



## Two-level game or the primacy of domestic politics? Ethiopia's regional foreign policy after 2018

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of EDINBURGH



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This research is an output from the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK Aid from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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## Abstract

Many analysts and policymakers were willing to associate foreign policy changes in Ethiopia after 2018 with a host of presumed positive outcomes. These included, among other things, improvements in regional peace and security, economic growth across the Horn of Africa, and democratization in Eritrea. This paper argues that these conclusions reflected not only policymakers' ideological biases but also assumptions about how foreign policy is conducted. In fact, Ethiopia's foreign policy since 2018 reflects a combination of Abiy Ahmed's efforts to consolidate domestic power, through a deeply personalized and de-institutionalized mode of conducting foreign affairs. There are cosmetic similarities between the EPRDF era, and after Abiy took power – in that foreign policy was used instrumentally to create space for domestic policy manoeuvre in both periods. However, the two sets of foreign policies are entirely different in substance. The paper concludes by arguing that policy-makers analysing foreign policy in fragile countries should begin by interrogating the role foreign policy plays in domestic politics.

## Key Findings

- ▶ Ethiopia's foreign policy since 2018 has been marked by the personalized and de-institutionalized conduct of foreign affairs and domestic politics. More than a coherent foreign policy, this reflects PM Abiy Ahmed's efforts to consolidate domestic power.
- ▶ Foreign policy has been used instrumentally to create space for domestic policy manoeuvre in both the EPRDF-era and after the ascension of Abiy to the position of prime minister. The substance of these policies is very different.
- ▶ During the EPRDF era, Ethiopia's foreign policy was aimed at facilitating state-led economic development and transformation, while ensuring that the political turbulence of neighbouring states did not spill over into the country's territory. The EPRDF was able to achieve a degree of policy autonomy due to (a) its key role in security and intelligence cooperation with Western countries, and especially the United States during the Global War on Terror, and (b) its success in achieving some of the Millennium Development Goal milestones.
- ▶ Under Abiy, Ethiopian foreign policy has been characterised by reorientation of established policies towards the Gulf states (especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia), Egypt, and its immediate neighbours (specifically Somalia and Eritrea); sidelining of regional institutions such as IGAD; and personalization of foreign policy. Finally, Ethiopia's foreign policy during this period has continued to strategically rely on narratives of autonomy and self-determination to deflect external criticism.

## Key Policy Takeaways

- ▶ Policymakers and analysts should be attuned to the connections between foreign policy and domestic politics in countries where politics may be less institutionalised. This requires being attentive to the role that foreign policy can play in creating space for domestic political manoeuvre. In other words, how does the conduct of foreign policy either constrain or empower the leader or the political elite in a country's domestic political context?
- ▶ In analysing the relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics, policymakers should move beyond the simple 'two-level game' model.
  - Analyses of foreign policy decisions need to begin with an assessment of the relative position of the country in question: in relation to its immediate neighbours, within its broader sub-region, with global superpowers, and international organizations (including international financial institutions (IFIs)).
  - These analyses should be historically grounded and pay specific attention to changing patterns of individualization and (de-)institutionalization in the conduct of foreign policy. Specific indicators may include sidelining of established diplomats, cuts to the diplomatic service, flouting of established norms at the regional or international forums.
  - Analyses should also be attentive to the manner in which foreign policy is presented domestically. For instance, is the content of agreements made public? Are foreign policy decisions explicitly debated – either politically or in public? What is the substance of those debates?
- ▶ Analysts and policymakers should dig deeper – looking beyond cosmetic similarities – into the types of domestic politics enabled by foreign policy decisions. For instance, if two regimes adopt similar policies towards IFIs, while making very different domestic political decisions and re-orienting the domestic political economy, that suggests that the same tactics are being used for different strategic and political ends.
- ▶ Finally, a note of caution. Western responses to Ethiopia's transition appear to have been driven by geostrategic imperatives, rather than a clear-eyed focus on political changes. This policy paper reiterates the need for context-specific, historically-accurate, in-depth, political analysis.

## Introduction

In 2018, the World Peace Foundation published an occasional paper by Alex de Waal titled "The Future of Ethiopia: Developmental State or Political Marketplace?" (de Waal 2018). Much has changed in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa since the paper was published. The war in Tigray -- which also devastated parts of Amhara and Afar -- the continuing conflict in Oromia, the creation of the Prosperity Party to replace the EPRDF, have fundamentally altered Ethiopia's political landscape, amidst an ongoing climatic and macro-economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, many of the conclusions and unresolved questions from the working paper remain relevant. Taking some of the questions raised in de Waal's paper as its point of departure, this paper focuses on explaining some of the changes which have occurred in the conduct of Ethiopia's foreign policy after the elevation of Abiy Ahmed to the position of Prime Minister in April 2018.

Numerous papers have been produced on Ethiopia's 'transition' -- which arguably began with widespread protests in 2015. Most of these analyses focus on day-to-day dynamics, or on shifts in national, regional, and international alliances.<sup>2</sup> Many have been aimed at, or produced by policymakers focused on peace-making, local social cohesion, or humanitarian programming. In other words, they focus on the specifics of Ethiopia's overlapping crises, and responses to them. This paper begins, instead, with an intellectual puzzle: the willingness of many commentators to associate foreign policy changes in Ethiopia after 2018 with a host of presumed positive outcomes. These included, among other things, improvements in regional peace and security, geopolitical stability and economic growth across the HoA, and democratization in Eritrea (Stigant and Knopf 2018; Gardner 2018; Bereketeab 2019; International Crisis Group 2019b; Henneberg and Stapel 2020; Sharamo and Demissie 2021).

Not all these reports were uncritical, of course, and many made the point that there was much to be done for these outcomes to be achieved. Further, many of these opinions, especially those published in the immediate aftermath of the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement in 2018, seemed reasonable at the time. It is only with the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight that they seem misplaced. However, they are illustrative of a relatively common set of assumptions among commentators about how foreign policy is conducted by leaders.

