Regional power and contested hierarchy: Ethiopia, an 'imperfect hegemon' in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

Ethiopian foreign policy is based on ambitious domestic objectives, including aiming to become a middle-income country by 2025. Economic interdependence and integration are portrayed as the methods necessary to stabilize the region and fulfil those objectives. Why, then, is Ethiopian power challenged by regional actors when it claims to be acting as a security provider? This article interrogates the nature of one of Africa's powerful states in a region of conflict and examines the idea of hegemony. It proposes that Ethiopia sees itself as the regional hegemon while acting differently, and we analyse this notion by focusing on the concepts of hegemony. We conclude that Ethiopia is an imperfect hegemon, espousing a foreign policy characterized by a relationship of dominance over and assumption of allegiance from its neighbours, which could paradoxically lead to destabilizing policies. This policy was given momentum by former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and must now be studied in a new light in the absence of this charismatic leader.

Ethiopia emerged on the international and regional stages under the premiership of Meles Zenawi (1995–2012), in a national context marked by economic growth, major infrastructural projects, a presence in international forums and a commitment

to peacekeeping operations. Ethiopia stood out as the regional power, a position it claimed on the basis of its territorial size, its geographic location, its thousand-year history and its large population (100 million). In 2002, in the aftermath of the costly conflict against Eritrea, the Ethiopian government under Meles's leadership drew up a new foreign policy doctrine. Taking for granted its status as a hub of stability in the context of the 'war on terror', and with the Tigrayan party shaken by internal dissent, Ethiopia promulgated what was in effect its own Monroe Doctrine in the region, identifying development, and the stable environment it requires, as a primary goal. Since then, the region has been a matter of fundamental national interest for the Ethiopian state, and its foreign policy discourse has asserted the primacy of stabilizing the area. Ethiopian interventions in Somalia, Eritrea and even South Sudan have contributed to the perception of its role in policing the region.[1] Verhoeven summarizes the position thus: 'The contemporary pursuit of a "Great Ethiopia" is pursued in terms of a benign regional hegemony: "What is good for Ethiopia is good for the Horn of Africa."'[2] It is important to question this claim and its regional impact.

Ethiopia is an important case-study in International Relations (IR). First, it is a rising power in a conflict-ridden region, presenting itself as a 'benevolent hegemon'—although frequently perceived differently by its neighbours. Second, some argue that IR is about the politics of powerful states and that, as a consequence, there is a deficit of attention to Africa which explains IR's inability to adequately address African experiences. Indeed, Africa has often been neglected by the different theoretical approaches in IR, and more generally by the discipline itself. Christopher Clapham's famous work, *Africa and the international system* (1996), laid the foundations for a comprehensive discipline and analysis of African IR, and

was followed by a body of other writing.[3] But IR is still a western-centred discipline. International standards are disseminated from the centre to the peripheral areas. Contributions of the global South are still under-studied. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, this article interrogates the nature of one of Africa's powerful states in a region of conflict and examines the idea of hegemony.

Ethiopia has built an identity as security provider in its area. However, its actual achievements in this field are rather disappointing, prompting Ethiopia's neighbours to query the legitimacy of the hierarchy it has established. The regional security situation today is practically the same as it was 15 years ago: Somalia remains in crisis; Somaliland is in a state of precarious stability; Sudan and South Sudan, while distinct entities, are still in conflict; and Eritrea remains isolated. In this context, why is the Ethiopian power challenged by regional actors while it claims to be acting as a security provider? My argument is that Ethiopia's government believes itself to be a hegemon but acts differently. Its own 'Monroe Doctrine' in the Horn of Africa—its regional vision—helps us to challenge the hegemon concept. We could, indeed, label Ethiopia as 'an imperfect hegemon', in that the regional policy pursued by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—the coalition in power in Ethiopia since 1991—intended as benevolent but sometimes destabilizing in practice, is failing.

In what follows, I will first examine the hegemonic concept. In the next section I will show that Ethiopia is an imperfect hegemon, espousing a foreign policy characterized by a relationship of dominance over and assumption of allegiance from its neighbours, which could paradoxically lead to destabilizing policies. The last section analyses the particular character of the hegemonic EPRDF project in the region.

As well as referring to the classical literature, I have—despite a penchant for secrecy in the conduct of Ethiopian foreign policy—gathered data revealing the discourses and practices of state elites, mostly in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Eritrea, between 2009 and 2017, through interviews with local researchers and local elites affected by Ethiopia's external actions. I have also drawn on publicly available documents and secondary sources.

Hegemony in the literature

As the focus of this article is on hegemony, we may bypass the debate on the reasons behind power and will and concentrate on the qualities an actor needs to become a hegemon and the conditions within the regional system conducive to the establishment of hegemony.

