

## POST-INDEPENDENCE RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND ERITREA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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### Abstract

This article is intended to assess the historical introspects of Sino-Eritrea bilateral relationship over the last two and half decades and put forward a new fresh analysis. China established diplomatic ties with transitional government of Eritrea in 1993. Since then, efforts have being made to further deepen and heighten the political and economic relations. China has been cooperating with Eritrea in many aspects such as, infrastructure development, education, military, human resource development, Science and Technology and health. Both countries have also shown convergence of interests and cooperation with each other on regional and international issues. However, Sino-Eritrean bilateral friendship is not without challenges: trade gap, China-Ethiopia relations, Chinese product qualities, etc are few among others. Finally, the research is concluded that Sino-Eritrea relationship is mutual beneficial and constructive and suggested recommendations to policy making bodies more action to be taken on people- to- people diplomacy.

Keywords: Eritrea, China, relationships, prospects and challenges.

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## Introduction

Sino-Eritrea friendship is a time-tested relationship and it is integral part of China-Africa relations. China has been a trusted friend to Eritrea. China –Eritrea relations in fact date back to the days of unremitting effort for Independence of Eritrea. China had played a significant role by providing ideological and guerrilla warfare training. The two most principal figures in the bitter struggle for independence-Rommedan Mohammed Nur (EPLF secretary general from 1977 to 1987) and Isaias Afewerki (the current president of state of Eritrea) and many more fighters were trained in China for almost one year during the high days of Cultural Revolution in China. China also provided moral and material support despite Ethiopian imperial pressures. The end of cold war and the independence of Eritrea after the demise of Ethiopian military regime, however, turned the bilateral relation into a new page of friendship and cooperation. China was among the first countries that offered diplomatic recognition to the then time transitional government and the current government of Eritrea. Moreover, China was among the first countries that have established diplomatic ties with de facto government of Eritrea. The year 2015 marked the celebration of 22<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the state of Eritrea and the People's Republic of China.

This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the whole historical retrospect of this relation starting from 1993 to the current state of relationship. It inspects the trends of convergence from multi-angles. It also focuses on areas of concerns in the future relationship between the two states. This research paper also put forward some important policy recommendations such as: narrowing trade gap, more political cooperation to deflect politically motivated criticism by western countries, China role in conflict dissuasion and peace making between Eritrea and Ethiopia among others.

## **Eritrean Armed Struggle and China**

As stated in the introductory part, China's link to Eritrea is traced back to the times of armed struggle. Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) had sent many members of its guerilla fighters for military and political training purposes. President Isaias Afewerki, Rommedan Mohammed Nur, Mesfin Hagos, Mahmoud Chekini among others were sent to China for military training (Bruce D. Larkin, 1979, 186). Undoubtedly, China support to Eritrean armed wing driven from its

ambitious plan to disseminate communist revolutionary ethos in Africa. Ethiopia's emperor Haile Selassie's unwillingness to approach communist China for ideological incompatibility reasons had also become soup-to-nut to ELF leadership—who was deadly struggling to get aids (Addis Dilnesa, 2005:245).

However, the relation had encountered hiccups immediately after Haile Selassie's formal state visit to Beijing in 1971. Both states, Mao's China and Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, had proceeded to engage economic and technical cooperation. China extended its hands to assist the development projects in Ethiopia though intercepted after the military coup in September 1974- instigated by a group of top military personals, which then led to the rise of the ruthless regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (David H. Shinn, 2014:3). In spite of China's suspicion toward Mengistu's regime posture toward Soviet (during the high days of Sino-Soviet conflict), China had expressed a will to resume all out engagement with new revolutionary government of Ethiopia. Unfortunately, Mengistu unwelcomed the entire offer for China cooperating with reactionary forces from west and efforts of destabilization in the horn of Africa by sponsoring, equipping and providing shelter to different insurgent groups in Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia. Accordingly, China-Ethiopian relations remained in standstill until the end of Sino-Soviet hostility calm down in the mid of 1980s.