The point here is not to criticize the commentators for what were often reasonable opinions – but to use the Ethiopian case to revisit some of these commonly held assumptions about the relationship between domestic and international politics in (relatively) peripheral or weak countries within the international system. This is not an abstract point. As the case of Ethiopia demonstrates, the relationship between foreign policy and national politics can have devastating implications for the lives of millions and reshape the regional political landscape.

The key contention of this paper is that Ethiopia's foreign policy since 2018 reflects a combination of Abiy's efforts to consolidate domestic power, through a deeply personalized and de-institutionalized mode of conducting foreign affairs. These efforts have been both empowered and constrained by residual policies from the EPRDF era, and have played out within a regional context shaped by similar efforts of other regional leaders (notably those of Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia) to use foreign policy and consolidate domestic power. Not all of these efforts have been successful, but in all cases, these leaders were acting 'rationally', if amorally, in the pursuit of domestic power. However, 'political rationality' in the conduct of foreign policy need not lead to welfare enhancing consequences – either domestically or regionally, and the current predicament of the HoA reflects the de-institutionalised pursuit of domestic power by elites through regional deal-making. Within Ethiopia, there are similarities between the EPRDF era, and after Abiy took power – in that foreign policy was used instrumentally to create space for domestic policy manoeuvre in both periods. These similarities are only skin-deep, however, and the two sets of foreign policies are wholly different in substance.

The argument in this paper is organized into four substantive sections. The first section briefly sketches the relationship between domestic and international politics in the IR literature, while the second outlines the key features of Ethiopian foreign policy under the EPRDF. The third sub-section is organized into several sub-sections and examines and analyses the changes in Ethiopian foreign policy after Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. This section also draws on interviews and meetings with researchers working on Ethiopian politics. The fourth and final section concludes. Two caveats are appropriate at this point. First, the paper touches on but does not examine Ethiopia's relationships with Western countries (including Russia) and international organizations such as United Nations and international financial institutions (IFIs), in detail. Its focus is largely on regional dynamics. Second, the paper presumes a degree of knowledge about Ethiopia's political transition and the history of the HoA.



## The relationship between domestic and international affairs

Until relatively recently, scholars of IR paid little attention to domestic politics and domestic decision-making. This had much to do with the basic tenets of 'realism', which was the dominant paradigm when IR evolved to become a distinct field of study (Kaarbo 2015). Realists argued that international politics differed from domestic politics due to the condition of Hobbesian anarchy prevalent in the international system (Schmidt 2002). In addition, realist scholars such as Kenneth Waltz drew a distinction between discrete behaviour of a state (why a state made a specific decision), and more systemic patterns in the international order (declines in great power wars, changing norms for humanitarian intervention, etc. (Waltz 1979, 121). In this view, the former was an example of foreign policy, and only the latter comprised the appropriate subject of IR. Needless to say, the distinction is an artificial one. The various things that IR seeks to explain – the likelihood of inter-state war, the nature of alliances, competitive interstate relations are either foreign policies or the direct (if unintended) result of foreign policies (Fearon 1998). Nonetheless, the realist assumptions about the nature of the state – as unitary actors where the domestic attributes of the states played little role in determining the international order, remained dominant for a long time.

It was only in the 1980s that scholars began to argue for greater attention to be paid to the domestic politics of states, arguing that states were not unitary actors, and that domestic interactions might shape foreign policy (Fearon 1998, 300). Arguably the most famous formulation of this was Robert Putnam's conceptualization of international interaction as a 'two-level game' (Putnam 1988). Putnam argued that it was meaningless to merely acknowledge that there was a relationship between domestic and international affairs. Instead, analysts needed to understand what that relationship was, and when and how domestic politics shaped foreign policy. Putnam's theoretical framework described international negotiations as comprising of two levels. *'At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments'* (Putnam 1988, 434).

Analytically, therefore, there is bargaining between negotiators trying to reach an agreement at the international level (Level 1), and separate discussions within each group of constituents about whether to ratify that agreement (Level 2). Agreement at the international level is possible only when the win-sets -- the range of agreements at the international level that can be ratified at the domestic level -- overlap. The size of the win-set is shaped by three factors: preferences of and possible coalitions among domestic actors; political institutions at the domestic level; and negotiators' strategies at the international level. Putnam argued that a negotiator who was constrained by fractious domestic politics (that is with a narrow domestic win-set) had an advantage in international negotiations. She could always point to the difficulties of domestic ratification to obtain better terms from her international co-negotiators. This is what Schelling referred to as the 'paradox of weakness' in international affairs (Schelling 1960). US presidents, for instance, have often pointed to the difficulty of ratification in Congress as a method of extracting concessions at the international stage.

The theory turns on two further points. The first is that these negotiations (at Level 1 or Level 2, or indeed between Level 1 and 2 within a country) are never one-off, reducing the likelihood of defections by the actors. Put slightly differently - in an anarchic global order, policymakers always have an incentive to renege on their commitments. However, they are constrained by the likelihood of future interactions with the actors to whom they may have made such commitments (Keohane 2005; Axelrod 1984). Second is the notion of ratification. The expression refers to any decision-process at Level 2, whether formal or informal, 'that is required to endorse or implement a Level 1 agreement'. This does not refer to a formal parliamentary process but might even refer to implementation or acceptance by bureaucratic agencies, interest groups, social classes, or public opinion. Putnam's theory launched the 'domestic turn' in IR, leading to an explosion of literature on the relationship between domestic politics and international affairs (Kaarbo 2015; Hess and Orphanides 1995; Smith 1996; Knopf 1993; da Conceição-Heldt 2013; Downs 1995; Byiers and Woolfrey 2023; Putnam 2019; Schnapper 2021). Reviewing the literature and its advances is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that this concept is now well established in IR theory. One could even argue that the bare bones of the two-level game operate as a paradigm through which many analysts interpret the conduct of foreign policy, whether consciously or otherwise.

