

Lingering Shadows of Contiguous Ties:

The Cases of the ports of Assab (Eritrea) and Walvis Bay (Namibia)

Part 1 (of a 2-Part Series)

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Abstract:

Even after breaking free from the chains of colonialism and achieving statehood, former colonizers can continue to challenge the sovereignty of the newly independent nations, particularly when they share borders or are in close geographic proximity. This notion is vividly illustrated by the experiences of Eritrea and Namibia. Their arduous journeys to freedom remind us that the struggle against external forces—especially those nearby—often persists beyond independence.

The histories of imperial Ethiopia and Eritrea, along with apartheid South Africa and Namibia, highlight the complexities and lasting impacts of contiguous expansionism. These cases offer two critical lessons: one emphasizes the potential for peaceful coexistence, while the other warns that the lingering influence of expansionist neighbors can lead to prolonged conflicts. This is especially true unless the root causes of the aggression are completely addressed or transformed.

I. Introduction

Even after the chains of colonialism are broken and the quest for statehood is realized, the colonizer may continue to pose challenges to the sovereignty of the victim nation—especially if the two have contiguous ties or are located in the same neighborhood. This proposition is exemplified by the experiences of Eritrea and Namibia, two former colonies whose long journeys toward freedom serve as poignant reminders that the battle against external forces—especially those in geographic proximity—does not end with the attainment of independence.

For example, when Namibia, a former German colony, finally achieved independence from South Africa on March 12, 1990, its principal seaport, Walvis Bay, and the Penguin Islands remained occupied by its expansionist neighbor South Africa. Pretoria “also claimed that the boundary with Namibia was not the middle but the Northern bank of the Orange River.”¹ It took four more years before the port and other sovereign parts of Namibia were returned to their rightful owners, completing the formal decolonization of this southwestern African nation. This was a culmination of strategies Pretoria pursued during its decades-long occupation of Namibia to bolster its chances of retaining the enclave in case the former German colony achieves independence.

Ethiopia was also relentless in its attempt to separate Assab from Eritrea during its long occupation of the Red Sea territory by either merging it with a nearby Ethiopian administrative district or managing it separately to establish a *fait accompli* in case of Eritrean independence. As soon as it set foot in the former Italian and British colony under a bogus federation in 1953, Ethiopia tried to detach the port from the Red Sea territory and incorporate it into the neighboring Ethiopian province of Wollo or administer it as an autonomous unit mostly run by military officials. However, when the day of independence arrived in May 1991, the policy failed because Eritrean nationalists were able to successfully secure every inch of the territory, including its ports, bringing closure to 30 years of a protracted bloody armed struggle.

However, a mere five years after Eritrea’s formal independence in 1993, following a United Nations-supervised referendum in which 99.8 percent of Eritreans voted for independence, Ethiopia made an attempt to re-occupy sovereign parts of the new country; although the conflict looked primarily like a border dispute, with Badme as its focal point, Ethiopia’s unstated objective was to capture Assab. Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut say, Assab “was a strategic target [of the Border War] for Ethiopia”² and that “politicians in Ethiopia had demanded Assab be captured.”³

¹ Laurent C. W. Kaela, *The Question of Namibia*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1996, p. 134:

² Dominique Jacquin-Berdal and Martin Plaut (editors), *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2005, p.154.

³ *Ibid*, p. 81.

Furthermore, five years following the resolution of that border dispute in 2018 when the then new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed a peace agreement with Eritrea—an achievement that won him a Nobel Peace Prize—the same prime minister issued what essentially was a declaration of war to secure sea access for his landlocked country. This rapid shift—occurring in what seemed historically like a blink of a moment—took place after a few years of the two governments working together to ensure regional peace.

This post-independence prime land grabbing behavior was part of a pattern both imperial Ethiopia and apartheid South Africa practiced during their prolonged occupation of Eritrea and Namibia respectively--exploiting their contiguous ties to these former European colonies.

This paper explores how or if the lingering shadows of contiguous ties with expansionist neighbors might lead to enduring conflicts long after the shackles of colonialism are shattered unless and until the underlying source of the aggression is removed or fundamentally transformed. By examining these cases, we gain insight into the dynamics of contiguous expansionism and the challenges it poses to victim nations' sovereignty as well as regional stability.