### **Eritrea and China Relation from 1993-1998**

Formal diplomatic ties between China and Eritrea established on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1993 when Yang Fuchang, special envoy of the Chinese government to Eritrea, and Muhammed Sherifo, foreign minister of Eritrea, signed a joint statement of the establishment of diplomatic ties of the two states (Beijing Summit document, 2006). The relations have further strengthened in the same year when Qian Qichen, vice-premier and the then time minister of foreign Affairs met Mr. Isaias Afewerki during the 48<sup>th</sup> UN conference, New York. Thereafter, China continued to send different high level leaders and officials. Eritrea in turn never failed to reciprocate. Haile Weldensea, minister of finance and development and Isaias Afewerki, the president, visited Beijing in 1993 and 1994 respectively. There was also another visit by Huan Guoying, vice-minister of the ministry of International Liaison in July 1996 (Ibid).

However, tensions in the Sino-Eritrean relation crop after the outbreak of border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in May 1998 though the situation did not last long. During the war China supplied all types' of ammunitions to both countries-Eritrea and Ethiopia. Not only that, China has also failed to value the historical friendship with Eritrea by giving more attention to its relatively more gains in Ethiopia than in Eritrea (David H. Shine, 2009). The demographic size of Ethiopia, the size of investment, high China export curve in Ethiopia and Meles Zenawi's high political and diplomatic acumen were few among others that gravitated China to switch in favour of Ethiopia albeit it was infamous arithmetic from Eritrean side. Chinese government approach in the horn of Africa in generally and in Eritrea and Ethiopia particularly has also received acrimony by non-government organization for its failure to work in compliance with humanitarian laws (David,2009:3).

Fortunately, however, the friendship track between the two countries recuperated and holds its status quo position after Tang Jiaxuan, Minister of foreign affairs, met President Isaias Afewerki in Asmara on January 9,2002.The delegation reiterated the People's Republic of China's willingness to strength consultation and cooperation in addition to further enhancement of the bilateral bondage (IRIN, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002). Henceforth, the two countries extended their cooperation in the political, economic, social, health and educational areas.Since then, China had played a pivotal role in revitalizing the war shattered Eritrea's economy and the relation is growing fast from outwardly to a real partnership.

### **Post-Ethio-Eritrean border war period and Sino- Eritrea relation**

Sino-Africa cooperation forum (October, 2000) on its part paved a new headway in Sino-Eritrean bilateral relation. The Minister of macro-economy along with other diplomatic corps attended the "Beijing ministerial meeting 2000 of the Sino-African Cooperation Forum"(China Embassy in Eritrea,2004:1).The forum provided a new energy and optimism to Sino-Eritrean relations. In February 2005, Isaias Afewerki paid a visit to China to further boost the Eritrea-China relations. The visit followed by high level talks on strengthening cooperation on various sectors. Mr. Isaias entreated China and Chinese investors to extend their hands to the development of war torn Eritrean economy(Beijing Review, 2005:1).Premier, Wen Jiabao, likewise, said:"China expects to further explore potentials for bilateral economic and trade cooperation, promote mutually beneficial

cooperation in key sectors such as infrastructure construction, mining and fishery(Xinhua , February 19, 2005:1)."Finally,they agreed to cooperate on matters like, human resources development, health and construction activities, which were all purely for civil use purposes. In the same year, assistant Foreign Minister of China Lv Guozeng visited Eritrea. In the occasion, Mr. Isaias expressed Eritrea's unrestrained will to engage with China in fields of technology, trade and investment. He has also pledged Sino-Eritrean coordination on international affairs (Xinhua, February 19, 2005:1).

The two countries also agreed to take off a new strategic partnership in military. Eritrea-China strategic dialogue took place when Minister of Defense Sebhat Efreem visited Beijing to meet China's Defense minister Cao Gabcchuan on May 25, 2006 (Chinese Foreign Ministry documents,2006).Recognizing Eritrea's solid political stance toward one –China policy and other global and regional issues,Cao expressed China's armed force readiness to further promote the friendly cooperation between the two countries.Sebhat in his part acclaimed the China's non-interference policy in general and lack of political condition in particular (Daily online,2006: 1).