The concept of hegemony is used to explain regional relations between big and small states and allows these relations to be described in terms of a hierarchical system, notably where one actor speaks of its 'responsibility' as the most powerful state regionally and is called upon by external actors to stabilize its own 'back yard'. For many years, a number of IR scholars with a range of theoretical perspectives have worked on promoting hierarchy as a structural concept in IR, in opposition to the traditional notion of anarchy.[4] One of the contradictions of the international system is that it is normatively egalitarian but empirically hierarchical.[5] The degree to which the established hierarchy is accepted defines the extent of its hegemony. But the concept is still contested and fragmented. There is no consensus on what a hegemon is, what the conditions for the emergence of a hegemon and the reasons for its continuance in that position are, or what the consequences of this hegemony are for the global or regional system. Generally, hegemony characterizes the actor holding the most power.[6] Hegemony is

defined by the way power is exercised. Much of the scholarly work in IR focuses on US hegemony, where the debate is dominated by consideration of whether US hegemony will continue or is in fact declining and will end at some point. But it is imperative also to study hegemony below the systemic level, and to understand the region—for example, the Horn of Africa—as a 'mini international system'. The hierarchy of states does not exist only in the global international system.

According to realism, and particularly neo-realism, hegemony is the ultimate possible achievement of actors building a unipolar international system.[7] But unipolarity is never stable, because other actors will seek to balance against the hegemon. Hegemonic dominance is associated with certain costs, and the perception of threat will eventually result in power balancing. If no fear is sensed by other actors, no balancing will take place.

According to neo-liberalism, the aim of international actors is the maximization of economic power rather than military force. Economic resources are stronger. The hegemon has to persuade others to adhere to its vision of world order and to submit to its leadership. The hegemon offers other partners leadership in return for submission but it cannot enforce rule (as an imperial power) and needs consent from other sovereign actors. The hegemon invests resources in institutions to make sure that its rules will guide the behaviour of others. Hegemons need cooperation.[8]

Finally, according to neo-Gramscian theories, hegemony is expressed through universal norms, institutions and mechanisms, which are established through three types of structures—social, economic and political. For instance, the United States internationalized its 'liberal ideology' which became mainstream and widely spread across the globe.

The corresponding factors influencing the hegemonic system in these three models are, respectively, coercion (through military power) in the neo-realist theory; consent through economic dominance for neo-liberalists; and social, economic and political structures according to neo-Gramscians. In all three models, a hegemon must first have substantial relative power when compared with other actors; second, a hegemon must be willing and able to establish rules or policies in the international political arena; and third, a hegemon must be accepted by others.

Consent plays a crucial role in the successful exercise of hegemonic power, and distinguishes it from imperialism. Robert Gilpin mentions the self-centred nature of the hegemon,[9] but denies any predatory role, which would correspond rather to the notion of imperialism. He agrees with Robert Keohane, who distinguishes the two concepts as follows: 'Unlike an imperial power, a hegemon cannot make and enforce rules without a certain degree of consent from other sovereign states.'[10] Consent from dominated states therefore lies at the core of this distinction. Is this a stable order? Hierarchical stability depends on the degree of satisfaction of the dominated states, and should be seen as legitimate. In the current international system, legitimacy is considered essential. For Gilpin: 'The lesser states in an international system follow the leadership of more powerful states, partly because they accept the legitimacy and utility of the existing order.'[11] This legitimacy is seen as the acceptance of one actor that another actor can justifiably behave as it does. Legitimacy is therefore a powerful tool for stabilization. Power must be justified sooner or later, without imposing oneself. According to this theory, Ethiopia is an imperfect hegemon.

This legitimacy results from an ever-fluid process by which an actor tries to 'naturalize' the political order. It is therefore

subjective and relational.[12] The decline of American hegemony or the existence of Chinese claims in south-east Asia shows the shift from hegemonic ambition to the way in which acts are perceived. Ethiopia's external action cannot be called hegemonic, despite its willingness to be seen as such, for the simple reason that it is not in a position of supremacy that enables it to produce and enforce respect for the key rules of the international (regional) system. Critics of Ethiopia's 'hegemonic policy' are therefore using the word incorrectly. Their choice of terms reflects a persistent suspicion of imperialist behaviour, as Ethiopia did have an imperialist history and this remains etched in the collective memory. The Eritrean government, and even the Al-Shabaab group in Somalia, describe Ethiopia's policies using the term 'hegemon'. For example, the website of the Eritrean ministry of information (Shabait) uses expressions such as 'Ethiopian hegemony'.[13] Such language is targeted at Ethiopia's perceived imperialism, seen as the extension of the country's twentieth-century imperial power.

The perception of Ethiopia's Christian heritage by its neighbours also prevents the country from rising to a position of hegemon in the region. This was confirmed during interviews in Djibouti—which, as a Muslim state and a member of the Arab League, believes itself to be more entitled than Ethiopia to negotiate with Somalia. As an example, when Djibouti agreed to send a battalion (then two) to Somalia (in the Hiran province)—although it had previously declared its opposition to intervention by neighbouring countries —it justified its initiative by reference to the need to 'monitor the actions of Ethiopia in Somalia'.[14] Furthermore, in 2015 a Djiboutian colonel criticized Ethiopian behaviour in Hiran province and the presence of troops with no mandate. He added: 'I want to make it clear that Ethiopian army units that recently

withdrew from Halgan settlement do not belong to Amisom [the African Union Mission in Somalia].'[15]

Theory applied to the Ethiopian case: an 'imperfect hegemon'

The EPRDF seeks to create for itself an image as a 'regional benevolent hegemon'; but if Ethiopia has the realist attributes of a hegemon, it lacks the liberal and neo-Gramscian attributes,[16] and thus could be defined as an 'imperfect hegemon'.