II. The Historical Context

The long-anticipated decolonization of the two former African colonies of Eritrea and Namibia occurred at the close of the Cold War era, albeit one year apart, in 1991 and 1990, respectively. These momentous events marked the end of over a century of resistance against various expansionists, from far and near, spanning oceans and regional boundaries. Eritrea and Namibia were among the last former European colonies to undergo post-World War II decolonization, facing considerable delays and denials for more than three decades after what is known as the 'Year of Africa,' 1960, celebrating the time when 17 former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa gained independence, while Eritreans and Namibians were forced to get organized to prepare for a long fight to regain their rights to determine their futures.

The hindrance was primarily attributed to their expansionist neighbors—imperial Ethiopia and apartheid South Africa—whose adept manipulation of Cold War politics ensured Western, particularly Washington's superpower patronage to achieve their respective annexationist objectives. For example, as we will see below, these were the only African nations involved militarily in the U.S.-led anti-communist Korean War, with Ethiopia being the sole non-NATO African nation in that ideologically driven crusade against communism. Theodore Vestal, in his book on the last Ethiopian emperor, says, "To show Ethiopia's appreciation for the United States' support on the Eritrean and Ogaden issues in 1950, Emperor Haile Selassie sent a contingent of 1, 200 troops from the Imperial Bodyguard to join" the Korean War. Adding, he says, "An American ship transported the troops to Korea early in 1951," and noted that "Ethiopia was the one non-NATO nation in Africa to contribute a contingent" to that distant Asian conflict.⁴ In the case of Pretoria, Borstelmann says the war in the Korean Peninsula greatly helped it continue its control of South West Africa [Namibia] and keep practicing its abhorrent policy of apartheid for more than forty years, until the very end of the Cold War. The Korean war, he adds, "welded the common interests of South Africa and the United States into a solid alliance."⁵

So, at the onset of the post-World War II era, while the rest of the world embarked on decolonization, compelling former European empires—such as the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, and others—to relinquish their colonial possessions, the Ethiopian empire and apartheid South Africa initiated well-financed diplomatic efforts, shrouded in thinly veiled schemes, to essentially *recolonize* these two former European colonies.

In a major shift from the evolving post-1945 consensus on decolonization during the early post-World War II years, Washington began to see the world principally through the prism of communism and looked at the USSR as an existential threat—a shift which also complicated the disposition of the former colonies such as Eritrea and Namibia. As a result, American policymakers viewed the decolonization of former colonies that were going through the then newly established United Nations system at the time through this new lens to protect the global order Washington created for the post-war world. As a result, they saw the disposition of

⁴Theodore M. Vestal, *The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans' Attitude Toward Africa*, Praeger: Santa Barbara, CA, 2011, p. 40.

⁵Thomas Borstelmann. *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, (New York: Oxford University Press.1993), 139.

Eritrea and Namibia from this point of view.

The Eritrean case was initially part of the disposition of the former Italian colonies—the others being Libya and Somalia. However, due to shifting U.S. policy that favored Ethiopia, Eritrea was later separated from the other former Italian colonies and was eventually denied the right to determine its future. In the case of Namibia, the United Nations was trying hard to terminate South Africa's mandate over the former German colony given by the then defunct League of Nations to place it in the UN Trusteeship system to prepare it for independence after a ten-year transitional period. Pretoria refused to hand over the territory because it was determined to incorporate it into South Africa as its fifth province.

The two expansionist nations quickly realized the way to achieve their respective goals was to secure the support of then increasingly dominant superpower, the United States. Both were adept at leveraging every opportunity that came along that was of interest to Washington.

Washington's unconditional support for the Ethiopian emperor and its persistent and unjustified opposition to Eritrea's self-determination at the dawn of the era of decolonization, also had to do with the "Israeli security agreement," which saw Ethiopia as a reliable partner in the fight against forces in the Middle East that threatened Israeli security. Such a policy naturally mischaracterized a potential Eritrean independence. Lefebvre says Israel "envisioned the Red Sea being converted into an Arab Lake in the event of an Eritrean victory" in the war to end Ethiopian occupation of the Red Sea territory.⁶ US arguments against Eritrea's independence echoed these baseless sentiments as well as those pushed by the Ethiopian emperor and his representatives—arguments which history has now proven to be groundless. This was also a reflection of the one-sided discussion in Washington on the Eritrean case, with no input at all from the Eritrean people or their representatives.

