

[DÉCRYPTAGE]

A REGION IN DISSOLUTION: THE ETHIOPIAN CRISIS AND
THE EGYPTIAN-RUSSIAN BREAKDOWN



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Par Dylan MOTIN



LES JEUNES
IHEDN

À PROPOS DE L'ARTICLE

The recent Ethiopian civil war underlined important evolutions both at the regional and global levels. Relations between Egypt and Sudan on one side and Russia on the other reached a low point while the two African states grew closer to Washington. The venomous relations between Addis Ababa, Cairo, and Khartoum forced Moscow and Washington to pick opposite sides in the Ethiopian conflict. This bipolarization of regional politics imitates dynamics at work in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, and threatens to fragment Northeast Africa for a long time.

À PROPOS DE L'AUTEUR



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À PROPOS DE LA DÉLÉGATION

“The deterioration of Sino-American relations, the *de facto* nuclear status of North Korea and the tensions with Japan are dominant trends South Korea is facing. In that respect, the creation of a sustainable regional security architecture appears to be hypothetical in the short run. In parallel, challenges pertaining to the demographic transition and the environmental concerns are at the core of governmental policies. Through the organization of conferences, interviews, visits, workshops, and the publication of news reports and more in-depth studies, the International Delegation for South Korea wishes to question national, regional, and international challenges from an original and pertinent angle. The diverse background of its members — academic, geographic, personal and professional — assists along these lines.” Christophe K. (International Delegate).

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1) Introduction

Observers of the ongoing Ethiopian Civil War tend to approach it by the sole prism of Ethiopia's domestic politics and with a focus on the humanitarian disaster. Many have missed the underlying international trends and the new coalitions that the crisis has revealed. Relations between the West and Ethiopia soured deeply. The United States partnered with Sudan, a former adversary. Egyptian-Russian tensions over the Ethiopian crisis flared up suddenly during the summer 2021. Through this article, we accordingly attempt to answer several questions. Why did Egypt drop its equibrist foreign policy? Why did Egypt and Sudan make a total flip towards the West? How did Russia end up picking Ethiopia's side? Why did the United States turn against Ethiopia?

To understand this surprising turn of events and the positioning of the main global and regional protagonists, we need to tell several interlaced stories and look at the sequence of events starting from 2017 in Libya. In the process, we may glean some insights about where the region is going. Coincidentally, international relations theorists identify 2017 as the pivotal year when the U.S. government officially acknowledged a new era of great power competition, and thus the end of the 'unipolar moment'.¹

In order to make sense of the events, I will make a few assumptions about how international politics works. States are unitary actors that behave rationally. In order to survive in a dangerous world, they try to increase their security and maximize their power. States primarily focus on their regional environment because the most serious threats to their survival generally emerge near their borders.² Therefore, I solely focus on the strategic decisions of the actors and avoid diving into domestic political issues or historical arguments.³

¹ Trump Administration, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* 2017, White House, 68p; and MEARSHEIMER John, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order" *International Security*, 2019, Vol 43, Issue 4, p. 8. 'Unipolar moment' is from KRAUTHAMMER Charles, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, 1990, Vol 70, Issue 1, pp. 23-33.

² MEARSHEIMER John J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 2014, 592p.

³ For a thoughtful discussion of methodology, see ARON Raymond, "Thucydide et le récit des événements," *History and Theory*, 1961, Vol 1, Issue 2, pp. 103-128.

A discussion of current affairs is marred by risks because the retrospective insights of historians and scholars is unavailable. One needs to rely on press reports and is reduced to deciphering the intentions and actions of the protagonists. Despite this, it is possible to roughly evaluate the chain of events in order to find patterns. It will be the task of the future historian to confirm or deny our assertions.

2) The Rise of the Russians in Northeastern Africa

In 2017, Russian special forces made their entry into the Libyan civil war using Egyptian territory to mount operations with the aim of supporting East Libya in its war against the Tripoli government. From then on, Russian military support to East Libya constantly deepened. The Wagner Group, a private military company with no legal existence and close ties to the GRU and the Russian State,⁴ established airbases in al-Jufra in central Libya and al-Ghardabiya near Sirte and Wagner troops reached around 1,200 troops.⁵ In 2020, it climbed to between 2,000 and 3,000 troops accompanied by 14 MiG-29 fighters and Su-24 attack aircraft. Wagner troops represent the overwhelming majority of the Russian forces on the ground but a few regulars are deployed to support Wagner operations.⁶ Wagner also introduced a few hundred mercenaries in Sudan in 2017 and has since expanded its presence to Chad and the Central African Republic (CAF). More visibly, Sudan agreed during the last years of Omar al-Bashir's reign to host a Russian naval base labeled as a "logistical support point".