The Ethiopian hegemon from a realist perspective

Several authors have highlighted the hegemonic role that Ethiopia may have played in the past, or continues to play now.[17] Some analysts, such as the journalist Elio Comarin, take the view that Ethiopia wishes 'to play hegemon of one of the planet's poorest regions'.[18] Ethiopia is the most densely populated landlocked country in the world, and the instability of its environment could help it to adopt a hegemonic policy in the region, as Sally Healy points out: 'This vulnerability inevitably impacts on Ethiopia's foreign policy, encouraging hegemonic conduct in the region.'[19] In April 2015, Harry Verhoeven wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that Ethiopia could be a future African hegemon.[20] Fifteen years earlier, Jeffrey Herbst suggested that there would be four African countries likely to act as hegemons: Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).[21] Nonetheless, he added that Ethiopia was too poor and too internally divided to be able to truly exercise the role of regional hegemon.[22]

Since the turn of the century, however, Ethiopia has seen great changes, among which analysts have focused on realist attributes and material preponderance.

Economically, we observe what might be called Ethiopia's 'great leap forward', characterized by the double-digit economic growth repeatedly proclaimed by the government since 2005. Even if the figures may have been exaggerated, Ethiopia still boasts one of the most dynamic economic growth rates on the continent. The country's economic resurgence is a result of the EPRDF's state-building project, and establishes hegemonic control over the region's political economy.[23]

Demographically, Ethiopia is the second most populous state in Africa after Nigeria. Its almost 100 million inhabitants represent nearly 40 per cent of the population of the Greater Horn and 85 per cent of that of the Horn itself.[24] Its population quadrupled in the second half of the twentieth century and the current figure is forecast to double by 2060.

In terms of military power, Ethiopia has the third largest force on the African continent. Its capabilities range from conventional warfare through counter-insurgency to peacekeeping operations (PKOs). PKOs are an essential component of Ethiopian foreign policy. According to the realist IR approach, the main objective of actors in the international system is to accumulate power. For John Mearsheimer, the ultimate objective is the quest for a position of hegemon.[25] From this perspective, PKOs are a tool in the service of power politics. Scott Firsing identified a number of factors that help to explain the participation of African states in PKOs, among which the following apply in the case of Ethiopia: international pressure; the desire for international and regional status and influence; the desire for prestige and influence within the United Nations system; national security; political gain; economic profit; and the modernization or growth of the armed forces.[26] The country began to take part in UN operations in the mid-twentieth century, sending troops to Korea in 1951 and to the DRC in 1959, but ceased to do so for a long time under

Mengistu's regime. Since 2004 Ethiopia has contributed significantly to PKOs (2,530 troops in 2004), a commitment that reached a peak between 2011 and 2012 (3,490–6,090 troops). Given the challenges the country faces in domestic politics and the economy, how can such an effort be justified?

PKOs are a way to cultivate an image as a 'security provider' and become recognized as such by international powers and the UN system.[27] The Ethiopian government itself claims to have solid experience in peacekeeping and a regional and global commitment to security that it is prepared to increase 'at the request of the international community' in the years ahead.[28] In June 2016, Ethiopia became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. PKOs also enable Ethiopia to protect its emerging economic development and preserve an image of a safe destination for foreign investment. The direct or indirect role played by the economy justifies the description of the EPRDF's external actions as 'gunboat diplomacy'. Ethiopia's ambitions do not appear to be limited to its regional environment; in 2010 the government decided to open the Ethiopian International Peacekeeping Training Center (EIPKTC), established by the ministries of defence, development and economic affairs and the UN Development Programme. This centre is intended to become a hub of international excellence for the training of Ethiopian officers and experts, alongside a minimum of 15–20 per cent of foreign students, representing significant competition for Kenya's International Peace Support Training Centre. Moreover, the presence of a French adviser at command level, the provision of classrooms to teach French and the request for French support indicate a desire to deploy peacekeeping forces beyond the region.[29] From a realist perspective, these actions give the impression that Ethiopia is pursuing a strictly national agenda. It wants to play a part in interventions because it fears the risks

of contagion of regional instability at home. According to a liberal, institutionalist approach, every country can benefit from the interaction, and the absolute gain is greater than the relative gain. These interventions foster bilateral relations and have positive political and economic effects. The two theories help explain the role played by Ethiopia in Sudan, for example, where 8,369 troops were deployed in January 2018.