Take, for instance, the 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement, with which this paper began. There are at least three explanations for why many commentators hailed it as a landmark agreement, with likely positive effects in the HoA. The first is that they simply didn't know better or failed to place the joint declaration between the countries in the appropriate analytical context. The second is that their reading of the situation was framed by their ideological/psychological biases, reflecting what they hoped would be the outcome of the agreement (see Jervis 1976).<sup>3</sup> Ordinary people on both sides of the border celebrated the agreement in public, and no-one wanted to spoil the party – even if some may have had misgivings about the leaders' intentions in private. All commentators were deeply suspicious of the Eritrean dictator and his motives, and focused their doubts on him, while hoping for momentum for reform in Eritrea. Both of these explanations may be partially true – for instance, it is plausible that key policymakers in the United States were more likely to have interpreted the political changes in Ethiopia in ideological terms (Verhoeven and Woldemariam 2022). However, neither is entirely satisfactory. After all, many of the commentators were long-term analysts of Ethiopia, and their assessments were only cautiously optimistic.

A third possible explanation is that the analyses were entirely reasonable. Commentators expected the agreement, and the manner in which it was negotiated and agreed, to reflect a domestic consensus which framed (and constrained) Abiy's negotiating stance. They also expected the peace-making process to have been mediated by Ethiopian foreign policy institutions. Analysts also expected that any deal reached internationally would need to be 'ratified' domestically. In other words, analysts understood the deal in a particular way, because that is how they usually expect foreign policy to be conducted.<sup>4</sup> In turn, this understanding reflected assumptions about the nature of politics, development, and the state in Ethiopia, as well as the nature of the international system.

This paper makes two points in this regard. First, that the conduct of Ethiopian foreign policy does not fit the 'two-level game' framework, neither before, nor after 2018. Second, that the two-level game is premised on two implicit assumptions – the relative equality of actors in the international realm, and the relatively institutionalized conduct of politics in the domestic realm. The Ethiopian case suggests (as does a broader set of literature on the HoA and African states) that these assumptions do not accurately reflect the realities of foreign policy-making in less-powerful countries on the margins of the global system.

## Ethiopia's hegemonic role in the HoA: foreign policy in the EPRDF era

Ethiopia's foreign policy during the EPRDF-era had two broad goals (Gebreluel 2023). The first was the carving out of political autonomy in the pursuit of economic development and transformation. The second goal, in the realm of peace and security, was stability, and ensuring that the political turbulence of neighbouring states did not spill over into the country's territory. The former was articulated clearly in Ethiopia's 2002 'Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy' White Paper (the 2002 White Paper),<sup>5</sup> while the latter can be discerned from the policies of the Ethiopian government, notably at the African Union and IGAD.

The 2002 White Paper was formulated in the immediate aftermath of the war with Eritrea and a split within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), from which then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi emerged as the winner. It diagnosed under-development and poverty as the key challenges facing Ethiopia, accusing past governments of practicing 'jingoism with an empty stomach'.<sup>6</sup> The 2002 White Paper argued that poverty had deprived the government of resources and legitimacy, made domestic governance fragile, and left the country vulnerable to foreign interference. Economic transformation was therefore the superordinate goal identified in it:<sup>7</sup>

*'The primary interest of the people is to live free from poverty, disease and ignorance. Rapid development is not merely important in raising the standard of living of the people, but also a guarantee of national survival. Unless we can bring about rapid development that benefits the people, we will not be able to avoid chaos and disintegration. Therefore, assuring accelerated development and raising the living standard of our people is critical in preventing our country from disaster and dismemberment. This is a fundamental issue on which the interests and the survival of the people of Ethiopia depends.'*

Alongside development, the second goal identified in the 2002 White Paper was the promotion of democracy. Democratization was stated as being essential for ensuring national solidarity and mutual tolerance in a state which had a history of inter-group conflict. This was not a form of parliamentary democracy based on free elections, but instead what the EPRDF styled 'revolutionary democracy' -- based on participation of local councils. Implicit in this argument was the belief that the foreign relations and national security policy to be pursued would be in aid of these goals.<sup>8</sup>

Only the developmental goal was pursued in a meaningful manner. The commitment to democratization was abandoned after the disputed 2005 elections, which were followed by harsh crackdowns on the opposition, the progressive centralization of decision-making authority around Meles, and the intentional fusing of the party and the state (Clapham 2017; Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). However, this was also the point at which EPRDF began to implement its model of a 'developmental state' through a series of development policies prepared after 2002 (Sarkar and de Waal 2023). In general, this had three declared elements: (1) a strategy of state-directed economic growth; (2) commitment to pro-poor welfare policies; and (3) transformation of the nature of the state institutions, and particularly the bureaucracy, to implement the other two limbs of the model (Clapham 2018; de Waal 2018). The political logic was simple - the developmental transformation of Ethiopia – or so Meles argued – depended on the EPRDF remaining in power for a sufficient period of time. This is what Stefan Dercon calls the 'development bargain' - a durable political economic deal among the elite in which the national leadership is focused on delivering development, and where state power is used to achieve these developmental goals (Dercon 2022).

Much of Ethiopia's foreign policy during this period was designed to create the space for the EPRDF to pursue these developmental goals, implicitly acknowledging Ethiopia's peripheral position in the international system. This meant steering clear of policy prescriptions from international financial institutions and avoiding over-dependence on any one global power. This was reasonably difficult, because the EPRDF came to power as an explicitly Marxist-Leninist organization at a time when the ideology of market liberalism was at its height (or nadir, depending on how one looks at it). The new government also needed external support to finance post-conflict reconstruction and its plans for economic development (Furtado and Smith 2009). In its early days, the government did sign up for some modest structural reforms – reducing tariffs, dismantling some price controls, and agreeing to privatize some agencies, but implementation lagged, and the government refused to dismantle its managed exchange regime, nor was it willing to discuss privatization of the key sectors such as finance, land, energy, and telecommunications (Borchgrevink 2008).

