

POLICY MEMO

Eritrea's Growing Ties with China and Russia Highlight America's Inadequate Approach in East Africa

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July 2023

China and Russia have recently increased their engagement with Eritrea, a small but strategically located country in East Africa. Meanwhile, American influence in the region is amid a yearslong slide. Despite the obvious risks, the United States has failed to muster a committed response and has even taken some counterproductive measures that demonstrate a lack of strategic thinking. If these trends continue, a vital region may fall under the conclusive influence of Washington's primary geopolitical competitors.

A Long and Deepening Friendship

Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki recently made a four-day state visit to China, where he was feted with a red

carpet and a 21-gun salute.¹ This warm reception reflects his long relationship with Beijing, which predates Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. In 1967, Afewerki and others from what was then northern Ethiopia traveled to China for military training. Almost 30 years later, the same group would lead the insurgency that won Eritrean independence. Afewerki is reportedly a devotee of Mao Zedong and admires the Chinese Communist Party.² He has visited Beijing five times since 1994, and shares China's goal of reorienting the global order away from the US and the West.³

The Eritrean government's China policy reflects Afewerki's sympathies. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and

Justice (PFDJ) started participating in exchanges with the CCP years ago, and Eritrean dignitaries regularly visit Beijing.⁴ Three senior officials—Foreign Minister Osman Saleh, Head of the PFDJ’s Economic Affairs Hagos Gebrehiwet, and Presidential Adviser Yemane Gebreab—account for at least 15 total visits to China since 2010. The Sino-Eritrean relationship even survived the revelation that China sold weapons to both sides of Eritrea and Ethiopia’s vicious border war from 1998 to 2000.⁵

Beijing reciprocates Asmara’s enthusiasm. Since Eritrea’s independence, four of five Chinese foreign ministers (excluding the newly emplaced current minister) have visited the country during their tenure. Since 1997, 16 Chinese medical teams have worked in Eritrea.⁶ China is Eritrea’s largest investor, contractor, and trade partner, and Chinese companies built some of the country’s most important infrastructure.⁷ This work includes an upgrade to the primary port of Massawa and a road that links Massawa and Assab, the site of another port.

The already close relationship has grown noticeably tighter in recent years. Wang Yi, who is now China’s most important diplomat as director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission, visited Asmara twice in his three-year tenure as foreign minister, in 2020 and 2022.⁸ During the latest visit, the countries established a “strategic partnership,” marking the first time Eritrea has entered Beijing’s taxonomy of partner nations.⁹ Xue Bing, China’s special envoy for Horn of Africa affairs, followed up Wang’s visit in March and September of the same year.¹⁰ During both visits, Xue met with President Afewerki. In 2021, Eritrea officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative.¹¹ Trade between the two nations has surged as well.¹²

In the last 11 years, Chinese companies have bought controlling stakes in all four of Eritrea’s developed mining projects from Australian and Canadian companies. Some of these projects contain world-class deposits. Two of those

acquisitions—Zijin Mining Group’s buyout of Canada’s Nevsun Resources’ copper and zinc mine and Sichuan Road and Bridge Group’s buyout of Australian company Danakali’s potash project—happened within the last five years.¹³

Russia’s Recent Engagements

Shortly after his visit to Beijing, Afewerki jetted off to Moscow for discussions with President Vladimir Putin.¹⁴ Russia’s ties with Eritrea are much less extensive than China’s, in part because the Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse severely curtailed Russia’s Africa outreach. But like Afewerki’s visit to China, this trip to Russia is part of a broader campaign to deepen ties. **Four months before Afewerki’s Moscow trip, Sergei Lavrov made the first-ever visit to Eritrea by a Russian foreign minister.**¹⁵ Both Lavrov and Putin have urged Afewerki to attend the July Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, though it is unclear if he will do so. Eritrea was also the only African country to vote against two United Nations resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶ And Eritrea, along with China, Russia, and a rogues’ gallery of other states, founded the anti-Western Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations in 2021.

Eritrea is only about the size of Virginia, with a population of around six million people. But Asmara punches above its weight in geopolitical significance because of where it sits. It has nearly 1,400 miles of Red Sea coastline and shares a maritime border with Yemen and Saudi Arabia. It holds a commanding position on the Bab al Mandeb Strait, a global shipping chokepoint, and its islands pepper the Red Sea approach to the strait. Assab is closer than any other port to the heart of the Bab, and much of Eritrea may be mineral rich.