Some inconsistency is apparent in Ethiopia's application of standards, both at home and internationally. While the EPRDF is dedicated to building an identity as the guardian of regional security, the legitimacy of its claim to that role is debatable at the regional level, and indeed remains to some extent contested by its neighbours. According to Bereketeab: 'Advertently or inadvertently, Ethiopia is sabotaging its capacity for hegemonic stature by its aggressive inclinations toward its neighbors […] Coercive means of seeking hegemony betray the very essence of moral authority of hegemony.'[30]

The Ethiopian hegemon from a liberal and neo-Gramscian perspective

Hegemony is positional and relational. Material preponderance is a precondition of hegemony, but there is no hegemony without the consent of others. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi understood that shaping an identity as the keeper of regional order is a way of claiming a certain level of legitimacy, and thereby justifying its actions both within and beyond its borders. Thomas Ward stresses that states consider legitimacy not as an end, but as a means.[31] In this section of the article, I analyse resistance inside Ethiopia and how the EPRDF's efforts to influence international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) are perceived by neighbours as attempts to create a 'Trojan horse' for Ethiopian interests.

Neo-Gramscian and neo-liberalist theories agree on one point: international hegemony is based on national hegemony established by a social class. The line between domestic and foreign policy is indistinguishable.[32] Ethiopian activism on the international and regional stages must be analysed in relation to the situation within the country, because, as Thomas Ward explains, 'the concern shown by a country to respect the rules of international legitimacy was in response to the desire to escape the negative consequences of illegitimate behaviour'.[33]

Four events could have marginalized Ethiopia on the international stage. The first took place in late 2001 after Meles Zenawi refused to invade Eritrea. A purge within the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) provides evidence of the autocratic style of power, entirely centred on Meles Zenawi. Democracy became a secondary goal.[34] The developmental state established by the Prime Minister was nothing but a means of legitimizing his authority.[35]

The second event took place in 2003, when Ethiopia's refusal to respect the decision of the arbitrating committee in the border dispute with Eritrea could have led to severe sanctions.[36] However, Ethiopia's claim to legitimacy gained support in the face of blunders and provocations on the part of the Eritrean government, which refused to cooperate with the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea.[37] In 2012, the Ethiopian government carried out incursions into Eritrean territory without any real condemnation from either the AU or the UN.

Third, around 2005 the coalition in power in Addis Ababa, feeling itself threatened by the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD),[38] suspended the democratic process, with violent repression and widespread arrests.[39] The results of the election thus revealed the failure of the government's policies in the eyes of the international community. Fourth,

Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in 2006 in fact helped to strengthen Meles's authority in this context of internal turmoil, and the country asserted itself as a key actor in the region, imposing its diplomacy without international mandate.[40] Its support for the 'war on terror' opened up domestic opportunities and the adoption of a counterterrorist law helped diminish internal sources of opposition and destabilization. This manoeuvre was a success. The elections of 2010 were perfectly controlled and the EPRDF achieved a landslide victory, the opposition gaining only a single seat in the lower house of the parliament. The party then won all seats in the upper chamber in 2015.

The same policies seem to have been sustained under Meles Zenawi's successor, Hailémariam Dessalegn. However, despite Ethiopian involvement in and containment of conflict in Somalia and South Sudan—all three of the main operations in Sudan (United Nations Mission in South Sudan, United Nations–African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur and United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei) having been launched during Meles's premiership—the EPRDF regime has not been successful at resolving it. Historical grievances against Ethiopia are deep. Neighbours see its international engagement as a cover to justify the pursuit of its self-interested national foreign and security objectives. They contest its capacity to be a neutral mediator. Ethiopia remains the prisoner of history and its international allies.

Woldemariam shows the centrality of the diplomatic backing Ethiopia has received from Great Powers such as the United States to the pursuit of its regional objectives, particularly within international institutions.[41] After the Second World War, Ethiopia was the regional power by default (Sudan and Somalia not being independent states). Ethiopia is one of only three African founding member states of the UN, alongside Egypt

and South Africa, and was the largest recipient of US assistance in Africa between 1953 and 1976 in the midst of the Cold War. During this period, Emperor Haile Selassie expressed his territorial claims on European-administered territories of the Horn—claims that would be pursued via the UN. The General Assembly adopted Resolution 390 in 1950, linking Eritrea to Ethiopia in a federal union. This decision gave the Eritreans a special status as 'a recognized people, rights holder, but not subject of law', yet it did not grant them independence. Ethiopians gradually extended their criminal law to the Eritrean territory, removed the Eritrean flag and emblems (1952), and finally imposed the Amharic language, first in public, then in education.[42] In 1954 and in 1956, the Eritrean parliament tried to protest to the UN. Then, in 1962, when Eritrea was formally declared the fourteenth Ethiopian province, the civil war began. Similarly, when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was created in 1963, Haile Selassie used the new body to protect Ethiopia from a potential Eritrean breakaway. According to Woldemariam, 'Eritrea never made it to the OAU's agenda, in part because Ethiopian diplomats had made sure that the annexation of Eritrea occurred before a crucial meeting of the OAU in 1964 where the resolution on the inviolability of colonial boundaries was passed'.[43] During the Ethiopia–Somalia war in 1977 the OAU avoided taking sides, and analysts claimed this position was a tacit endorsement of Ethiopia's regional political power.[44]