The main Russian interests in the Mediterranean basin and northeastern Africa are scoring points against Western powers and increasing their capability to threaten the of

⁴ RÁCZ András, "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* [en ligne], 21 September 2020 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.

⁵ ARNOLD Thomas D., "Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* [en ligne], 23 September 2020 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>; and STEWART Phil, ALI Idrees, and NOUEIHED Lin, "Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role - Sources," *Reuters* [en ligne], 14 March 2017 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

⁶ HARCHAOUI Jalel, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Ways to More Influence in Libya," *War on the Rocks* [en ligne], 7 Janvier 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>.

NATO's southern flank; the Russians likely came with no ill intent towards the Egyptians. However, Russian military presence in Syria, East Libya, and Sudan means that the two African neighbors of Egypt now have Russian contingents on their soil and represents a near 360-degree encirclement of Egypt.

3) The Egyptian Dilemma: Turkey, Russia, the United States

In January 2020, Turkey launched a military intervention to save West Libya from defeat at the hands of the Easterners. Egypt and other stakeholding powers were forced to pick between the Turks and the West Libyans on one side, and the Emiratis, Russians, and East Libyans on the other. The Egyptians and the French chose the evil they knew — Russia and the East — while the Americans remained relatively silent.

But the Russians have to play a complex game with Turkey. They hope to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO while at the same time containing Turkish ambitions in the Caucasus, Libya and Syria, where the Kremlin has plans of its own. Moscow must also tread carefully in order not to scare the Iranians and the Iraqis by building too close a relationship with Ankara. Russia's 'constraint' of Turkey⁷ asks for a delicate balancing act : containing Turkey when its interests clash with Russia's while growing the gap between Ankara and Western capitals. As Mr. Jalel HARCHAOUI adeptly summed up, *"Russia has shown a patient willingness to accept and accommodate Turkey's aspirations to become a full-blown regional power,"* and although *"Ankara and Moscow are often on opposing sides, such as in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Armenia-Azerbaijan, and other conflicts [...] Moscow makes an effort to remain pragmatic and amenable to talks because Turkey is a convenient partner for Russia to keep."*⁸

The Westerners — namely, the United States and France — are left in an unpleasant situation. They worry about both Turkey's newfound international ambitions and its

⁷ SEGAL Gerald, "East Asia and the 'Constraint' of China," *International Security*, 1966, Vol 20, Issue 4, pp. 107–135.

⁸ HARCHAOUI Jalel, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Ways to More Influence in Libya," *War on the Rocks* [en ligne], 7 Janvier 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>.

flirtation with Russia. However, they cannot risk a total breakdown of relations either. A Turkey aligned with Russia means that access to the Black Sea is lost and that Turkish borders with Bulgaria and Greece would become NATO's new south-eastern flank. At a time where the Americans are struggling to balance against China in East Asia while lacking the means to defend East-Central Europe,⁹ the last thing they want is a hostile Russian-Turkish force garrisoning Thrace.

The Russians have little interest in the political fate of Libya itself and wish to avoid a dispute with Turkey for such a secondary stake. They are content to secure their military foothold in East Libya and can live without influence over West Libya. Moscow was less than thrilled when the East Libyans started their westward offensive in April 2019 and always kept communication channels with West Libya open.¹⁰ Thus, the Russians readily accepted a freeze of the frontline in 2020, where the Turks would remain in Tripoli while themselves would keep their hard-won influence in the East.

For Egypt, not only had the coalition with the United Arab Emirates and Russia failed to expel Turkey, but the Russians were now more strongly established in Libya than ever. This new status quo thus left Egypt with the worst of both worlds: a Russo-Turkish dominion over its western neighbor. Accordingly, the Egyptians decided in mid-2020 to mend fences with the West Libyans and the Turks.¹¹ As *Al-Monitor* put it, "*Egypt, along with several European countries and the United States, advocates the immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Libya, including thousands of Syrian mercenaries brought to the country by Turkey.*"¹² Therefore, the sole partners able to allay Egyptian insecurities were to be found in the West.

⁹ BRANDS Hal and MONTGOMERY Evan Braden, "One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition," *Texas National Security Review*, 2020, Vol 3, Issue 2, pp. 80-92; and KIM Tongfi and SIMÓN Luis, "Greater Security Cooperation: US Allies in Europe and East Asia," *Parameters*, 2021, Vol 51, Issue 2, pp. 61-71.

¹⁰ WEHREY Frederic and WEISS Andrew S., *Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa*, 2021, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp. 12-13.