Erupting in the middle of this process of disposing the former colonies was the Korean War considered as the first major threat to the then emerging world order established by the United States which was preparing to protect it from the communist camp led by the USSR and its allies. This development gave both Ethiopia and South Africa a critical opportunity to show their support to the U.S.-led effort to stop the communist forces in the Korean Peninsula to secure Washington's support in their efforts to annex their neighbors Eritrea and Namibia, respectively. So, they became the only two African nations to militarily participate in the Korean conflict.

As a result, both Eritrea and Namibia became collateral victims of the distant Asian war exposing them for further victimization throughout the Cold War decades and sowing the fragile Horn and the southern regions with more seeds of more conflicts whose adverse effect on the continent are still being felt today. Even after enduring challenging struggles to liberate themselves from various expansionist forces, these two nations faced or have been facing difficult early post-independence transitions. Despite suffering decisive defeats—militarily in Eritrea's case and diplomatically in Namibia's—their last colonizers, like other expansionists in the post-colonial era, have tried to leverage their contiguous ties to regain control. They have attempted, or are attempting, to disrupt the post-independence progress of these former colonies by leaving unresolved issues or devising new schemes to potentially reverse their hard-won independence.

III. The Perils of Geography

The Eritrean and Namibian cases represent distinct scenarios occurring in disparate regions of the continent. However, a critical linkage exists in the geographically contiguous relationship between these former colonies and their annexionist neighbors. Another post-World War II example of this phenomenon in Africa, in addition to Ethiopia and South Africa, is imperial Morocco, which has persistently sought the past 50 years to forcibly annex its neighbor Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony.

When expansionist aggression emanates from neighboring borders rather than distant seas, ruling elites typically strive to retain control over their colonial possessions,⁷ even after a comprehensive defeat on the

⁶ Jeffrey Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991*, Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1991, p.162.

⁷ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970, p.1.

battlefield, as in the case of Ethiopia, or mostly on the global anti-apartheid forums of diplomacy, as in the South African case. Colonial expansion across oceans involves the acquisition and colonization of territories separated by vast bodies of water, such as oceans or seas. Nations engaged in this form of aggression include Italy, Britain, Spain, France, and others from that part of the world.

Conversely, non-transatlantic or contiguous colonial expansion transpires when a nation extends its territory by annexing or colonizing adjacent or neighboring lands without the need to traverse significant bodies of water. Richard Pipes cites cases of how non-transatlantic empires and empire builders fail to draw “a clear distinction between themselves as a nation and as an imperial power. . . . partly because their colonial possession lay not overseas but” across land next door.⁸ “The French in North Africa, the Germans in the Cameroons, or the Japanese in Korea had no doubt about their identity,” Pipes added, “They crossed bodies of water. However, he added, those that conducted their expansion into “contiguous lands. . . . were never fully conscious of being strangers in their vast and amorphous land. . . . They created and ruled an empire as if they were creating a national state.”⁹

Eritrea and Namibia endured both forms of expansionism. Eritrea suffered under Italian and British empires before being handed over to emperor Haile Selassie under a bogus federation engineered by Washington with total disregard of the wishes of the Eritrean people. Namibia too first suffered under German rule before it was put in the League of Nations Mandate system with South Africa as its designated administrator. However, when the League of Nations’ successor, the United Nations, wanted to put the territory in the UN Trusteeship program to prepare it for independence soon after the end of World War II, Pretoria refused to hand it over and continued to administer it with the intention of eventually annexing it as its fifth province.

Common traits of both modes of expansion include heavy doses of a sense of entitlement driven by elaborate schemes of mythmaking. Expansionist ideologies, whether manifested through imperial conquests or territorial annexations, have been fueled partially by a sense of entitlement to expand national borders and influence. Their entitlement complex is characterized by several key traits, including a deep-seated belief that they have a natural right to claim ownership over other people’s land and other resources. It is often reinforced with elaborate mythmaking schemes fueled by narrative devices to cover up and justify the underlying aggression behind such efforts.

These efforts were part of the broader, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, tactics and strategies employed by Ethiopia in Eritrea and by South Africa in Namibia, both during the years of occupation and in some parts of the post-independence period.