Sino-Eritrean relation took a further positive turn with the visit of President Isaias Afewerki to Beijing on 4-5 November 2006. The president visited China to attend the Beijing summit – forum on China –African Cooperation (Xinhua,2006:1). Furthermore, the relationship got a boost with another visit from Beijing to Asmara in January 2007 when Foreign Ministry Li Zhaoxing met Mr.Isaias at Dendon Club. Both sides agreed to deepen and diversify cooperation. In the occasion, Mr. Li expressed: "China is ready to cooperate with Eritrea within the framework of the forum on China –Africa Cooperation (Chinese Embassy in Eritrea documents,2007:1)." In sideline, Minister of Finance of Eritrea,BerhaneAbrehe, and Li signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on economic and technological matters.More specifically the terms under the agreement include, zero tariffs in Eritrean exports to china, annulling debts and China to extend its hands to different development projects, more importantly in health sectors(Eritrea Daily,2007: 1).

Afterwards, both countries agreed to cooperate and work on, especially on matters of trade, investment,technology, cultural exchange programmes, health and military affairs. The bilateralengagement also extended to industry, agriculture, telecommunication and

infrastructure developments. Many Chinese companies are already established many imprints in different infrastructural construction, such as, road construction, cement factory in Massawa, Orotta Hospital in Asmara, College of Arts and Social Sciences, AdiKeih, rural schools in Mendefera and Ghindea are few among others. The role of Chinese mining companies in Eritrea is also not insignificant. Many private mining companies have already well-established in many parts of the nation. Although still under construction, the buildings of College of Science at Eritrean Institute of Technology are also among other magnificent architectural imprints of Chinese companies in Eritrea.

China had also offered millions of dollars in the form of aids and loans. The government of Eritrea has constantly been receiving support in human resource development projects. In 2010 alone, the government of china granted 50 scholarship to Eritrean students in different fields of specialization and the number is growing from time to time without any stoppage (Mr. Li Liansheng, 2010). Chinese development assistance and cooperation also extended to non-academic areas such as sport, culture and medicine. China's role in closing funding gap, especially after the UN Security Council sanction in 2011 and even before, confirmed the depth of this solid partnership and proved to be the most viable alternative to Eritrea.

From 2003 to 2005, Eritrea received different types of aids ranging from technical to food supplies which totally costs around 62.7 million dollar (Guardian, 2012; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). In 2006, Eritrea was also granted a total of 23.0 million dollar in the form of preferential loans. This grant utilized in communication development projects to improve the out dated communication infrastructure. Electronic media equipment have also been offered to the ministry of information to upgrade the working process of media. Since September 1997, Eritrea has also been receiving uninterrupted medical assistance under Chinese development modalities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

Bipartisanship is also part and parcel of Sino-Eritrean relations. The link between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and PFDJ stretched back to the time of armed struggle. Chinese government outlook toward Eritrea is also derived from this historical arithmetic. As mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, China, under the chairman Mao Tzung, gave full play to the Eritrean People's quest for self-determination by hosting, training and

funneling supplies to Eritrean freedom fighters(Paul B.Henze,2000, 186). CPC and PFDJ maintain erratic relation since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993. Yeman Ghebreab, Head of Political affairs of the PFDJ, paid several state and party level visits along young functionaries to China (Dehai,2015: 1).CPC also paid a reciprocating visit headed by Mr. Zhong Weiyum, Head of Bureau of African Affairs, on February 09, 2015.

In addition to this, both countries have also shared common views and values on many regional and international issues(David H. Shinne,2015).Both parties accept the deleterious effects of human right politics by west and support each other on human right issues. To further manifestation of their convergence at global scale, Eritrea firmly supports the one-china policy and its reunification (China Embassy report, 2005).China in turn contends all allegations by west against the government of Eritrea as subject of intervention in the internal affairs of Eritrea.Eritrea and China have also a common position on many domestic affairs. Both countries put more importance and priorities on economic rights than political once.