¹¹ MELCANGI Alessia, "Egypt Recalibrated Its Strategy in Libya Because of Turkey," *Atlantic Council* [en ligne], 1 Juin 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-recalibrated-its-strategy-in-libya-because-of-turkey/>.

¹² EMAM Amr, "Egypt Disappointed by Russian Stance on Nile Dam Dispute," *Al-Monitor* [en ligne], 16 Juillet 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-disappointed-russian-stance-nile-dam-dispute>.

4) Red Star on the Nile? Towards the Cairo-Khartoum-Washington Axis

Egyptian-U.S. relations have been good overall since after the 1978 Camp David Accords. Nevertheless, after the end of the Cold War, Cairo started to explore a more plural foreign policy and maintained friendly relations with both established and newer powers. The 2010s notably saw an intensification of Egyptian-Russian cooperation in the military sphere. But the regional turn of affairs around Egyptian borders mentioned earlier forced Cairo to seek greater coordination with Washington. The growing military cooperation between Cairo and Paris must also be understood in that background, and so is the emergence of an Egypt-France-Greece teaming up in response to Turkey's air and sea violations of the Cypriot and Greek borders.

Sudan under the al-Bashir regime leaned on China and Russia to gain support for its territorial integrity, countervail Western hostility, and maintain its military. Al-Bashir even agreed to host a Russian naval base. However, South Sudan has been independent since 2011 and al-Bashir deposed in 2019. Thus the Sudanese lost their main motivations to align with Beijing and Moscow and instead opened up to Washington. The Sudanese government was left with an agreement to establish a Russian base in Port Sudan that it did not want anymore.

It goes without saying that Washington was not thrilled by the prospect of a Russian squadron on the Red Sea. Also, Cairo could not help but be wary of Russian ships based at both entries of the Suez Canal — at Port Sudan and Tartus in Syria. Therefore, there is little doubt that both the Americans and the Egyptians pressured the Sudanese against the deal. The Port Sudan project has become a bargaining chip to extract gains by playing Moscow against Washington. However, the contestation of the deal itself shows that the Sudanese mood had already changed in favor of Washington. In December 2020, Sudan announced it would normalize relations with Israel under U.S. offices in exchange for exiting the list of states supporting terrorism. In March 2021, the United States provided Sudan with enough money to repay a World Bank loan so Khartoum could restart its

relations with international financial institutions and receive funding. In April 2021, Sudan suspended the application of the Russian base deal and vowed to renegotiate it.¹³

Although it is unsure whether the Sudanese appreciated much the French domination of the CAF, it was a known quantity. When the Russians finally managed to chase the French out of the CAF in June 2020, the Sudanese realized that they would be left with Russian Wagner troops on their soil, all along their western border (CAF, Chad, Libya), and an assertive and Russia-backed Ethiopia.

To sum up, although the Kremlin likely had no ill will toward Egypt and Sudan, the Egyptians and the Sudanese could not but see in this flurry of military and political activities more sinister intentions. The Egyptians are especially displeased by the Russian-Turkish domination of Libya while Sudan's changing interests allowed it to work with the United States. As a consequence, both Cairo and Khartoum reoriented their foreign policy in a pro-American direction and left Russia with no other major partner than Ethiopia.

5) When the Chips Are Down: The Ethiopian Crisis

The current Ethiopian crisis has four interlaced components impossible to disentangle : the war against Tigray and other insurgent groups ;¹⁴ the conflict over the Nile waters ;¹⁵ the Ethiopian-Sudanese territorial conflict ; and the power rivalry between Egypt and

¹³ SUKHANKIN Sergey, "Russian Naval Base in Sudan Stays for Now: What Happens Next?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* [en ligne], 12 Mai 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Vol 18, Issue 76, Disponible sur : <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-naval-base-in-sudan-stays-for-now-what-happens-next/>.

¹⁴ The civil war itself is born out of Ethiopian internal dynamics that I will not detail here. For an introduction, FELBAB-BROWN Vanda, "Dangerous Trends in Ethiopia: Time for Washington's Tough Love," *Brookings Institution* [en ligne], 9 Août 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/09/dangerous-trends-in-ethiopia-time-for-washingtons-tough-love/> ; and ISTRATII Romina, "On the Conflict in Tigray," *Public Orthodoxy* [en ligne], 29 Juin 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/06/29/conflict-in-tigray/> . Also, ISHIYAMA John, "Is Ethnonationalism Growing in Ethiopia and Will It Lead to the Dissolution of the Country? Evidence from the World Value Survey 2007–2020", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2021, Vol 56, Issue 5, pp. 1024–1035.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise," *International Crisis Group* [en ligne] 17 Juin 2020 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/nile-dam-talks-short-window-embrace-compromise>.