IV. Assab: Where the Birth of a Modern Nation Unfolded

The port of Assab is where the modern nation that became Eritrea was conceived in 1869—a moment in history that holds significant importance for Eritreans due to the foundational role it played in the formation of modern Eritrea. This historical event marks the beginning of Eritrea's modern history, as it was during this time that the Italian government signed a treaty with local Afar sultans, granting it control over the port of Assab. This event laid the groundwork for the eventual colonization of Eritrea by Italy and the subsequent resistance by the Eritrean people against foreign domination and their struggle for self-determination.

Beyond its importance to Eritreans, the year 1869 also holds broader significance for the people of the region. The colonization of Eritrea by Italy was part of a broader wave of European colonialism in Africa during the 19th century. The events of 1869 in Assab reflect the broader geopolitical dynamics of the time, as European powers sought to expand their empires and control strategic territories. These events reflect wide-ranging trends of colonialism during this period, highlighting the interconnectedness of Eritrea's history with that of the wider world.

The Italians, at different times during their occupation of the Red Sea territory, tried to use Assab as a means of influencing the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa region, especially that of Ethiopia. One hundred years

⁸ Richard Pipes, “Birth of an Empire,” a book review of Geoffrey Hosking’s book *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*, London: HarperCollins, 1997. (Emphasis added.)

⁹ Tania Raffass, *The Soviet Union: Federation or Empire?* New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 182.

ago this year (2024), “Mussolini offered Haile Selassie I a 99-year duty-free concession at Assab and the right to build a road linking it with central Ethiopia... [and] his offer was reinforced in the 1928 Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship and Commerce—but was never implemented.”¹⁰ However, at that time, Ethiopia’s search for maritime access was not limited to Assab or any other Eritrean port. According to the Ethiopian leader’s chief American advisor on his Eritrean annexation project, “from the time of Haile Selassie’s first visit to Europe in 1924, (then Regent) Ras Teferi had repeatedly sought access to the sea, specifically outlets at Massawa, Assab, Djibouti, Zella, and Berbera.” However, he added, “All the attempts were rebuffed.”¹¹

A few years later, following their 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, the Italians expanded the port to accommodate modern shipping, and soon after, the road to Desse was completed. However, the port’s development as a major outlet for Ethiopian commerce had to wait another decade. During World War II, Italy’s involvement led to a blockade of Assab. After the British defeated the Italians, the new British administration in Eritrea dismantled and sold some of its port and military airport facilities.

However, Italy’s defeat early in World War II and the subsequent disposition of its colonies—Somalia and Libya, along with Eritrea—by the international community at the end of the war in 1945, provided the Ethiopian emperor with a new opportunity to push his sea access agenda. To bolster his unfounded claim over Eritrea, he worked tirelessly to secure American support. He also crafted various narratives to justify his expansionist territorial ambitions, including one that depicted Eritrea, then over 60 years old, as a ‘child’ returning to its mother. Records indicate that the Ethiopian leader was prepared to dismember this ‘child’ and retain a small part if his initial goal of annexing all of Eritrea failed. His ‘Plan B’ was to acquire and retain the port of Assab.

The Ethiopian leader was also willing to look at other options in the region when he felt his claims over Eritrea were likely to be rejected by the international community. When the United States, as one of the Four Powers considering the fate of the former Italian colonies soon after the end of World War II, pushed for collective trusteeship for all the three former colonies, Ethiopia was forced to initiate “negotiations with Britain on the possible acquisition of the port of Zeila, in British Somaliland, to serve Ethiopia as connecting sea corridor in return for the Ogaden, which Britain had been seeking from Ethiopia in order to realize its dream of creating ‘greater Somalia.’” In early 1946, the emperor sent his top diplomats to London “to lay formally the Ethiopian basis for a quid pro quo arrangement” which he soon found out that “Britain showed little enthusiasm for the Ethiopian project, not so much because she didn’t like the idea, but because she thought that it might jeopardize her plan of partitioning Eritrea, with half of it going to Ethiopia in return for the Ogaden.”¹²