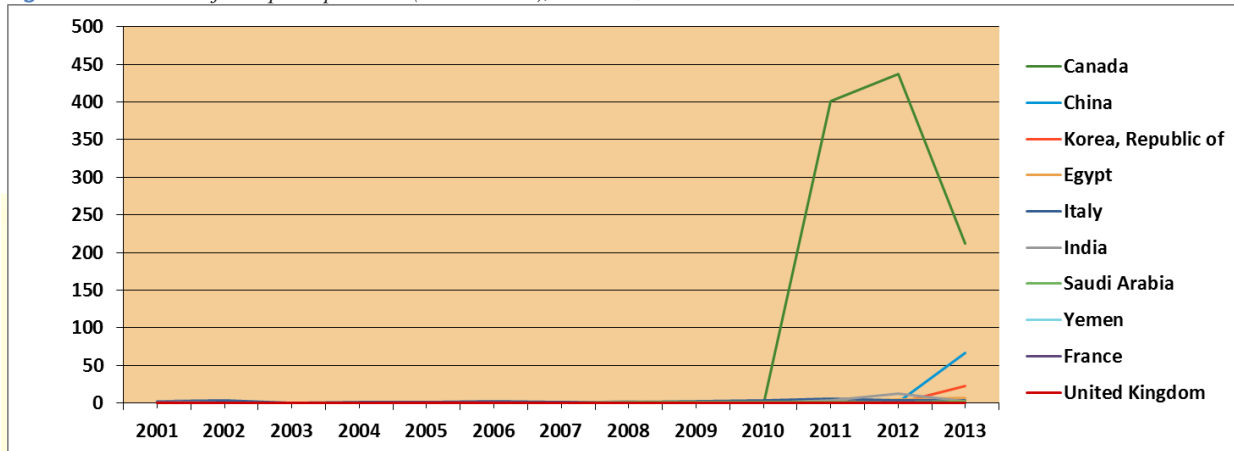
Eritrea also has much gain from its burgeoning relations with China in United Nation deliberations. China, as a member of Security Council, doesn't compromise the philosophical foundations of its foreign policy-non-interference. China support to Eritrea in UNO also emulated from it's firm believes in the principle of non-interference.The country has always been expressing its indignation, in United Nation Security Council (UNSC), UN general Assembly and UN Human right Commission, against politically driven critics' and resolutions against the State of Eritrea.

### Challenges

However,Eritrea relation with China is always not at ease. There have been many set of haunts in the bilateral relations since the establishment of transitional government of Eritrea,especially in political and economic fields.Above all, the widening trade gap is a matter of great concern to Eritrea despite China being the largest source of direct foreign investment (FDI) in Eritrea. Since Independence, Eritrea has been importing items such as, vehicles, heavy machineries, military hardwires, spare parts, articles of apparel, fertilizers, food stuffs and telecommunication and information facilities from People's

China(WTO: Trade matrix, annual, 1995-2013). Exports from Eritrea to China on the other hand include mineral resources, livestock, textiles and food stuff.

Figure 1. Eritrea's major exports partners (1995 - 2013), in USD \$ millions.



Source: Merchandise trade matrix, imports and exports of total all products, annual, 1995-2013

The trends of bilateral trade relation between China and Eritrea, however, have no substantial difference from the whole export-import trends of the nation. The overall export –import landscape of Eritrea shows an average trade deficit of \$ 424.51 million from 1995 to 2013 and the trends seems far from ending amid the government’s active encouragement for investors from home and abroad. From independence to 2012, Eritrea’s maximum imports value is 849 USD million in 2012, but averaged 536.72 million. The average export value on the other hand is only 112.21 USD millions. From the out-set, Eritrea has been struggling to recuperate, but successfully failed. China is a major import and export partner of Eritrea as indicated in table 1 and table 2. However, the balance of trade remained harrowing to Eritrea. Beijing preferential trade treatment would also barely help to narrow the gap between export-imports as Eritrea failed to utilize its advantages.

