

# **U.S. Backing of Eritrea (1993) & Somaliland: A Failed Policy Destabilizing the Horn of Africa**

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## **Ethiopia's Access to the Sea & Regional Stability in the Horn of Africa**

The United States was founded on the principle of unity, emerging victorious against the secessionist movement of the South led by the Confederates during the Civil War. This struggle for national cohesion solidified the young nation's strength, ensuring its territorial integrity and reinforcing the unionist agenda. By 1865, the Union's decisive victory over the Confederacy preserved the United States as a single entity and laid the foundation for its ascent as a global power. In the following decades, the U.S. transitioned from a fractured republic into the dominant force in world affairs, playing a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of both World Wars and eventually becoming the world's sole superpower—the modern New World Order architect.

## **Ethiopia's Struggle for National Unity**

Much like the United States, Ethiopia has faced persistent threats to its national unity. Following the Second World War, Ethiopia encountered numerous challenges, both internal and external, that sought to undermine its sovereignty. Middle Eastern nations and Western powers often backed these destabilizing forces. One of the most significant betrayals in Ethiopia's modern history occurred when the United States, previously an ally, shifted its support away from Ethiopia during the Ogden War of 1977–1978. Instead, Washington aligned itself with Somalia, the aggressor, pushing Ethiopia into the Soviet sphere of influence. This shift marked a pivotal moment in Ethiopia's geopolitical trajectory, as Cold War dynamics forced the nation to reassess its alliances.

Western foreign policy toward Ethiopia has long been shaped by strategic calculations that often contradict the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. One of the most revealing insights into these policies comes from Henry Kissinger, a key architect of U.S. foreign policy in the mid-20th century. In National Security Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM 200), Kissinger explicitly identified Ethiopia as a potential threat to U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa and the broader Sub-Saharan region. This perspective influenced Western engagement with Ethiopia, often prioritizing external strategic interests over Ethiopia's internal stability and territorial cohesion.

Meanwhile, Arab states, particularly those bordering the Red Sea, have historically pursued policies to weaken Ethiopia. A key objective has been denying Ethiopia direct access to the sea, consolidating Arab control over the Red Sea's strategic waterways. This agenda has played a crucial role in shaping regional conflicts and influencing separatist movements within Ethiopia.

## **The Origins and Evolution of the Eritrean Secessionist Movement**

The Eritrean secessionist movement began in 1961, primarily led by Western Eritrean lowlanders. The early leadership of the movement was predominantly Muslim and viewed Emperor Haile Selassie's government as hostile to the federal arrangement that had originally granted Eritrea autonomous status within Ethiopia. This perception was not entirely unfounded, as Haile Selassie's administration worked to dissolve Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia, fully annexing the region in 1962.

Initially, the leaders of the Eritrean struggle were not advocating outright independence but seeking the restoration of the Eritrean federation. However, as time passed, the movement evolved, gaining external support from regional and global powers with their geopolitical agendas. Western nations and Arab states saw the control of the Gulf of Aden as a strategic priority. They viewed a strong, pan-African Ethiopia as threatening their regional influence. They aimed to isolate Ethiopia from the Gulf, ensuring that neither Ethiopia nor any African power could establish dominance over the critical Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb strait, a vital maritime chokepoint for global trade and military strategy.

To achieve this, Western and Arab powers formed a subtle but coordinated alliance against Ethiopia, strategically nurturing and empowering anti-Ethiopian unity forces within and outside the country. Eritrean secessionists became key beneficiaries of this strategy. The Arab world, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, provided ideological, financial, and military support to the Eritrean movements, driven by the long-standing belief that a weakened weaker Ethiopia would increase enhance Arab control influence over the Red Sea. Meanwhile, Western nations, particularly the United States and its allies, saw Eritrean independence to counter Soviet influence in the region, especially after Ethiopia aligned itself with the USSR following Washington's abandonment of the country during the Ogaden War.

The Eritrean movements, guided and funded by these external actors, gradually altered their focus from restoring the federation to complete independence. By the late 1970s and 1980s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), led by Isaias Afwerki, had emerged as the dominant force, consolidating power and aligning with global powers that sought to fragment Ethiopia. With continuous military, financial, and diplomatic backing from Arab states and tacit support from the West, Eritrean forces waged a prolonged war against Ethiopia.

