakeup call to Sudan. Hence, they would take every caution to avoid civil war. Moreover, with the separation of the Southern Sudan, the North becomes a homogenous Muslim society. And they will try to an all inclusive government. This fact would dampen the ensuing conflict in that part of Sudan. And the government and people of the North would be committed to fend off conflict and put in place a peaceful resolution mechanism to its problem. The border issue will not become a cause for war, but a development and security issue that must be address by a regional organization like IGAD."

He goes on saying, “though supporting the insurgent groups of one country by the other may not altogether be dropped, we will definitely see a significant change in this regard. Instead, there will rather be a growing tendency to find solution through addressing the political problems of marginalization and good governance.”

Northern Sudan, the last decade, has been exclusively dependent on its newly discovered oil resource, totally abandoning and wasting the huge potential it has in agricultural sector. Unfortunately, the oil rich part of its territory had recently declared its independence to become a new state in Africa as *Republic of Southern Sudan*. The Northern Sudan now should go back to its “farm” leaving the oil to the South. However, the two Sudan cannot dream development without having a strong economic tie. They can only swim or sink together.

Kenya, with a primary focus on the farthest region of the eastern Africa is going down to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. It is trying to aggressively penetrate the East African economic community. Djibouti and Ethiopia have pioneered the integration by establishing the energy alliance in the Horn. Countries of the Horn will never have a sure footed development without establishing an economic integration among them.

The future will witness the death of a national economy per se. The chance is as P.M Meles has said “to swim or sink together.” We cannot see a developed and prosperous Ethiopia or Eritria or Djibouti or Sudan or Somaliland etc without having economic relation. The sporadic conflicts we have in the pastoralist communities who live in the peripheries the countries in the Horn will gradually dry out with a socio-political and economic transformation of these communities.

Djibouti can be an example to this pastoralist transformation. Hundred years ago Djibouti was just a camp of pastoralist traders. The great grandfather of the current Djiboutian generation had been pastoralist. When that pastoralist mode of life has changed and the people began to start a settled life the current conflict situation will give way to a lasting peaceful life. The abundant natural resources available in the Somali region of Ethiopia, the fertile land and river have so far remained untapped. The

poverty and marginalization and hopelessness are key triggering factors for a protracted conflict in this region. This was until now the favorable ground for the insurgent groups to proliferate.

Considering the recent new development, that is the emergence of the southern Sudan as a new independent state, there come new opportunities to Ethiopia. The Northern Sudan Republic was Sudan to be a giant economy in the Horn after the discovery of oil in Sudan and it was enjoying the luxury of being an oil producer with a potential of emerging as a giant economy in the Horn.

But this situation swiftly hanged with the new dramatic turn of events in that country. That luxury has gone with the separation of the Southern Sudan. And this situation has led the Northern Sudan to new challenge. Northern Sudan was relying on its oil abandoning all other sectors of the Economy, including farming.

The oil rich land locked southern Sudan now contemplating to use the port of Djibouti. And this would only be possible if only it has a land link with Djibouti that of necessity must go across Ethiopia.

This in turn will help Ethiopia to continue the sustained developmental efforts supported by the favorable regional and global condition. The giant global economies of China and India are coming to this huge market of the sub-region. The Horn is getting the attentions of the big economies and the geopolitical importance that is assumed to fade away after the cold war.

The Indian Ocean has increased its strategic importance with the emergence of the Asian big economies-china and India. And this would give political and economic importance of Ethiopia with a faster growing economy.

The power interconnection with Djibouti has reminded us of the potential of Ethiopia to emerge as a huge power house of its neighbors who are badly in need of a cheaper power source and no country in the Horn has a hydro power electric source.

In Djibouti Diesel is an expensive source of electric city. The cheap hydro electric power connection would definitely ease the burden of business in Djibouti. A small enterprise in Djibouti would pay 30 thousand Birr a month for their electric bill. Kenya and Sudan has already signed an agreement with Ethiopia. The power transmission cable to Sudan is already in place.

This and other new development in the Horn would led to an energy based economic integration or interdependence in the Horn of Africa. And the time when Egypt will join this interconnection would not be that far and the day we see Ethiopia being called “a power hub of the North-eastern Africa” as Meles has indicated in his speech.

The future should be a time when see an organization named as “multilateral commission of the Horn” with the objective to foster a closer cooperation among countries in Horn to deal with the common problems. And seek ways to improve public understanding of such problems and to support proposals for handling them jointly, and to nurture habits and practices of working together among the countries of the region. We must be informed that time for conflict has gone and the time for cooperation has come.