Sources of rent remained centralized (Kelsall 2013; Vaughan and Gebremichael 2003). The government refused to back down even when IMF loans were cut off, signaling its determination to retain policy autonomy (Manyazewal 2019). None of this is to suggest that Ethiopia did not adopt neoliberal policies in some contexts. As Admasie has argued in his study of the Ethiopian labour movement, Ethiopia's economic growth after 2000 was premised on a manufacturing strategy funded by foreign direct investment (Admasie 2016). This strategy relied heavily on the availability of cheap labour, with the state intervening to keep wages low through macro-economic and exchange rate policies (Admasie 2018). In other words, foreign policies were designed to protect policy autonomy, even though the policies which were actually adopted sometimes bore a marked similarity to neo-liberal orthodoxy (Fantini and Puddu 2016).

Ethiopia's relationship with the West changed significantly after the year 2000. While there were many reasons for this, including the fact that structural adjustment programs were no longer as fashionable – two reasons stand out (Feyissa 2011). The first was Ethiopia's regional role in the United States' Global War on Terror (GWOT). Ethiopia's centrality to, and willingness to be a part of U.S. security and regional stability objectives meant that donors were less likely to scrutinize its worsening human rights record, its geostrategic involvement in its neighbours, and its stated reluctance to adopt neoliberal reforms (Le Gouriellec 2018; Fantini and Puddu 2016). The second reason was Ethiopia's tangible progress in meeting the various millennium development goals (MDGs) and achieving developmental outcomes – these included rapid reductions in infant and maternal mortality, the huge expansion of primary education, the building of infrastructure, and the putting in place of social safety nets such as the Productive Safety Net Program (in collaboration with external donors) (Ronnås and Sarkar 2019; Lavers 2022; Feyissa 2011). Ethiopia's willingness to chart its own path was exemplified by the building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which was funded using domestic bonds because some multilateral development financial institutions (notably the World Bank) were unwilling to offer the necessary loans and came to be seen as too pro-Egypt in their orientation (International Crisis Group 2019a; Mbaku 2013).

Within the region, Ethiopia's policies were largely driven by a desire to (a) contain Eritrea's influence – particularly after the 1998–2000 war, and (b) the desire to insulate internal affairs in Ethiopia from regional instability. As a region, the HoA has historically been characterized by a pattern of mutual interference by states in their neighbours, usually through the hosting of and support to non-state armed actors (Cliffe 1999; de Waal 2015). During the EPRDF era, Ethiopia tried to ensure that territories of neighbouring states could not be used to foment instability within the country – often through direct intervention in neighbours' affairs, or by creating buffer-zones adjoining Ethiopia's borders, to be administered by proxies (Mesfin and Beyene 2018). For instance, Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2006, on the back of a sustained diplomatic campaign, was motivated by the rise of Islamic Courts Union (ICU) but more importantly, by its desire to neutralize suspected Eritrean influence within the ICU (Majid et al. 2021; Marchal 2009; 2011). In addition, by 2017, Ethiopia had become the world's largest contributor of troops for UN peacekeeping missions, and playing an active role in Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, under the aegis of the AU and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Verhoeven and Woldemariam 2022). At the regional level and especially at IGAD, Ethiopia also used diplomacy to pursue its geo-political interests and to sideline Eritrea. For instance, although the leadership of IGAD is meant to rotate between different countries, Ethiopia held the position of the chair between 2008 and 2019, while the Executive Secretary position was held by a Kenyan diplomat. This gave rise to allegations that IGAD had simply become a platform for Ethiopian and, to a lesser extent, Kenyan interests (United States Institute of Peace 2020).

Ethiopia's relationship with the OECD countries -- especially the US -- and the IFIs was never completely free from tension. The US's foreign policy towards Ethiopia was shaped overwhelmingly by intelligence and security cooperation with Ethiopian authorities in the context of the GWOT, especially efforts to target Islamists in Somalia (Odinga 2017). IFIs and OECD countries tolerated Ethiopia's developmental state and facilitated funding for it, because it delivered on progress towards the MDGs/SDGs, and because of Ethiopia's geostrategic importance. However, Ethiopia's developmental policies, with their explicit rejection of the Washington consensus and affinity for East Asian state-led developmental models troubled US and OECD policymakers (Verhoeven and Woldemariam 2022). In the realm of security cooperation, Ethiopian authorities rebuffed offers of military training and cooperation from the Americans, even when their interests coincided.

Finally, Ethiopia's closeness to China – both politically, and as a source of debt financing for infrastructural projects -- was seen as a cause of concern by American policymakers and diplomats. Each of these factors also contributed to the willingness of western policymakers to embrace Abiy when he came to power on a platform of orthodox economic liberalization.

In sum, external action in the EPRDF era, whether it was coercive or diplomatic, was intended to create and safeguard policy autonomy for the pursuit of predominantly developmental goals. These developmental goals were, of course, part of EPRDF's strategies for retaining power, and whether they were sufficiently equitable remains open to question. However, given the evidence, it is difficult to dismiss the pursuit of development by the EPRDF as purely instrumental. All of this occurred within a highly centralized political systems, where institutions played an important, if ambiguous, role. These institutions, such as the bureaucracy, the party, the security institutions, etc., were undemocratic and often repressive, but at least while Meles was alive, the 'rules of the game' seemed to be relatively settled. All of this was to change after his death in 2012, with widespread protests breaking out in 2015, which led to the elevation of Abiy to the position of Prime Minister in 2018.