Ethiopia.¹⁶ This civil war confirmed the trends described above : the United States chose Tigray over Ethiopia while the Russians leaned on Ethiopia.

This multifaceted crisis revealed new international fault lines. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), long a worry for the water security of Egypt and Sudan, neared operational status in the first part of 2020. The United States clearly took the Egyptian-Sudanese side in February 2020 when it underlined that the GERD risks “*causing significant harm to downstream countries, final testing and filling should not take place without an agreement.*”¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the Ethiopians were displeased and criticized American partiality.¹⁸

Western powers vocally criticized the Ethiopian attack over Tigray and the United States sanctioned Ethiopia for its blockade of aid going into the rebel region. However, Washington has been mute over the Tigrayan counterattack in the Amhara region. The Ethiopians deeply resented the West’s implicit approval of the Tigrayan rebellion.¹⁹

The Sudanese naturally jumped on the occasion offered by the Ethiopian collapse in December 2020 to seize the *al-Fashaga* borderlands they long coveted. Sudan’s military is also in contact with Tigrayan leaders and is supporting Gumuz rebels operating in the vicinity of the GERD with the obvious hope of derailing the operation of the dam.²⁰

¹⁶ DENTICE Giuseppe and CORDA Tiziana, “Power Rivalry in the Horn: Egypt’s View of Ethiopia’s Tigrayan Woes,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies* [en ligne] , 15 Décembre 2020 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/power-rivalry-horn-egypts-view-ethiopias-tigrayan-woes-28613>.

¹⁷ MNUCHIN Steven T., “Statement by the Secretary of the Treasury on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury* [en ligne], 28 Février 2020 [consulté le 03/1/2021], Disponible sur : <https://home.treasury.gov/news/secretary-statements-remarks/statement-by-the-secretary-of-the-treasury-on-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam>.

¹⁸ Africanews, “Ethiopia Accuses U.S. of Favouring Egypt in Nile Dam Talks”, *Africanews* [en ligne] 4 Mars 2020 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.africanews.com/2020/03/04/ethiopia-accuses-us-of-favouring-egypt-in-nile-dam-talks>.

¹⁹ Deutsche Welle, “Ethiopia: Rallies Denounce ‘Western Intervention’ Over Tigray,”, *Deutsche Welle* [en ligne], 30 Mai 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-rallies-denounce-western-intervention-over-tigray/a-57720578> ; GIRMA Mohammed, “As Ethiopia and Tigray Face Tough Options, the West Needs to Be Even-Handed,” *Conversation* [en ligne], 21 Juillet 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://theconversation.com/as-ethiopia-and-tigray-face-tough-options-the-west-needs-to-be-even-handed-164714>; and NPR, “U.S. Sanctions Eritrean Military Leader Over Human Rights Abuses in Ethiopia War,”, *NPR* [en ligne], 23 Août 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/23/1030344084/u-s-sanctions-eritrean-military-leader-over-human-rights-abuses-in-ethiopia-war>.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, “Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute,”, *International Crisis Group* [en ligne], 24 Juin 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b173-containing-volatile-sudan-ethiopia-border-dispute>.

Meanwhile, Egypt reinforced its military cooperation with Sudan and staged joint maneuvers there. The United States remained silent too about Sudanese military endeavors while pushing on with the normalization of its relations with Khartoum ; silence implies consent.

Egyptian-Russian tensions finally came out in public during the summer 2021. Egypt participated in late June–early July with NATO's *Sea Breeze 2021* naval exercise in the Black Sea, on Russia's doorstep.²¹ A few days later on July 8, Russia openly angered Egypt during a UN Security Council session by expressing sympathy towards Ethiopian views of the GERD issue.²² Russia and Ethiopia then signed a military cooperation agreement four days later, on July 12. On July 14, in an obvious retaliation, Egypt announced it would postpone the completion of a nuclear plant being built in El-Dabaa by Russia's state company Rosatom to 2030 instead of 2028.²³ Although, in isolation, the Ethiopian crisis would likely not have brought Egypt-Russian tensions to the open sphere, conjugated with a growing distrust and Egypt's alignment on the West, it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

6) Winners and Losers

Russia's diplomacy became a victim of its own success. Russian activism worried several regional and international powers and provoked a backlash. This backlash forced Russia to corner itself onto Ethiopia's sinking ship. By playing all sides to gain influence, it has made itself everyone's target. The main interest for states like Egypt in appealing to Moscow was to counterbalance Western omnipresence and obtain maneuvering room. But when Egypt saw it risked trading one hegemon for another, it soon turned back to Washington.