The role played by Ethiopia in IGAD is also contested. Kenya and Uganda seem to give priority to the East African Community (EAC), leaving Ethiopia to pursue its own interests in IGAD. While the latter organization, which was created at the initiative of Djiboutian President Hassan Gouled Aptidon in the 1980s,[45] made the first (albeit unsuccessful) attempt to resolve the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, it has not

remained committed to achieving such resolution. The failure of IGAD regarding this 'no war, no peace' situation is particularly revealing of Ethiopian domination in the organization. For Bereketeab, 'any discussion that would offend Ethiopia could not be entertained within IGAD'.[46] Furthermore, regional diplomats are critical of Ethiopia's firm grip on the organization, and its use of this to legitimize its external actions, particularly in South Sudan where Hailemariam Dessalegn does not have the same authority as Meles Zenawi—authority that is needed to resolve the conflict.[47]

According to Medhane Tadesse, the EPRDF-led government 'use[s] organizations as a vehicle to pressure and isolate hostile countries'.[48] Unsurprisingly, Eritrea condemns this domination. The regime of Issayas Aferworki suspended its participation in IGAD when the organization's Council of Ministers, at a meeting in Nairobi in April 2007, published a statement highlighting Ethiopia's action in Somalia and its support for the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The statement was unanimously approved but Eritrea consequently denounced the organization, arguing that the statement was proof that IGAD was no longer neutral. According to Eritrea, IGAD is manipulated by both the United States and Ethiopia for their own interests—a conclusion it has reached owing to 'the number of recurring irresponsible resolutions that undermine regional peace and security that have been adopted under the guise of IGAD'.[49]

There is much evidence of Ethiopia's control of IGAD. A powerful symbol of this is the fact that meetings are rarely held at the organization's headquarters in Djibouti, but mainly in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. An Ethiopian has served as the chair of IGAD every year since 2008, and while IGAD is supposed to elect a new chairperson at each of its annual

summits, there has been no summit since 2008 when Ethiopia took the chair.[50]

The EPRDF project: Ethiopia must recover its lost rank and dominant status

Status is of crucial importance in relation to a state's external actions. In this section, I shall explain the process whereby the coalition in power legitimized Ethiopia's status. How did the EPRDF construct the country's identity as a hegemon in the Horn of Africa?

An introduction to EPRDF foreign policy

According to Medhane Tadesse: 'Successive Ethiopian regimes have followed a Metternichean realpolitik, carefully identifying their state security interests and resolutely pursuing them. This largely explains why Ethiopia remains a status quo power that focuses on maintaining internal peace and a balance of power in the region.'[51] The EPRDF government has followed that tradition. During the 1990s, Ethiopia was a diminished regional power and the regime, focused on internal issues, maintained good relations with its neighbours. Its regional policy was 'one of adjustment to Eritrean independence'. Indeed, Eritrea obtained its independence after the new regime in Addis Ababa was recognized. It was built on the failure of Mengistu's Marxist-Leninist political system and the commitment to recognize the results of the referendum for self-determination. Independence was declared in 1991 and formally institutionalized in 1994, after the referendum in April 1993. Ethiopian foreign policy has been shaped by its proximity to Eritrea. Until 1998, relations were good: agreements were made in 1991 and 1993 allowing the free movement of labour, the two countries used the same currency, diplomats occasionally represented each other's interests in international forums, and

so on.[52] During the civil war, the Ethiopian and Eritrean guerrillas relied upon different nationalisms, and divisions existed between the two allies on ideology, strategy and tactics; yet despite these divisions, the imperatives of war against the Derg forced the movements to cooperate. In the early 1990s, both countries rebuilt themselves, but in different ways. After 1991, the new Ethiopian regime reformed the state along ethnic lines and built a federal state, whereas Eritrea opted for a unitary state. Rising tensions reached a peak with the introduction of Eritrea's new currency in 1997 and a border conflict in 1998. The security of the Ethiopian state and the survival of the post-1991 EPRDF-led political order became a central concern of Ethiopian foreign policy,[53] whereas Eritrea's foreign policy came to be based on the belief that Ethiopia has not yet accepted its independence and that the fight must go on, both to complete the process of independence (with the demarcation of borders) and to defend the country's sovereignty. For Eritrea, the war turned into an attack on its existence as a state. Ethiopian foreign policy is always shaped by its relations with Eritrea.

Currently, however, the most direct security threat to Ethiopia comes from Somalia. In this context, the Ethiopian government has made use of the international system's resources to position itself as a key actor in the region. With the events of 11 September 2001, the Horn of Africa became, in political and 'expert' language, a 'risk area': partly because the region is home to a large number of Muslims, and is therefore seen as conducive to the recruitment of jihadists, and partly because it is situated at a crossroads between the African continent and the Middle East. Declarative speech acts along these lines suggest that the Muslim populations of Africa are a homogeneous whole, that the Islam practised there is likely to grow closer to the jihadist ideology, and—especially—that terrorist cells are already present. However, as Günter Schlee has pointed out,

'the rise of political Islam [in Somalia] is a response to the "war on terror" and therefore cannot be an element of its justification'.[54] Nevertheless, the designation and labelling by political leaders of certain threats as the source of security problems led to Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in 2006.[55] This operation enabled Ethiopia to strengthen its role as a key actor in controlling instability in the Horn of Africa.