Eventually, in 1991, Eritrean independence became inevitable with the fall of the Ethiopian Derg regime and the rise of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to power. In 1993, a Western-backed referendum formally granted Eritrea independence, officially cut off Ethiopia from direct access to the Red Sea. However, the effect of this fragmentation would not only Ethiopia but also backfire on the Western and Arab powers that backed Eritrean independence, as Eritrea under Isaias Afwerki became one of the region's most isolated and unpredictable regimes.

### **The Role of the TPLF and External Forces in Eritrea's Secession**

Although many insiders have repeatedly confirmed that Isaias Afwerki and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) dominated Eritrea during the transitional period, the decision to pursue complete independence was not solely made by the EPLF leadership. In actuality, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which controlled Ethiopia after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, played a decisive role in shaping Eritrea's destiny. Rather than seeking a comprehensive arrangement that could have preserved Eritrea within a united Ethiopian framework—such as a

federated system or a special autonomous status—the TPLF leadership prioritized its short-term political gains over national unity.

Instead of negotiating a compromise that could have satisfied both the EPLF and the Eritrean people while maintaining Ethiopia's territorial integrity, the TPLF actively sidelined Eritrea and facilitated its separation. This was not merely an act of negligence but a calculated strategy. The TPLF's primary goal was to consolidate power in Ethiopia by restructuring the country along ethnic lines, institutionalizing a system of ethnic federalism that would weaken the Ethiopian state and make it easier for the TPLF-led minority government to maintain control. In this framework, a strong and united Ethiopia—including Eritrean elites—posed a direct challenge to the TPLF's grip on power.

By ensuring Eritrea's departure from Ethiopia, the TPLF effectively removed a significant political and military rival while laying the groundwork for a deeply fragmented Ethiopian state. This decision aligned with broader external interests, particularly those outlined in early Western strategic policy documents such as Henry Kissinger's foreign policy recommendations. Kissinger's mid-20th-century assessments had identified Ethiopia as a potential challenge to U.S. and Western interests in the Horn of Africa. His policy framework, which prioritized weakening strong African states that could independently assert regional influence, indirectly supported Ethiopia's division and the rise of the TPLF as a manageable, minority-led regime that external forces could more easily influence.

This external backing and the TPLF's internal strategy made Eritrea's separation inevitable. Rather than pursuing unity, the TPLF actively excluded Eritreans from the political equation and engineered Ethiopia's fragmentation along ethnic lines. As a result, Ethiopia lost its coastal access and inherited a deeply divided political structure that has continued to fuel internal instability.

## **Western Double Standards in Secessionist Movements**

Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of inconsistency in how Western powers have treated secession movements is the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993. Western powers actively ensured that Eritrea was granted independence at all costs despite the severe geopolitical

and economic implications that followed, the most significant of which was landlocking Ethiopia's population of more than 100 million people. The United States of America and its friends offered diplomatic, economic, and media aid to the secession movement of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Isaias Afwerki. Prime Western media organizations like BBC, CNN, NPR, The Washington Post, and the New York Times allowed Isayas to speak in their columns, giving legitimacy to his secession movement in global politics (Connell, 2005). Following Eritrea's independence, Isaias quickly turned against the nations that had supported him in their initial secession fight by adopting autocratic and isolationist tactics that ensured that Eritrea became a pariah in global politics (Plaut, 2016).

This Western secession model in Eritrea sharply contrasts the United States experience. The United States went through a brutal civil war (1861–1865) to preserve the Union, recognizing that dissolution would have posed an existential threat to national unity. Notwithstanding that firsthand experience of secession's weakening impact on national unity, some United States policymakers insist on nurturing secession movements abroad. The inconsistency is glaring in the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopian unity is central to regional peace. Alas, United States foreign policy—strongly influenced by strategic doctrines of the Cold War era, such as Henry Kissinger's 1974 National Security Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM 200)—tended to accord more significance to geopolitical maneuver than regional unity (Korn, 1986). The Trump administration's Horn of Africa strategy was ambiguous. However, suggestions from the conservative policy guide of the Heritage Foundations' Project 2025 demonstrate that components of the Kissinger doctrine remain in play. As stated in the document, recognizing Somaliland as an independent country would be endorsed even though it would go against the sovereignty of Somalia in that step (Heritage Foundation, 2023). This aligns with a more significant pattern in the United States strategy: secession movements get aid subject to strategic priorities but not to national sovereignty or autonomy ideals.