## Ethiopia's foreign policy after 2018

Ethiopian politics and the country's foreign policy appear to have changed dramatically after 2018, though many long-term analysts have been at pains to stress the continuities between the techniques of power used in the EPRDF era and the contemporary period. There are, of course, significant challenges in analysing the foreign policy-making process in any country; which are magnified in case of Ethiopia. There is, understandably, a significant culture of secrecy in how officials formulate foreign policies. This is true of all countries, but true of politics more generally in Ethiopia, making it difficult to uncover the links between domestic politics and the articulation of foreign policy (Clapham 2017, 11). Further, since there is always a gap between the stated and real motivations for action, and since leaders cannot be taken at their word, we need to look to what leaders do. This does not mean, of course, that ideas do not matter – just that ideas and stated intentions are not always accurate guides to interpreting and understanding actions (Geuss 2008). In the Ethiopian case, one could argue that the broad strategic guidelines for foreign policy during the EPRDF era, and during Abiy's premiership are laid out in the 2002 White Paper, and Abiy's book *Medemer*. Even if this were true, the principles contained in these documents do not explain the specific decisions taken by the respective regimes.

In the case of Abiy, these challenges are compounded by the fact that few of his signature foreign policy achievements are public. The substance of the Ethiopia Eritrea peace agreement<sup>9</sup> was not made public, and while the Tigray peace agreement is, little is in the public realm about the negotiations which led to the agreement. Nonetheless, and based on the public record (and interviews), what follows is a partial assessment of Ethiopia's foreign policy since 2018. Arguably, this is characterised by two elements – (1) de-institutionalization and personalization of both politics and foreign policy making, and (2) the continued use of foreign policy to carve out space for domestic action – which was, in turn, aimed at consolidation of power. Different tactics were deployed in the pursuit of these of objectives at various times – ranging from personalised diplomacy to transactional politics. Ethiopia's foreign policy during this period has been characterised by the reorientation of established policies towards the Gulf states (especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia), Egypt, and its immediate neighbours (specifically Somalia and Eritrea. Regional institutions have been sidelined as Abiy has taken on the role of a 'populist peace-maker' (see the broader discussion of populist peacemaking in Landau and Lehrs 2022). Finally, Ethiopia's foreign policy during this period has continued to strategically rely on narratives of autonomy and self-determination to deflect external criticism.

## A tonal change in politics and foreign policy

Abiy began his first term in office by visiting Ethiopia's neighbouring countries along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In doing so, he seemed to promote a more personalized, and ostensibly collaborative tone in Ethiopian regional diplomacy, marking a clear rupture from the EPRDF 'way' of doing politics (Mosley 2020; Haustein and Feyissa 2021). In the words of one senior Ethiopian scholar 'while there is both change and continuity, Abiy is something of a political phenomenon for the way in which he emphasizes spiritualised political agency rather than dealing with structural challenges. [Under him,] power – and the way it is exercised [in politics] – is novel'.<sup>10</sup> Even as he wowed the international community by repealing repressive laws, pardoning former armed rebels (such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)), and announcing intentions to relax restrictions on investment in key sectors, 'his unilateral decision-making and policy-planning style... sometimes wrong-footed Ethiopia's foreign policy and security institutions' (Mosley 2020, 14). Cuts were subsequently made to the Foreign Ministry and diplomatic staffing and diaspora were promoted in place of the professional diplomats (Addis Standard 2021). All through these reforms, Abiy continued to employ a deeply personalized, 'semi-religious rhetoric of hope, love, and reconciliation', which appealed to a large number of Ethiopians, but failed to address a brewing domestic political crisis – characterized most concretely by conflict between different groups and regional states around disputed internal borders (which displaced huge numbers of people internally) and the progressive side-lining of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

There are at least two other examples of Abiy's personalization of foreign affairs and the concomitant sidelining of institutions. In 2019, for instance, he sought to mediate between pro-democracy protesters and the Sudanese generals following the overthrow of long-term ruler Omar al-Bashir, and was annoyed by the refusal of IGAD's council of ministers to rubber stamp his appointed emissary as an IGAD envoy (Berridge et al. 2022). In that instance, formalization of peace was left to the efforts of the regional bodies, and outsiders including the African Union, Arab countries, the US and UK (de Waal 2021a).<sup>11</sup>

Another instance comes from negotiations over the GERD. Abiy's insistence on overriding the objections of his foreign ministry to engage in direct talks with Cairo (mediated only by the US Treasury) had the unintended effect of pushing Sudan and Egypt closer together, a direct reversal of Sudan's earlier willingness to support Ethiopia in reopening discussion over the colonial treaties which governed the Nile waters (Berridge et al. 2022). At the same time, these negotiations yielded a draft treaty which Abiy refused to sign – perceiving, probably correctly, that these concessions would be seen as a sign of weakness prior to elections.

## Populism in domestic and foreign affairs

In Abiy's case, deinstitutionalization in domestic and foreign policy has taken a decidedly populist form. Populism is conventionally understood in two ways. It can refer to 'irresponsible' distributive policies adopted by political leaders -- in other words, policies deviating from macro-economic orthodoxy (usually as defined by international financial institutions), and the use of 'corporatist' or state-authorised structures to co-opt labour and other social movements into politics (Collier and Collier 1979; Destradi and Plagemann 2019). In academic scholarship, however, the expression is usually used to refer to a 'strategy of rule' – a 'thin-centred ideology' predicated on the division of society *'into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people'* (Mudde 2004).

The construction of populist rule relies on several steps (adapted from Laclau 2018). When a series of demands made by social groups cannot be absorbed by institutional channels, they begin to be treated as equivalent to each other, no matter their relative salience. Political leaders can capitalize on these demands to assemble coalitions of (often diverse) social groups. This occurs through the process of 'interpellation' which refers to the identification of individuals or groups with specific ideological issues, through a variety of discursive tactics (De Leon, Desai, and Tugal 2009). In doing so, political entrepreneurs claim that they are giving voice to the 'frustrated masses', and thus begin to construct 'the people' as a collective actor to confront either an existing regime or political settlement with the purpose of demanding change (Laclau 2018).