Table 1. Eritrea's major import partners in 2013

Table 2. Eritrea's major export partners in 2013



Country	Eritrea's major import partners
China	33%
Egypt	15%
Germany	9%
Italy	9%
Saudi Arabia	4%

Country	Eritrea's major Export partners
Canada	62%
China	19%
Korea Rep.	7%
Venezuela	4%
Egypt	4%

Source: world atlas

Moreover, one big allegation against China is dumping of very poor, but low price goods in Eritrea and thus spoiling the domestic market of Eritrea. Eritrea since independence has been extending several bans on imported goods to avoid such insidious effects despite the challenges from unchecked smugglers who have been trying to turn the country into Chinese imported good conclave. The impacts of those imported goods in local industries are also among others that require scrupulous examination since the noxious effects would disallow the normal growth of Eritrean goods and services. The damaging impacts in the local business men confidence are also no less insignificant.

The Ethio-Eritrean border war had also subjected China to wider public criticism, albeit, the relation did not encounter a setback. During the war, China supplied not insignificant military equipments to both belligerent states. From the outbreak of war on May 12, 1998 to the end of conflict on June, 2000, China accumulated over \$ 1 billion just from arm sells. Despite its close relationship with both, Eritrea and Ethiopia, it failed to middle the problem, instead provided fuel to the burning fire (David H. Shinn, 2014:4). China policy in this regard wedded only to its national interest regardless its pay off in the life of innocent people of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The worst is that the closeness of China as unequivocal partner of both states while they are in no war no peace situation. How to mitigate the threat posed by unlimited arm sell by China in the region in general and between belligerent states particular is therefore a worry not only to Eritrea and Ethiopia, but to the whole horn of Africa. China failed to act like a big brother to balance the question of future security and engagement of the region.

China's bottomless commitment to ward Ethiopia is also a matter of concern to Eritrea. China has given assistance both in military and other infrastructural development purposes to Ethiopia. Besides, Ethiopia received over US \$ 500 million concessional loans and \$1.5 billion in telecommunication infrastructure development investment. China has also funded many projects in Ethiopia including dam on Tekeze river, Gotera flyover project, Maganagna-kebena- Menelik Hospital etc. (David H. Shine, 2014:6; Gedion Gamora, 2009: 4).

The inability of Chinese companies to create enough opportunities to Eritrean youth is also another bottleneck in the future diplomatic and economic engagement of these two sisterly countries. Since independence, large Chinese companies have been engaging in construction, exploration and mining sectors in Eritrea (David H. Shine, 2014, 7). Sichuan Road and Bridge Co. Ltd, Beijing Donia Resources Co. Ltd, Land energy group ltd, Eritrea-China Exploration and mining Sh. Co. are among others. The wider public allegation however is that Eritrea doesn't need companies that only exploit its mineral resources, but support jobs for Eritrean youths to boost opportunities and reduce greatly increasing joblessness.

Eritreans don't deny that Chinese companies do make a remarkable effect in socio-economic development in Eritrea, but the lack of human face needed to be regulated to balance the relations and to avoid benign effects like in the case of Ethiopia and Kenya. There is a discontent over inexcusable ruthless exploitation of labour and lack of fair wage. Employers display terrible disregard to employees. Employers failed to take lesson from healthy and friendly working environ of Bisha, Nevsun Resources Lt.d, Vancouver –based company, working process.

Certain grey areas also persist in international fora. When the UNSC hits Eritrea with Resolution 1907 on December 23, 2009, China failed to use its veto power against the resolution as Libya did despite Eritrea's consistent solid stand on one-China Policy and on matters related human right, freedom of press, religion and belief (Chhor, Atitya; Roth, Richard, December 24, 2009). Historical revisit has also happened during the Interactive dialogue by commission of inquiry on Eritrea 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting, 29<sup>th</sup> regular session of human

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<sup>1</sup>Nevsun Resources Lt.d, Company is contracted for exploration and mining operation within Bisha mine, western flank of Eritrea, but originally Canadian. The company's main minerals are: gold, zinc and copper.

right council on June 23, 2015. Although the delegation from People's Republic of China commented against the inquiry commission reports during the preliminary session, China failed to reciprocate Eritrea's valuable support to China's position on human rights in 2006 (David H. Shinn, 2015:4). Eritrea understands the rationale behind the arithmetics, but at the same time questions amity between the two countries.