The EPRDF adopted the dominant narrative on failed states which since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since 2001, has been used as a basis for authorizing and legitimizing international peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions.[56] The limits of presupposing a 'lack' of capacities in failed or even weak states compared to so-called strong states have already been demonstrated.[57] Social forces remain and are likely to become a powerful lever against interventions.[58] Ethiopian support for the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia, led by Abdullahi Yusuf (well known for his anti-Islamism), together with rumours of foreign intervention, radicalized the most moderate branches of the Islamic Courts Union prior to the Ethiopian intervention in December 2006. Perceived as an 'occupation', the Ethiopian intervention prompted a nationalist backlash, on which Al-Shabaab was able to capitalize. Furthermore, as Stig Jarle Hansen notes, Ethiopian military doctrine followed the old Soviet model of using artillery in urban zones, causing high numbers of civilian deaths and injuries, and therefore arousing animosity and resentment among the population.[59] Internationally, however, this intervention placed Ethiopia on the same level as other countries threatened by fundamentalist religious groups, and thereby helped to strengthen the country's international legitimacy and in particular its presence in all the major international forums. Above all, Ethiopia—which was accused by Eritrea of violating international laws in settling the border

dispute between the two states—took care to highlight the legality of the operation and therefore the importance it accorded to international standards.[60] Furthermore, Meles accused Eritrea of rejecting these same international standards, again highlighting Ethiopia's legitimacy.

The discourse on exceptionalism: an Ethiopian 'manifest destiny'?

Ethiopia's power is based on certain advantageous traits which fuel a narrative of exceptionalism in the country, embedding 'national pride and status' as the cornerstones of the state's foreign and security policies.[61] Its intangible resources also generate international influence and further buttress this exceptionalism, which is skilfully maintained by its leaders. Brantly Womack analyses the deep structure of asymmetric relations, arguing that these go beyond traditional military capacities, and underlining the roles of identity, context and leadership.[62] Each of these dimensions is used by the Ethiopian government.

These intangible resources include the founding myths of the Ethiopian nation and nationalism: for instance, the ancient House of Solomon, and more recently victory over the Italians in 1896 at the Battle of Adwa.[63] The latter is still today a source of unity against threats from outside: it institutionalized the empire's external border, as the battle was followed by the signing of treaties with the neighbouring colonial powers. This exceptionalism can also be seen in the various discourses that evoke the victorious combat of Ethiopia against colonialism, and the effort to assert Ethiopia's status as the cradle of humankind. The skeleton of 'Lucy', 3.2 million years old, rests in the National Museum of Addis Ababa. The EPRDF also takes pride in highlighting the fact that the first accounts of the country's existence as a civilization are found in the Hebrew

Bible.[64] In addition, this form of discourse on exceptionalism is supported by both political and demographic factors. Politically, the Ethiopian state is one of the oldest in Africa, in terms of geographical borders, administrative system and institutions alike. At the end of the first century of the Christian era, the Axumite state, thanks to vast trade networks and its port of Adulis on the Red Sea, emerged as the dominant political entity in the region. Although it experienced great difficulties, the state entity survived throughout succeeding dynasties, making Ethiopia a state of several thousand years' continuous existence.

A status to reclaim: development as a priority

The argument I present in this article, for the reasons mentioned above, is that Ethiopia considers itself as a state that must reclaim its fallen status and regain its dominant position in the region.[65] This project faces obstacles posed by internal issues. The primary objective of Ethiopian diplomacy is thus economic development, seen as the way to save the country from disintegration. In the Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy,[66] which may be considered as Ethiopia's 'white paper' on foreign policy and security, the government stresses the importance of economic diplomacy as the founding element of its security policy and diplomatic relations. The conditions in which the state should thrive, and those that threaten its consolidation, are constantly emphasized from the first page onwards. Words such as 'chaos', 'disintegration', 'disaster', 'destruction' and 'dismemberment' appear alongside each other. The 'vulnerability' of the country, according to this document, lies in its poverty and 'backwardness', and it sees itself therefore as a 'developmental leader'.[67] While development is the primary objective of Ethiopian foreign and security policy, the government justifies this programme by reference to the 'position' that Ethiopia must hold. Indeed, after

reiterating the exceptionalism of the Ethiopian state, founded on its resistance to colonization and its historic heritage, the government explains that this independence is threatened by poverty. In a report drawn up in 2012, the country compares the pace at which it is developing to that of China, and states its aim of becoming a middle-income country by 2025.[68] Foreign policy must therefore be guided by domestic constraints and necessities: in this case, economic development and democratization.[69] Its foreign and security policies are thus based on the 'domestic first, external second' approach,[70] as the primary weaknesses—poverty and archaism—are internal. The 'spirit of Adwa' is called on to combat the enemy that is poverty.[71] At the same time, there is a perception of the country as surrounded by enemies, which Alain Gascon calls the 'Gragn syndrome', referring to the Muslim chief who conquered highlands populated by Ethiopian Christians in the sixteenth century.[72]