While this is a stylized representation and the precise sequence may vary, populism is almost always characterized by a Manichean worldview – where 'people' are good, and 'elites' are evil. Abiy's rhetoric, which demonized the TPLF, his allegations of corruption and inefficiency in state-owned enterprises, as well as charges that Tigrayans and Tigrayan elites dominated the security sector under the previous administration were essential to the construction of this worldview in Ethiopia. Again, the point here is not to suggest that there was no corruption in the previous administration – but that the rhetoric was deployed instrumentally, to consolidate the divide between the people and the past administration, and to justify the side-lining of private sector actors (such as MIDROC) considered close to the past regime (Mosley 2020; Lanfranchi and Meester 2021).

When it comes to the conduct of foreign affairs, analysts argue that populist leaders may be more willing to escalate international conflicts, weaken regional and international institutions, and are likely to centralize and personalize foreign-policy (Destradi and Plagemann 2019). Since populist logic is predicated on the often-symbolic privileging of 'people's' interests – leaders may pursue policies and diplomatic practices which seem to express the interests of the 'in-group' on the international stage (Jenne 2021). Finally, when they make peace, populist politicians are: likely to eschew established norms and practices, while couching their actions in the language of 'anti-elitism', adopt an aggrandized rhetoric positioning themselves in the spotlight (and thus integrating domestic politics into the international arena), and frame their actions as being 'truly' grounded in the concerns of conflict affected population (Landau and Lehrs 2022). In short, they make use of the international peace-making processes for domestic political needs.

## The domestic political context

The domestic context inherited by Abiy was both centralized and fragmented. The political system under the EPRDF had functioned through a form of 'vertical accountability' where local officials and bureaucrats owed their positions and loyalty to ethnically organized party units which existed from the level of the kebele upwards, rather than to the people (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). At the same time, the constitutional system (commonly described as 'ethnic federalism') overlaid political ethno-nationalism onto constitutional-administrative federalism (Berhe and Gebresilassie 2021). This had two key impacts. First, ethnic identity became the primary logic for the organization of political competition and conflict. As a result, individual or group claims for resources began to be couched in the emotive language of ethnicity, giving rise to a stream of group-based conflicts (Abbink 2011; Turton 2006). Second, since political parties were organized along ethno-national lines, and since the flow of resources from the centre to the regions was controlled by parties, the political system was vulnerable to political entrepreneurship and rent seeking behaviour based on appeals to ethno-nationalist identity.

Until about 2012, the EPRDF managed the system through a combination of selective accommodation, repression and co-option, but the system began to break down after Meles' death, and his successor Hailemariam Desalegn did not have the political skills to manage or re-constitute it. At the local level, this resulted in the breakdown of service delivery, a slowing economy, and increased perception of corruption fueling resentment against the ruling party and the TPLF, which was (correctly or otherwise) identified as being the pre-eminent political party within EPRDF (Horn Research Facility 2022). Localized violence also increased, with huge increases in internal displacement, especially (but not only) around the border between Oromia and the Somalia Regional State, between SNNP and Oromia, and in Benishangul Gumuz (Hagmann and Abdi 2020).<sup>12</sup>

In early 2018, Amhara and Oromo elites within the EPRDF formed a tactical alliance to curb the influence of the TPLF on an internal leadership election within the EPRDF and to select Abiy for the post of Prime Minister. What followed was a process of "mutual delegitimization", with both the Federal Government and the TPLF seeking to increasingly undermine the very legitimacy of the other as a valid political actor. On coming to power, Abiy's focus was clearly on the consolidation of power and the removal of the TPLF as a threat to his position.

He notably referred to the TPLF as 'daylight hyenas',<sup>13</sup> while alleging corruption and criminality on part of the EPRDF. Rhetorically, growing instability across the country began to be blamed on the "hidden hand" of the TPLF, while a concerted campaign was undertaken to remove those associated with (or perceived to be associated with) the TPLF from positions of authority. In short, measures intended to reify the division between the 'people' and the 'Tigrayan elite' – with Abiy squarely on the side of, and ostensibly channelling the voice of the people. For their part, the TPLF withdrew to within Tigray's borders, increasingly "othering" the Federal Government and refusing to recognise their legitimacy within the Ethiopian constitutional system. This approach became increasingly formalised politically, as the TPLF opted out of the creation of the Prosperity Party in 2019 (which replaced the EPRDF), and conducted elections in Tigray in 2020, further inflaming tensions. At this juncture, and without going into the historic causes of this mutual escalation in greater detail, it is useful to consider the role played by the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement, which was signed only a few months after Abiy took power, a point at which the path to conciliation between Abiy and the TPLF was still, theoretically open.

## The Ethiopia-Eritrea 'peace' deal

The bare facts are as follows. Abiy signalled his intention to repair relations with Eritrea in his inaugural speech in April 2018. This was welcomed by many Ethiopians, and perhaps more importantly, by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who were keen to support the rapprochement (Mosley 2020). The Saudis and the Emiratis had already grown closer to the president of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki, especially after 2015, when Eritrea made the Assab port available to the Emirati military for operations related to the war in Yemen (Vertin 2019).<sup>14</sup> The EPRDF had also been weary of what it believed to be the destabilizing effect of Gulf money in the HoA (de Waal 2018, 8); Abiy's elevation provided them with an opportunity to increase their influence in Ethiopia. The peace agreement, if it can be called that, was signed in Jeddah in September 2018, and *its substance was never made public* (de Waal 2021b). Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his peace-making efforts. Isaias Afewerki was conspicuously not given the award though he was mentioned indirectly in the Nobel Committee announcement (Tesfagiorgis 2019).

The peace agreement served three strategic purposes within Ethiopia. First, the agreement signalled to the TPLF leadership that issues of existential concern to it were being ignored, and that the space for negotiation (if it had existed at all) was shrinking. Second, Abiy portrayed the agreement as a victory for the authentic will of the 'people' over the 'elite' who had been holding peace hostage. Third, and although this cannot be asserted with certainty, the agreement seems to have laid the foundation for a military understanding or pact against the TPLF – as evidenced by the intervention by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) against the TPLF when war finally broke out in November 2020. The peace agreement itself amounted to little. After an initial flurry of goodwill meetings, by April 2019 border crossings had again been closed, and progress had stalled (Stigant and Phelan 2019).