²¹ Egypt Independent, "Four Arab Countries Participate in Sea Breeze Exercises in the Black Sea," *Egypt Independent* [en ligne] 23 Juin 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.egyptindependent.com/four-arab-countries-participate-in-sea-breeze-exercises-in-the-black-sea/>.

²² Emam, "Egypt Disappointed".

²³ MIKHAIL George, "Egypt Postpones Nuclear Power Plant Amid Tensions with Russia over Nile Dam," *Al-Monitor* [en ligne], 28 Juillet 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-postpones-nuclear-power-plant-amid-tensions-russia-over-nile-dam>.

The real winner of the story is the United States, which triumphed while doing very little. Egypt is firmly on the American side while Washington flipped Sudan and disrupted Russian inroads in Africa for no cost. But Russia's troubles should not be overemphasized. First, Ethiopia is a tertiary interest for Moscow which remains laser-focused on European affairs. Second, although the Russians 'lost' Egypt and Sudan, they are solidly entrenched in Libya and, going forward, the Ethiopian connection could become a significant asset — if the Ethiopian government survives its current predicament.

A notable absent in the Ethiopian crisis is China, which remained on the sidewalk while this whole situation unfolded. Beijing has no major stake in the region. Economists believe that Ethiopia's young and cheap workforce could attract consumer goods industries away from China.²⁴ The Chinese are thus probably not upset to see an economic competitor plunging in chaos. While Russia sees its northeastern African policies as an extension of its political-military contest with NATO states for the domination of Europe, China has no such strategic interest in northeastern Africa.

The real loser of this whole ordeal is Ethiopia. The combat record of the national army is abysmal, and it has to rely on ragtag militias to hold the line. The Tigrayans had impressive successes early on but lacked the manpower to develop their offensive.²⁵ In addition, the Ethiopian coffers are empty and Addis Ababa needs fresh cash.²⁶ Someone will have to foot the bill but it is unlikely to be Moscow. If the Tigrayans keep raising and arming new units while using their alliance with other rebel groups like the Oromo Liberation Front to the maximum, the Ethiopian government could follow the recent path of its Afghan peer as well.

²⁴ GAMES Dianna, "Ethiopia Gambles on Cheap Labour," *African Business* [en ligne], 12 Juillet 2019 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://african.business/2019/07/economy/ethiopia-gambles-on-cheap-labour/>.

²⁵ Tigray's counterattack towards the Ethiopian core is a typical case of war aims expansion, where a warring side with at first limited ambitions becomes more ambitious because of battlefield successes. LABS Eric J., "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, 1997, Vol 6, Issue 4, pp. 1–49.

²⁶ NUNIS Vivienne, "Ethiopia's Economy Battered by Tigray War," *BBC News* [en ligne], 31 Juillet 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58319977>.

7) The Road Ahead

Although the Chinese had originally few stakes in Russia's African forays, the American return in Egypt and Sudan affects it equally: Beijing now has few choices other than to follow suit and work with the Ethiopians. Actually, many in Ethiopia already consider China to be on their side along with Russia.²⁷ Consequently, diplomatic and security relations between Beijing and Cairo are unlikely to develop much in the medium term. Instead, in the coming months and years we should see greater Sino-Russian interest in Eritrea.

Indeed, the obsolescence of the Eritrean military put Asmara in a state of dependence towards Chinese and Russian weapons and assistance. If Sudan ultimately reneges on the basing agreement, Eritrea would become the next most likely candidate for a Russian port. However, Eritrean troops used the Ethiopian invitation to enter Tigray to seize border territories they long coveted and are unlikely to leave willingly. If Addis Ababa, Beijing, and Moscow want to entice Asmara into a staunch coalition, they would need to turn a blind eye towards Eritrean advances.

But once again, Ethiopia is no core interest for neither the Kremlin nor the Zhongnanhai, and a lot will depend on the issue of the Tigrayan war. If the military situation keeps degrading for Addis Ababa, we can expect the appearance of Wagner units to support the Ethiopian army. If the cost of maintaining Ethiopia's ship afloat overcomes potential benefits and the current regime takes on too much water, China and Russia will have little remorse in leaving the boat : a major intervention *à la* Syria is unlikely. In any case, the growing pressure among regional states to choose between the American and the Sino-Russian side echoes the same bipolarization obvious in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Great power competition in northeast Africa is just getting started.

²⁷ NYABIAGE Jevans, "Why China Is Taking a Low Profile on Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict?" *South China Morning Post* [en ligne], 6 Juin 2021 [consulté le 03/10/2021], Disponible sur : <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3136228/why-china-taking-low-profile-ethiopia-tigray-conflict>.



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