The case of Somaliland further exemplifies that inconsistency. Having unilaterally seceded from Somalia in 1991, Somaliland has de facto remained independent in practice in enjoying relative peace, democratic governance, and economic prosperity—especially in comparison to decades of instability in Somalia (Bradbury, 2008). Notwithstanding these developments, other states have not yet accorded official diplomatic status to Somaliland. Thus, several questions arise: Why was

Eritrea rushed through with overwhelming Western backing while Somaliland has not yet attained diplomatic status despite peace?

The answer lies in geopolitical and economic interests that typically guide global policy. Western powers partly supported secession to balance Ethiopia as a regional hegemon in their perceptions. Conversely, recognizing Somaliland would counter strategic Western-aligned interests in the region to maintain Somalia as a unified state within global diplomatic arrangements (Clapham, 2017). The more excellent pattern is that actions by Western powers towards secession movements are not in alignment with consistent adherence to sovereignty or self-determination but in alignment with the strategic geopolitical interests of their own country and societies.

### **A Need for New Policies on the Horn of Africa**

Throughout the past 40 years of living in the United States, I have routinely supported Democratic politicians, including my votes for two consecutive presidents, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and Secretary Hillary Clinton. At one point, I considered voting for George W. Bush, but for reasons unknown, I lost interest on election day and abstained. Reflecting on my voting history, I have developed a deep sense of political disillusionment, particularly regarding U.S. foreign policy toward Ethiopia. While I once identified with the policies of past administrations—especially those of Clinton and Bush—my disillusionment has grown over the years, mainly due to how these administrations have engaged with Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa region.

Ethiopia's geopolitical status as a landlocked nation is one of my primary concerns. With a population of over 120 million and abundant natural resources, Ethiopia has systematically been marginalized by Western powers in ways that have restricted its access to maritime trade and economic self-sufficiency. This situation dates to the recognition of Eritrea's independence in 1993, which left Ethiopia without direct access to the sea. Western governments, including those whose policies I once supported, played a key role in recognizing Eritrea's sovereignty without fully considering the long-term consequences for Ethiopia. While Eritrea, with only about 5 million people, secured extensive coastal territory along the Red Sea, Ethiopia was left

landlocked—an outcome that continues to have profound economic and geopolitical implications.

This decision is particularly perplexing given the West's stance on Somaliland, a region that declared independence from Somalia in 1991. Somaliland has maintained stability, a functioning government, democratic elections, and relative peace for over three decades, even as the rest of Somalia has faced persistent conflict and instability. Despite Somaliland's governance capacity and stability, Western powers have ignored mainly its claims to sovereignty, refusing to grant it international recognition. This stands in stark contrast to their swift recognition of Eritrea's independence, which directly disadvantaged Ethiopia.

More recently, my concerns about U.S. foreign policy in the Horn of Africa intensified when I came across Project 2025, a policy document by the Heritage Foundation outlining recommendations for a potential second Trump administration. One of its notable proposals suggests that the Trump administration should recognize Somaliland as a sovereign nation. While this shift could finally grant Somaliland the recognition it sought, it also highlights glaring inconsistencies in Western policy regarding African territorial sovereignty.

The selective recognition of Eritrea while disregarding Somaliland raises serious questions about Western double standards in Africa. Why was Eritrea, a nation born from war and still entangled in regional conflicts, granted independence so readily, while Somaliland, which has maintained peace and democracy, remains unrecognized? If the U.S. and its allies are now willing to consider Somaliland's sovereignty, why have they remained silent on Ethiopia's need for equitable access to the sea?

A historical precedent further complicates this issue. On October 13, 1955 (Ethiopian Calendar), Somaliland elders and then-Foreign Secretary Abdullahi Isa wrote to the United Nations expressing their willingness to be annexed by Ethiopia. This historical fact adds another dimension to the debate—at one point, Somaliland itself saw closer ties with Ethiopia as beneficial, and diplomatic discussions took place. However, as geopolitical dynamics evolved, Ethiopia was landlocked while Somaliland remained in international limbo.

Given these realities, if a new Trump administration is serious about addressing past injustices in the Horn of Africa, it must consider the broader implications of its foreign policy. Recognizing Somaliland while ignoring Ethiopia's landlocked status would be yet another half-measure that fails to address the core issue. The international community, mainly Western powers, must take meaningful steps to rectify the historical damage done to Ethiopia. This could involve facilitating diplomatic negotiations to grant Ethiopia fair access to the sea—whether through mutually beneficial agreements with neighboring countries or by revisiting past territorial decisions that have hindered Ethiopia's economic development.