The peace agreement also had second order impacts. As Jason Mosley has pointed out: '[f]or Ethiopia, the embrace of Saudi Arabia and the UAE produced some quick financial support to (temporarily) alleviate foreign exchange pressure amid economic disruption and tepid export performance. For Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's embrace (as well as Ethiopia's new stance) provided an avenue to the elimination in 2018 of the UN Security Council's sanctions regime, first initiated in 2009' (Mosley 2020). Finally, international recognition in the form of the Nobel prize appears to have emboldened Abiy. He guessed, rightly as it turns out, that it gave him greater leeway to re-organize Ethiopian politics. At the end of 2019, he dissolved the EPRDF and created the 'Prosperity Party' (PP). In the words of a senior Ethiopian academic – the PP was 'not really a party in the true sense of the term'. It was akin to 'a loose coalition' organized around the person of the Prime Minister and held together by the common antipathy towards the TPLF.<sup>15</sup>

## The Tigray War

Much has been written about the war in Tigray – about why it began, the horrific manner in which it was prosecuted, and the failure (or unwillingness) of the international community and regional institutions to uphold international norms around the laws of war, humanitarian access, and most egregiously, the prohibitions against the use of starvation as a weapon of war (as articulated in Resolution 2417 of the UN Security Council).<sup>16</sup> Instead, in the context of this paper, this section points to two foreign policy tactics used by the Ethiopian state to resist calls to end conflict. The first was the instrumental use of the expressions 'decolonization' and 'self-determination' to try and nullify western criticism of the war. As Táíwò points out, rulers in the 'global South' routinely turn the narrative and discourse of decolonization to their own purposes – blaming artefacts and institutions emerging from modernity solely on the process of colonization (Táíwò 2022). In Ethiopia's case, the charge of neo-colonialism becomes even more complex, given its violent history of state formation. The second was the manner in which the Federal Government agreed to international proposals in the secret negotiations leading up to the Pretoria Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, and then reneged on them multiple times. In each case, the actions of the Ethiopian state (as centred on the person of the Prime Minister) were designed to maintain the greatest possible autonomy for domestic action.

This is arguably also visible in the peace agreement signed in November 2022 in Pretoria, between the Federal Government and the leadership of the Tigray region, which ended active hostilities. The Pretoria Agreement, as augmented by the Nairobi Declaration three weeks later, is an ungainly truce with the key political issues unresolved. At the time, the key question was – would the signing of the Pretoria Agreement nullify the implicit (or at least, invisible) agreement between Isaias and Abiy on security cooperation? It may be that the Pretoria Agreement has facilitated the creation of a new political coalition within Ethiopia – between the Oromo and the Tigrayan groups, reducing the political importance of the Amhara who were beginning to threaten Abiy's power (Tesfaye 2023). It can also be characterised as a form of 'payroll peace'<sup>17</sup> or more appropriately, 'ration-book peace', in that federal and Tigrayan authorities are alleged to have diverted humanitarian deliveries to military units, with private grain and flour traders also benefiting (Anyadike 2023).



## A de-institutionalized approach to foreign affairs

If there is a single thread that runs through Ethiopia's (domestic politics and) regional foreign policy after 2018, it is the progressive de-institutionalisation of governance. It is not surprising, then, that Abiy has also demonstrated a distrust of regional institutions, except when the AU has acquiesced to his agenda. The African Union played no role in the détente between Ethiopia and Eritrea (de Waal 2021b). IGAD also ceased to play a meaningful role in peace-making efforts in the HoA – for two key reasons (other than its historic institutional weaknesses). First, in September 2018, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia announced a parallel forum, known as the Tripartite Agreement, under which they agreed to cooperate and "build close political, economic, social, cultural and security ties", to "promote regional peace and security", and to establish a Joint High-Level Committee to coordinate the implementation.<sup>18</sup> After a few rounds of meetings yielded little by way of concrete statements on norms, policies, or programs, suspicions increased that the alliance was a way of side-stepping IGAD, and was being tactically utilised by all the leaders, but especially Somali president Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo' as a way of improving his chances of re-election through Ethiopian and Eritrean support (Rift Valley Institute 2022). While these efforts failed, there continue to be allegations that Somalia committed trainee troops to the Tigrayan conflict on the Eritrean side.<sup>19</sup>

Second, and as mentioned above, Ethiopia had dominated the functioning of IGAD by holding the position of chair until 2019. This arguably weakened IGAD as an institution even as it played a key role in regional peace efforts (Rift Valley Institute 2022). When Abiy appointed a close ally to the position of IGAD executive secretary in 2019, in violation of existing institutional procedures, Ethiopia had to cede the presidency, which was taken up by the then-transitional government in Sudan. Occupied by internal crises, Sudan had little ability to play Ethiopia's historic (if problematic) role in IGAD. Matters worsened when Sudan and Ethiopia's relationship took a turn for the worse over the GERD and conflict in the al-Fashaga region.

The escalation of the border conflict over the Fashaga region has a long history, which cannot be dealt with adequately in this paper. The schematic version is as follows. According to international treaties agreed in 1902 and 1907, the land technically belongs to Sudan, but Ethiopians had settled in the area and were cultivating there and paying their taxes to Ethiopian authorities (International Crisis Group 2021). A 2008 compromise sought to maintain the status quo - Ethiopia acknowledged the legal boundary but Sudan permitted the Ethiopians to continue living there undisturbed (de Waal 2021a). EPRDF's strategic goal had been keep Sudan as an ally (especially as a counterpoint to Egypt), so they were relatively accommodating on this issue. However, the agreement was never properly domesticated in Ethiopia — neither publicized nor fully explained. This illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of the EPRDF policy-making – it could be both strategic and undemocratic at the same time.