However, Washington soon shifted its position on the Eritrean question and decided to separate it from the other former Italian colonies and hand it over to the Ethiopian emperor under a plan cynically camouflaged as a federation to minimize or avoid resistance from the steadily increasing number of independent Third World nations that were members of the United Nations at the time and were pushing for the decolonization of all former colonies. Under the federal plan, Assab fell under Ethiopian jurisdiction, a move reinforced by Haile Selassie in 1953 when he designated it as a separate administrative unit. However, tensions flared in 1954 when Ethiopian troops fired upon dock workers protesting new labor regulations, signaling Assab’s integration into the Ethiopian economy at the expense of its ties to Eritrea. Subsequent port expansions aided by Yugoslavia (1958-1961) and road construction funded by the United States further solidified Assab’s role in Ethiopian commerce.¹³ Ethiopian leaders believed that Assab could be easily separated from the rest of Eritrea and brought under effective Ethiopian control without significant repercussions. This sentiment persisted, especially following the establishment of the U.S.-sponsored and diplomatically managed Eritrean-Ethiopian federation, which Ethiopia sought to leverage to secure Washington’s financial backing for Assab’s development.

¹⁰ See Dan Connell, ed., *Eritrea: Historical Dictionary*, 3rd Edition. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, p. 92.

¹¹ John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*. Algonac, MI: Reference Publications, 1984, p. 158; also, see Edward Ullendorff, *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie: My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress 1892-193*, New York (1976).

¹² Yohannes, Okbazghi. *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991 p. 80-81.

¹³ See Eritrean: *Historical Dictionary*, pps. 91-94

There was also another dimension to this aggression which became evident when Addis Ababa pursued the development of Assab to the detriment of Massawa. Ethiopia sought to undermine Massawa because the port served as the primary commercial artery for the Eritrean hinterland, and disrupting its prosperity would hasten the collapse of the Eritrean economy—an outcome Ethiopia desired to weaken Eritrea's economic and political autonomy. “The Ethiopians were well aware of what would be the logical consequences of their unilateral action to abrogate the federal structure sometime in the future.”¹⁴

By 1962, following Ethiopia's abrogation of the federal arrangement leading to the formal annexation of the territory, Assab had become Ethiopia's busiest port, with an increasingly significant portion of its population comprising of Ethiopians. Three years later, the emperor considered to incorporate the port into Ethiopia's Wollo Province; however, he yielded to pressure against it by Eritrean workers. The construction of Ethiopia's sole petroleum refinery in 1967, with assistance from the Soviet Union, underscored further the port's growing importance. The 1965 “announced plan was to include the merging of Eritrea's Danakil Province with [Ethiopia's] Wollo [province].”¹⁵

Following the overthrow of Haile Selassie by a military junta in the mid-1970s, the new regime was even more eager to administratively separate Assab from Eritrea, especially as nationalist sentiments grew among the Afar people. In April 1977, the regime convened an Afar congress, and a year later, the port was designated a separate administrative region as part of efforts to manage rising Eritrean nationalist sentiments.

Furthermore, the closure of the Djibouti railroad in 1978 shifted over 60% of Ethiopian trade through Assab, prompting the Ethiopian government to consider integrating the port into Wollo Province or establish a distinct Afar political entity. In 1987, the Derg regime formalized the creation of the Assab Autonomous Region, encompassing much of Eritrea's Denkel and parts of Ethiopian Dankalia. However, this change had minimal effect on the longstanding military control of the port, which had evolved into a significant military and naval stronghold.

This continued for the rest of the Cold War period when Ethiopia enjoyed not only American support but also USSR direct military involvement in Ethiopia's war against the Eritrean struggle. However, despite the unqualified superpower patronage Ethiopia enjoyed throughout the Cold War decades, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that led the independence movement of that former colony defeated the huge, well-equipped Ethiopian armed forces in May 1991.

The next few years after Eritrea's independence showed a great deal of promise for both countries and the rest of the region. In fact, the years from 1991 to 1998 serve as a remarkable illustration of peaceful coexistence and economic collaboration between the two nations. During this period, the two countries entered into a cooperative agreement that was particularly advantageous for Ethiopia, which lacked direct access to the sea. This agreement permitted Ethiopia to use Eritrea's ports of Assab and Massawa for its maritime trade without having to pay duties. This arrangement not only facilitated Ethiopia's access to international markets but also boosted the economic prospects of both nations. It highlighted the potential for beneficial and harmonious relationships between neighboring countries, demonstrating how diplomatic and economic strategies can lead to mutual prosperity. This phase of their relationship underscored the significant advantages of regional cooperation and set a positive precedent for neighboring states in terms of economic partnership and conflict resolution.