The Implications for the US

Alarm bells should be ringing in the Pentagon and State Department. If China develops a base—or possibly even dual-use infrastructure—in Assab or Massawa to complement its base in neighboring Djibouti, it would be able to blockade

the Bab al Mandeb Strait. If a confrontation with China were to occur, such a closure would force America's Sixth Fleet to waste precious days steaming from the Mediterranean Sea around the southern tip of Africa to get to the Indian or Pacific Oceans. Beijing could also cut off access to the Port of Djibouti, which is critical for the operations of the nearby US military base, and which is used by five of the Department of Defense's eleven combatant commands.¹⁷

Eritrea has recently begun to grant basing rights to foreign powers. The United Arab Emirates—another country rapidly deepening ties with China and Russia—operated a military base at Assab for years as part of its Yemen operations, and made improvements to the airstrip there. Several years ago, the UAE began dismantling parts of the base. However, it is unclear whether it fully withdrew or still maintains a presence there, particularly as the original lease was for 30 years.¹⁸

Russia also wants a base in the region to bolster its ability to project power into the Red Sea with the potential to cause problems for the US. In 2018, Moscow signed an agreement with Asmara to establish a logistics base, but nothing appears to have come of it.¹⁹ However, Lavrov may have revisited the topic in his January visit to Asmara, and there are rumors that the Wagner Group already has an undefined presence in Eritrea.²⁰ (Notwithstanding the recent Moscow-Wagner split, Wagner's Africa operations are of such value to Moscow that they are likely to continue in some form.) Moscow also tried to secure its own base in Djibouti but was rebuffed, and has long pressed the Sudanese government for basing rights in Port Sudan on the Red Sea.²¹

Eritrea's increased closeness with two of Washington's primary competitors comes amid years of decline in American influence in the Horn of Africa. Eritrea's eastern neighbor is Djibouti, which hosts an American military base. As of 2017, Djibouti also hosts China's first overseas military base, a

hardened encampment with a pier large enough to support a Chinese aircraft carrier and nuclear submarines.²² Chinese companies have built or begun managing two of the Djibouti seaport's four commercial terminals and have constructed much of the country's recent infrastructure, which contributes to Djibouti's heavy Chinese debt load.

To Djibouti's east sits Somalia, which is wracked by conflict and corruption despite the billions of dollars that the US and others have showered on Mogadishu for a decade. Its foreign minister, Abshir Omar Jama, recently visited Moscow for talks with Lavrov.²³ They reportedly discussed military cooperation, raising the specter of Wagner mercenaries being stationed in Somalia.

To Eritrea's west lies Sudan, which has over 500 miles of Red Sea coastline. Civil war broke out there in April, derailing years of American efforts to help cement a civilian-led government.²⁴ Meanwhile, Russia has a strong presence in the country, primarily through Wagner.

America's Non-Response

The US faces the increasing likelihood that thousands of miles of Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean coastline will become progressively more inhospitable. Two of the three countries—Eritrea and Djibouti—that command the Bab al Mandeb Strait could fall irretrievably into the Chinese camp. Yet Washington's response has been either apathetic or ineffective. In Sudan, the US spends most of its diplomatic energy supporting doomed ceasefires. And despite years of warnings from senior US military officers, Washington has failed to halt or even impede China's growing influence in Djibouti.²⁵

Meanwhile, the US has allowed one of its most promising relationship in the whole region to cool.²⁶ Washington has slowed its engagement with pro-American Somaliland,²⁷ with its recently renovated Berbera seaport and airport, over delayed elections and a territorial dispute in its east.



Those concerns are legitimate. However, the US is losing out in an important part of the world, and tightening relations with Somaliland is one way to ameliorate that problem.²⁸ Washington should not let concerns about Somaliland's delayed elections or violence in the east, which are ancillary to American interests, derail its pursuit of core interests.

Eritrea's increasingly close relations with Beijing and Moscow likely mean that the situation in the Horn of Africa will soon get even worse for Washington. The warning signs are obvious. But whether Washington is paying sufficient attention—or has a workable plan for addressing the problem—is much less clear.

Endnotes

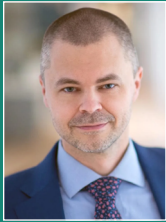
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