The 'white paper' presents a perception of the threats that the Ethiopian government must address in order to reduce the internal and external factors conducive to destabilization. The official document conceptualizes three types of threat which may be represented as concentric circles, centred on Addis Ababa.[73] The first circle corresponds to internal threats. The second encompasses immediate neighbours that may challenge the country's territorial integrity, destabilize it or support internal armed opposition groups: 'There are rivers that connect us and have a direct bearing on our development.'[74] Ethiopia is indeed a landlocked state, and it looks towards its neighbours to overcome the constraints associated with this position. Neighbouring states can provide a direct benefit when they are equipped with ports that Ethiopia can use to fulfil its development objectives.[75] However, the neighbouring states are portrayed as bringing more trouble than assistance: 'To sum up,

the value of our neighbours—in the short and medium term—is limited to a port service: The region reaches a certain level of prosperity, the role of our neighbours, both positive and negative, on our development is limited.'[76] The third circle includes a wider group of countries, such as Egypt and the Gulf states. The Ethiopian decision to build a dam on the Blue Nile may be interpreted as a power grab and a proof of its determination, given its exclusion by Sudan and Egypt from the negotiations in 1929 and 1959. With this decision, the Ethiopian regime openly asserted its desire for power and a higher role in the hierarchy than its neighbours. The objectives the EPRDF has set will, so it believes, enable the other countries in the region to become developed. It would therefore be 'responsible' to intervene militarily in order to stabilize the environment, a necessary condition for the fulfilment of its political and economic goals.[77]

There is evidence of a 'pivot' role being constructed in Ethiopian foreign policy discourse and analysis.[78] Studying Ethiopia's foreign policy and security documents reveals the image Ethiopia wishes to project, and the foreign policy discourse is accordingly a significant construction, used by politicians to legitimize their decisions for presentation to public opinion. From a Weberian perspective, this legitimization conditions the acceptance by individuals of, and therefore their submission to, the state. In this respect, the production of discourse is envisaged as an act of power, making political action acceptable and even suppressing any possibility of protest. As such, 'it is indeed through hegemonic discourse that actors are constructed and authorized, that alternative decisions are disqualified, and that the discursive sphere of politics, in which the foreign policy elites define national goals and interests, is constructed'.[79]

Conclusion

'Why is the Horn different?' asked Christopher Clapham a few years ago.[80] Conflicts in the Horn seem to be unmanageable. The rising power of Ethiopia should offer hope for conflict resolution. Its economic project integrates almost all the countries of the region. Nevertheless the Ethiopian regime is sinking into a crisis and the party-state is trying to keep a grip on the situation by remaining true to Meles's legacy.

Various conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above. In sum, this article has sought to make an effective contribution to the literature in both Africa's international relations and IR theory. I have argued that Ethiopia benefits from an international context that is highly favourable both to the role of hegemon it intends to assume in the region and to the regime's strategy, involving the exploitation of the resources offered by the international system in order to gain international legitimacy. At the same time, however, Ethiopia remains the prisoner of history and geography.[81]

While Ethiopia does possess some of the attributes of a hegemon, its ambitions to build a region of peace favourable to its economic development have been hindered by regional resistance. Ethiopia is an imperfect hegemon. Its international legitimacy is not universally recognized in the region. Among the many articles that recounted Meles's career upon his death, some have dented his legend, criticizing his failure to bring peace to the region,[82] even raising the question of whether he was simply a warmonger.[83] Therein lies the ambiguity of the character himself and the policy he implemented—and which his successor persists in, although he seems to have much less power in the decision-making process. The government continues to construct international legitimacy and establish its authority in the region. However, the developmental state model adopted by Meles to strengthen the socio-territorial unit

and ensure internal stability is also revealing its shortcomings, as evidenced in the multiple internal disputes.

Relations with Eritrea are essential to the evolution of the regime. The war of 1998–2000 can be seen as an Ethiopian victory in the military sense, yet it is also the point of departure of the oligarchic drift of the regime and the beginning of imperial-style behaviour in the region. Illustrative of this point are the complete pivot towards the 'renaissance', as it is labelled domestically, and the publication of a white paper on foreign policy. The developmental state model launched by Meles Zenawi seems to be on its way out. In the face of rising protest and the imperative of continued economic growth, the leadership is divided and paralysed by the fragile balance of antagonistic forces that compose it.

Finally, this article has sought to show why the Ethiopian case-study is important in seeking to understand African international relations. Africa is a productive laboratory for researchers in IR and security studies. The Horn of Africa gathers together some of the most enduring interlinked political rivalries within the international system. Robert Patman describes divert of the states in the Horn of Africa, and their trajectories, as a 'political metaphor'.[84] More importantly, study of this region challenges and sometimes clarifies powerful concepts developed by the field (such as 'hegemon' and 'imperialism'). Thus the Horn of Africa is pertinent not only for area specialists, but also as a remarkable locus for fieldwork and theory testing of both old and new approaches. Here I have argued that the concept of hegemony cannot be discarded, but that it is vital to attain a better understanding of what it actually means.

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Jason Warner developed the same argument for Nigeria. See 'Nigeria and "illusory hegemony" in foreign and security policymaking: *Pax Nigeriana* and the challenges of Boko Haram', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13: 3, 1 July 2017, pp. 638–61.