Then a mere five years after Eritrea's independence was internationally recognized in 1993, Ethiopia sought to reassert control over Eritrean territory, notably targeting the strategic port of Assab. Though ostensibly centered around the town of Badme, this conflict largely aimed to secure Ethiopia access to Assab. Ethiopia's primary, albeit unspoken, objective during the late-1990s Border War was to capture Assab, a point underscored by Ethiopian politicians' calls for its acquisition. Furthermore, Eritreans were also convinced that Ethiopia's true intention from the start of the war was to seize the port of Assab.¹⁶ All that brought almost everything the two nations had started to do in partnership came to a shrieking halt. Ethiopia's commercial

¹⁴ Yohannes, *Eritrea, A Pawn*, p. 220

¹⁵ Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990, p. 18, quoting *Adulis IV*, 5, 1987.

¹⁶ Dominique Jacquin-Berdal & Martin Plaut, *Unfinished*, see Notes 1 & 2 above; also see *Eritrea: Historical Dictionary*, pps. 92-93.

shipping through Eritrean ports came to a standstill. A full-scale war went on for more than two years, claiming the lives of tens of thousands on both sides of the border.

In its investigation to pinpoint the drivers of the dispute, the British *Guardian* newspaper attributed it to “a weak [Tigrayan led] Ethiopian government” that was trying “to stave off collapse by turning the country into a loose federation of ethnic states,” one of which being Tigray. Then, the paper said, the regime tried “to divert Tigrayan ambitions by offering them Eritrean territory, even an outlet to the Red Sea.”¹⁷

In the wake of the destructive conflict, which went on until mid 2000 and claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced even more, the need for a definitive boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia became imperative. The conflict underscored the necessity for a clear demarcation to prevent future conflicts. The Algiers Peace Agreement, signed on December 12, 2000, under the auspices of the United Nations, established the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) to delineate and demarcate the border between the two countries. The agreement mandated the commission to delimit and demarcate the border based on relevant colonial treaties (1900, 1902, and 1908) and applicable international law. The agreement specified that the commission, composed of five members, would not have the authority to make decisions *ex aequo et bono*, or ‘according to what is just and good.’ In April 2002, the EEBC delivered its decision, which awarded the town of Badme, the epicenter of the conflict, to Eritrea. This decision was based on colonial treaties and evidence provided by both parties during the delimitation process.

Though the commission issued its decision three years after the start of the war, the conflict was not resolved for another 17 years because the regime in power during that time in Addis Ababa had other plans. As a result, it refused to accept the decision, leading to a prolonged stalemate between the two countries, with both sides fortifying their positions along the disputed border. -The failure to implement the EEBC's decision not only prolonged the dispute but also contributed to the deterioration of relations between the two nations, affecting regional stability and hindering economic development.

The regime, then dominated and almost totally controlled by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), chose to wage a low-intensity, but multifaceted and relentless ‘No-War No-Peace’ campaign, freezing the simmering conflict, trying a new scheme to achieve what it could not achieve through active fighting.

Then, seventeen years after the commission’s decision, a historic peace agreement was signed between Eritrea and a new Ethiopian government in 2018, ending two decades of hostility. As part of the agreement, both countries agreed to implement the EEBC's decision, including the demarcation of the border.- Unfortunately, Ethiopia’s entitlement complex reasserted itself merely five years later when the same regime that signed the 2018 peace agreement launched a new aggressive maritime access campaign once again putting the Horn region on edge.

V. Walvis Bay: Gateway to Many Nations

South Africa's claim over Namibia's Walvis Bay goes back to the colonial era when the territory was called South West Africa and was part of the German empire. However, Germany’s occupation period of the territory was relatively short compared with those of the other European colonizers due to its defeat early in World War I, forcing it to give up its colonies. As a result, South West Africa, along with the Walvis Bay enclave, came under the League of Nations mandate system and South Africa was allowed to temporarily administer it.