In mid-December 2020, with Ethiopia distracted by the war in Tigray, and after some provocation from the Ethiopian (Amhara) side, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) took control of the region, sparking a response from Ethiopia – with Amhara militia and security forces occupying the land. The SAF may have been motivated by multiple reasons: <sup>20</sup> they may have sought to change facts on the ground and wanted to position themselves as the defender of the nation's sovereignty, even as they were wary of Abiy's alliance with Isaias in Eritrea. At the same time, they may have seen a chance to retaliate against Abiy for his perceived meddling in the Sudanese transition. Whatever the reason, when this occurred, Abiy was compelled to act in support of the Amhara who were his primary political constituency within Ethiopia at the time (having alienated the Oromo). In other words, this case illustrates all the trends illustrated above – the consequences of populist peacemaking, the use of international (or internationalized) conflict to influence domestic politics, and at the same time, the role of domestic politics in compelling action in the international sphere. The consequence was a break in the institutional and strategic continuity of Ethiopia's relationship with Sudan and a closer alignment between Sudan and Egypt in the negotiations over the GERD – in effect allowing a secondary issue (a uncertain claim on a relatively inconsequential piece of territory) to overrule the country's strategic interest (Gebreluel 2023).

## Conclusion

What does Ethiopia's foreign policy after 2018 tell us about the relationship between domestic and international politics? This paper has argued that existing 'two-level game' paradigm prevalent in international affairs provides only a partial explanation for Ethiopia, and by extension, for countries which are poorly institutionalised or located in the global south. The Ethiopian case acts as a 'deviant' case study; it helps us understand the potential limitations of existing theoretical frameworks and explanatory paradigms (Lijphart 1971).

Of course, the argument in this paper is itself incomplete. There is much we do not and cannot know about the decision-making processes behind the formulation of Ethiopian foreign policy. Not without crossing the line from research into intelligence gathering. The outcomes of Abiy's foreign policy decisions were not preordained; there were clearly unintended outcomes – including the manner in which the war in Tigray unfolded -- which could not have been foreseen.

Nonetheless, we can draw some tentative conclusions – which have significant implications for analysts, policymakers, and academics. The 'two-level' game assumes that the states being analysed are relatively institutionalised, and in a position of relative equality on the global stage. This description does not fit most countries in the world, and certainly not those countries which are usually described as fragile. Instead, in countries with fragmented polities which exist in a subaltern position within the global economy, rulers seek to consolidate their position by manoeuvring on the international stage. This can be understood as a form of 'extraversion', where rulers employ 'their dependent relationship with the external world to appropriate resources and authority' (Bayart and Ellis 2000; Peiffer and Englebert 2012; Hagmann 2016). The expression 'extraversion' is not therefore used in a normative sense, but to draw attention to the subordinate position of these countries in the global system.

This argument will need to be tested in other contexts, but at the very least policymakers should begin their analyses of foreign policy changes in 'fragile' countries by looking at the ways in which these create space for domestic political manoeuvre. A key secondary conclusion is that ideas and ideology do matter – and policymakers should dig deeper into the substance of foreign policy changes. Despite all that the EPRDF got wrong, its foreign policy appears to have been geared towards delivering economic development. In Abiy's case, given the singular absence of almost any pro-poor programming, the overriding objective seems to be retention and consolidation of power.

More specifically, in the case of Ethiopia, this paper has argued that the country's foreign policy since 2018 has been marked by the personalized and de-institutionalized conduct of foreign affairs, and indeed domestic politics. The fragmented domestic political context in the country can be attributed, at least partially, to this deinstitutionalization.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The civil war is partially responsible for the economic challenges facing Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the analyses are not publicly available.

<sup>3</sup> This is almost always the case in international relations.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, both the EPRDF and the National Assembly instructed Abiy to report back to them, which he doesn't appear to have done.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, "Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy," (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Alex de Waal, "Revisiting Ethiopia's 'Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy'," *Issues Paper for Workshop on Ethiopian National Security Policy*, March 2017, Mimeo.

<sup>8</sup> de Waal notes that the intention was to have public consultations around the 2002 White Paper, but these never took place (de Waal 2018).

<sup>9</sup> All that was published was the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, 9 July 2018, available at <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2097>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ethiopian academic, March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Though it is worth noting that Abiy's intervention put him at cross-purposes with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who were closer to the military leaders (and especially General Hemedti) rather than the civil society groups who chose Abdallah Hamdok as their prime minister.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of displacement trends, see Aditya Sarkar, Alfredo Manfredini Böhm, and Fasil Mulatu, "Conflict, displacement, and livelihoods in Ethiopia: The role of social protection" in *From Productive Safety Net to Productive Jobs*, Emily Weedon eds., (Washington DC: World Bank, forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> A hyena that comes out in the daylight is considered mad and should be killed.

<sup>14</sup> AP News, "UAE dismantles Eritrea base as it pulls back after Yemen war," February 18, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-dubai-only-on-ap-united-arab-emirates-east-africa-088f41c7d54d6a397398b2a825f5e45a>.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ethiopian thinktank analyst, March 2022.

<sup>16</sup> S/RES/2417 (2018), available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/159/35/PDF/N1815935.pdf?OpenElement>. This probably reflects a generalized retreat from international norms within peacemaking. See (Howard and Stark 2018)

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the concept of 'payroll peace' see de Waal and Boswell (2020).

<sup>18</sup> "Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea," available at the University of Edinburgh Peace Agreements Database, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/2099>.

<sup>19</sup> The dramatic change in Ethiopia's policies towards Somalia may also have been a consequence of domestic political concerns in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, and the role that had been played by the brutal 'liyu' special forces controlled by former regional president Abdi Iley (an EPRDF appointee) in maintaining the buffer zone between Somalia, Somaliland, and the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia.

<sup>20</sup> Written correspondence with former Ethiopian diplomat posted in Sudan, 2023.

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