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See e.g. Ruth Iyob, 'Regional hegemony: domination and resistance in the Horn of Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 31: 2, 1933, pp. 257–76.

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Ethiopia follows the same kind of trajectory as Nigeria, whose hegemony some have questioned. According to Jason Warner, Nigeria is an 'illusory hegemony' because its pursuit of regional dominance in west Africa via its grand strategy of Pax Nigeriana has been fundamentally frustrated by the presence of Boko Haram: see Warner, 'Nigeria and "illusory hegemony"'.

23

Verhoeven, 'Africa's next hegemon'.

24

The 'Horn of Africa' comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland. The 'Greater Horn' comprises the member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, i.e. these five countries plus Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda.

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John Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

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Author's interview with Major-General Hassen Ebrahim Mussa, commanding general of the EIPKTC, Addis Ababa, Feb. 2015.

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Redie Bereketeab, 'Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD): a critical analysis', in Kidane Mengisteab and Redie Bereketeab, eds, *Regional integration, identity and citizenship in the Greater Horn of Africa* (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2012), pp. 173–94.

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Thomas Ward, 'La légitimité dans les relations internationales. Dix propositions', in G. Andréani and P. Hassner, eds, *Justifier la guerre ? De l'humanitaire au contre-terrorisme* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 2005), p. 369.

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Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and interdependence: world politics in transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).
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Ward, 'La légitimité dans les relations internationales', p. 370.
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Jean-Nicolas Bach, '"Le roi est mort, vive le roi": Meles Zenawi règne, mais ne gouverne plus', *Politique Africaine* 4: 128, 2012, pp. 143–58.
35
René Lefort, 'The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi: a response to Alex de Waal', *African Affairs* 112: 448, 2013, pp. 460–70 at p. 465.
36
Following the Algiers Agreement of Dec. 2000, an independent commission (located at The Hague) was set up to assess the claims of each party. In Dec. 2001, before the deadline set by the agreement, each party submitted its claims (military operations conducted on the front, treatment of prisoners of war and civilians, violation of diplomatic immunity, etc.). The sentences were handed down in 2004. On 19 Dec. 2005, Eritrea was declared responsible for causing the conflict. The two parties accepted the decision of the commission. Eritrea, in an effort to show goodwill, accepted the international decisions, whereas Ethiopia did not respect the border decision.
37
Abiy Ahmed, who took over from Hailemariam Desalegn as Ethiopia's new prime minister in April 2018, has accelerated a radical reform programme and initiated a historic diplomatic outreach to neighbouring Eritrea.
38
The CUD won 137 seats out of 138 on the Addis Ababa city council. Along with Dire Dawa, the capital has a specific status within the federation, which is made up of nine state regions.
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Jon Abbink, 'Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath', *African Affairs* 105: 419, 2006, pp. 173–99.

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Thus began a debate on the nature of the intervention: preventive attack or legitimate defence? The Ethiopian discourse stresses that there was no imminent threat, but that an attack had already occurred: 'We're not saying we might be attacked. We're saying we've been already attacked' and 'forced to go to war'. Thereafter, although its legality was contested, the intervention was recognized by the international community as an act of legitimate defence, and support was provided, upon request, to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to combat the Islamic Courts Union. The operation officially began on 24 Dec. 2006 and was presented as an operation of legitimate defence: 'Ethiopia has the right to protect itself and take proportional measures.' Reactive legitimate defence is provided for under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which maintains an extremely restrictive definition, whereas in practice countries have afforded it a rather more expansive definition since the *Caroline* affair in 1837. Since then, legitimate preventive self-defence has been permitted in practice by states, but requires a certain degree of imminence of the attack. See 'We're not saying we might be attacked. We're saying we've been already attacked—Prime Minister', *Ethiopian Herald*, 28 Nov. 2010, pp. 3, 10; 'Forced to go to war', *Ethiopian Herald*, 26 Dec. 2012, pp. 1, 9; Awol Kassim Allo, 'Ethiopia's armed intervention in Somalia: the legality of self-defense in response to the threat of terrorism', *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 29: 1, 2010, p. 167; 'Ethiopia seeks to resolve jihadists' aggression peacefully, has inherent right to defend itself', *Ethiopian Herald*, 26 Nov. 2006, p. 1.

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Fabienne le Houerou, *Ethiopie–Erythrée: frères ennemis de la corne de l'Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), p. 49.

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Woldemariam, 'Regional powers, Great Power allies, and international institutions', p. 378.

44

Woldemariam, 'Regional powers, Great Power allies, and international institutions', p. 378.

45

The first step towards regional cooperation was taken on 5 Feb. 1985 in Djibouti, at a regional conference that was held to combat drought and desertification. The official creation of IGAD followed the regional heads of state summit in Djibouti, 15–16 Jan. 1986. See Anne-Lyse Coutin, *Coopération et intégration régionale. L'exemple de la corne de l'Afrique. L'Autorité Intergouvernementale pour le Développement (IGAD)* (Bordeaux: Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux, 2001), p. 20.

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Bereketeab, 'Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)', p. 185.

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