Ultimately, Ethiopia's lack of access to the sea is not merely a bilateral issue between Ethiopia and Eritrea—it is a direct consequence of decisions made by Western powers, particularly the U.S. and European nations, during the post-Cold War restructuring of Africa. The economic and geopolitical constraints placed on Ethiopia have long-term consequences for the country and the stability of the Horn of Africa. Suppose the West is genuinely committed to fostering regional stability and development. In that case, it must abandon its selective sovereignty and territorial integrity approach and adopt policies promoting regional cooperation and economic fairness.

As a voter who once believed in the promises of Democratic leaders, I have grown increasingly skeptical of their foreign policy choices, particularly regarding Africa. The policies of the Democratic presidents I supported have repeatedly failed to advocate for Ethiopia's rightful place in the regional and global order. While I initially doubted the Trump administration's intentions, including Somaliland's recognition in Project 2025, I have questioned whether a more pragmatic approach to the Horn of Africa is on the horizon. Suppose the U.S. truly wishes to correct past mistakes and promote long-term stability. In that case, it must ensure that Ethiopia's 120 million people are not left at a perpetual disadvantage due to shortsighted geopolitical maneuvering.

Western policymakers must engage in meaningful discussions with Ethiopia and its neighbors to develop a framework that guarantees equitable access to the sea. Whether through negotiated access to Eritrean ports, a revised regional trade policy, or new economic partnerships that empower Ethiopia and the countries on the list, the focus must be on long-term solutions rather than temporary political gestures. There is no game as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century so-called Kissinger policy on Ethiopia.



Recognizing Somaliland could be a misstep, as it risks fueling further armed conflicts in an already volatile region. Such a decision may heighten tensions within Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa, where territorial disputes and ethnic divisions remain unresolved. Granting Somaliland independence could also embolden other separatist movements within Somalia and neighboring countries, leading to increased instability and prolonged conflicts.

Moreover, this move could escalate geopolitical competition, drawing in external powers that challenge the West's role in shaping a new nation. Countries such as China, Russia, and Middle Eastern states with strategic interests in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden may oppose Western-backed recognition of Somaliland, potentially turning the region into a new battleground for influence. Additionally, Somalia's fragmentation could weaken regional security, creating opportunities for extremist groups like Al-Shabaab to exploit the situation and expand their operations.

Rather than recognizing Somaliland's independence, a more strategic and balanced approach would be to support a comprehensive regional framework that promotes dialogue, economic cooperation, and peaceful resolutions to territorial disputes. The West must prioritize stability and long-term development over short-term geopolitical maneuvering, ensuring that policies do not inadvertently fuel further conflict and competition in the region.

The Horn of Africa remains one of the world's most strategically important regions, and the decisions made by global powers today will shape its trajectory for future generations. Suppose the U.S. and its allies genuinely seek to support stability and development. In that case, they must move beyond outdated, inconsistent policies and work toward fair and just solutions that reflect the realities on the ground. As Africa's second-most populous country, Ethiopia deserves policies recognizing its significance and potential, not those that continue to marginalize and landlock it. Suppose the Trump administration, or any future U.S. administration, is serious about addressing these issues. In that case, it must advocate for a regional settlement reasonably considering Ethiopia's historical, economic, and geopolitical needs.

- Support the Ethiopian people in removing the ethnic-based regime of Abiy Ahmed from power and establishing a transitional government that upholds justice and paves the way for lasting peace.
- Grant Ethiopia access to the sea. As Africa's second-most populous nation, Ethiopia's loss of its coastline due to geopolitical conflicts among global powers has only fueled instability. Without maritime access, the region's strategic commercial routes will remain vulnerable to ongoing tensions.
- **The United States must rectify the historical mistake of allowing Eritrea to secede from Ethiopia, which resulted in a vast coastline being handed to a nation of just 5 million people while leaving over 100 million Ethiopians landlocked and economically disadvantaged.**

This issue has become central to how I view American politics. While I once believed in Democratic leaders' foreign policy direction, their repeated failures regarding Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa have left me deeply disappointed. If the U.S. truly values democracy, stability, and fairness, it must address the contradictions in its policies and ensure that Ethiopia's rightful place in the region is acknowledged and supported. Until then, the people's skepticism about American foreign policy, particularly regarding Africa, will remain unchanged.

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