People-to-people diplomacy along cultural diplomacy become all more important in the contemporary global politics. International Relations values People to People diplomacy as integral part of public diplomacy. It also recognizes its role on relation between nations since bilateral relations cannot sustain without wider public support. However, China and Eritrea seem to have underestimated this role. The channel of people to people exchange is still very inadequate. Favorable view and mutual good feeling between the people of China and Eritrea would not be cultivated through traditional approach alone. They need to go beyond the traditional frontiers. They need dueling priorities on cultural exchange schemes and exchange visits particularly with more focus the young generation.

Hence, China and Eritrea bilateral relations would boost further if China and Eritrea deal with all those challenges in advance. The warming investment opportunity in Eritrea is a good step toward socio-economic transformation of war ravaged Eritrea economy, but the country needs to draw attention on its possible negative impacts. China activities in Eritrea should positively affect the daily life of the local people. Chinese mining and construction companies should also ameliorate the employment opportunities of Eritrea and without threatening the local labour optimism by hiring large size Chinese laborers. More investment in fact is also needed in people to people diplomacy.

### Conclusion

The findings of this article asserts that despite Eritrea has very old economic, political and military ties with China dating back to the times of long struggle for independence, the Sino-Eritrea relations is not without its shortcomings, but the possibilities for the deepening of this relationship is great. In the economic landscape, things are not showing positive signs. The widening trade gap is a matter of great concern for Eritrea. There is also wide public allegation against Chinese product qualities and its noxious impact in the local business. The

Ethio-Eritrean border war and Chinese government war time economic calculations with disregard to the outcome arises from selling of ammunitions and arms to both fighting parties equally subjected China to a wider public criticism. Moreover, China's failure to diversify its investment from just resource exploitation to other areas tends to portray the China- Eritrean relations as resource based-relations (Sarah Raine,2009:237-271). China's failure to pay back unequivocally attention to Eritrea's backing in many regional and international issues likewise questions the future bilateral friendship.

The question what should China and Eritrea take to balance the relationship and forge strong ties at all level, and both states to enjoy from the bilateral relationship, is a tantamount of the above mentioned analyses. The researcher therefore gave the following recommendation to policy making bodies:

1. **Rearranging the trade gap:** In order to reduce the trade gap and bring forward a new page of bilateral relationship, joint committee should meet and make a commitment to improve market access of Eritrean products. At the same time, quality control branch has to set up to bring solutions to the negative impacts of dumping low price and poor quality goods and services from China. Moreover, Eritrea should utilize properly the preferential treatment by China on Eritrean goods and services.
2. **Bring Human face:** As aforementioned China's unrestrained army sell to the region when fog of war was looming over people of Eritrea and Ethiopia portrays China relation with Eritrea negatively. So, it would not be fair if bilateral relation disregards the humanitarian face as well. China not needs to overlook the humanitarian aspects in their foreign relations.
3. **More cooperation in International fora:** As far as cooperation in international fora is concern, both countries acknowledge the significance of working together. However, little improvement would be important on China's position toward Eritrean areas that requires China's support.
4. **Diversification of investment:** Eritrea has never established such a trusted friendship other than with China. However, there have been glitches to be rectified in the investment

policies. First, Eritrea should have to pave a new window for Chinese foreign direct investment. So that, more opportunities would come to galvanize the low employment opportunities. Second, China's investors and government need to deal with how to diversify the economic engagement from resource-based to other areas- which could produce more opportunity to the wellbeing of Eritrea.

##### **5. Big-brother role in Conflict dissuasion and Peacemaking between Eritrea and**

**Ethiopia:** Two countries, Eritrea and Ethiopia, have been archrivals since the outbreak of border war in 1998. Their relationship has seen many ups and downs. The two countries have main problem over borders. Eritrea's position is that Ethiopia should accept the final and binding deliberation by Ethio-Eritrean border Commission (EEBC). Ethiopia on the other hand demands dialogue before the implementation. Significantly attached to Ethio-Eritrean problem is also the case of opposition and involvement of the two states aiming to weaken and destabilize one another. Military build up and ensuing arm races between the two states is also part of the dilemma. Hence, China should have to act positively to ease the situation in ground by bring them into round table discussion.

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