However, a little over two decades later, the then newly established United Nations, succeeding the League of Nations, told South Africa to relinquish its control over the territory to place it in the United Nations Trusteeship system whose principal mandate was to get ready former colonies for independence following a ten-year preparatory transition. The apartheid regime refused to give up control of the territory, citing historical claims and strategic imperatives. Its control over the port allowed it to exert significant leverage over landlocked neighboring states that needed maritime access, thereby influencing regional and continental dynamics.

Walvis Bay's location at the Atlantic coast of Namibia grants it a strategic advantage for trade. Unlike many other ports in the region, Walvis Bay offers deep-water access, allowing large vessels to dock and unload cargo efficiently. Its proximity to major shipping routes makes it an attractive option for international trade, reducing

¹⁷Neal Arscherson, *The Guardian* newspaper (online), “When two tribes go to war, only the arms dealer wins,” 28 February, 1999. Retrieved March 6, 2024, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/feb/28/ethiopia.nealarscherson1> (Emphasis added).

transit times and costs for landlocked countries.” Its strategic location of the port--halfway down the Atlantic coastal area of Namibia, with straight access to main shipping routes--has made it “the gateway port for trade between landlocked African countries and the rest of the world.”¹⁸

It serves as a critical gateway for at least three of the 16 landlocked nations in Africa —Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. It provides them access to global markets. Today, all three nations have dry port facilities in Walvis Bay. Its increasing attractiveness “can be attributed to several key factors including strategic location, efficient transport corridor, modern infrastructure, customs and trade facilitation, competitive costs, political stability, diversified cargo handling and being transshipment hub,” says Trevor Ndjadila, acting executive at NamPort. In terms of strategic location, he said Walvis Bay “offers a strategic and geographically advantageous location along the southwestern coast of Africa. It provides these landlocked countries with direct access to international markets, bypassing the lengthy and congested routes through neighboring countries.”¹⁹

Writing a year before Namibia became independent, Christopher Wren, a *New York Times* correspondent described the bay as a ‘prime property that controls the future of an independent Namibia.’ However, he predicted that “the tiny enclave will not be part of Namibia, which it encloses on three sides, when the country finally becomes independent.” Adding, he asserted, ““under international law it is sovereign South African territory.” Reiterating the significance of the enclave to the future of the territory, he predicted that Namibia “would find it hard to survive without access to the only deep-water port on its 700-mile coast.” But the American paper of records stressed that South Africa held “an indisputable title to Walvis Bay.”²⁰

However, Pretoria faced persistent challenges to its claim from both domestic and international groups. The then evolving Namibian peoples struggle to end South Africa’s occupation of their country brought the question of Walvis Bay into sharp focus. The South West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO), which led the Namibian independence movement, strongly opposed the apartheid regime. The guerrilla group said the enclave was sovereign Namibian territory and that its fighters would liberate every part of Namibia from Pretoria’s control, no matter “whether it takes place in a negotiated settlement or whether we have to go into the dunes” to fight.²¹

There were also significant challenges from the United Nations and the rest of the international community. The UN and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) recognized the enclave as an integral part of Namibia, thereby establishing Windhoek’s sovereignty over it. A year after South Africa tried to separate the enclave from Namibia, the UNSC approved Res. 432, which called for the “early re-integration of Walvis Bay into Namibia”²² In addition to the broader international community’s pressure on South Africa to end its control over the territory, there were similar efforts from regional and continental organizations such as the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) which later came to be known as African Union (AU).

However, Pretoria persisted in its efforts by employing various tactics to keep the bay, along with the Penguin Islands. as part of its territory in the event of Namibia gaining independence. These tactics included incorporating it into a neighboring South African province to create a fait accompli for the Namibian people and the international community that has been supporting them. For example, when there was a great push in the United Nations for the independence of Namibia toward the end of the 1970s, Pretoria put Walvis Bay “under the

¹⁸ See Africa’s Ports and Ships, *Walvis Bay Port*, March 17, 2024, retrieved on March 17, 2024, from https://www.linkedin.com/posts/namibiannews_walvis-bay-woos-neighbouring-countries-activity-7159055782783729664-DJ

¹⁹ Chamwe Kaira, “Walvis Bay woos neighboring countries,” *All Namibia News Post*, retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://www.linkedin.com/posts/namibiannews_walvis-bay-woos-neighbouring-countries-activity-7159055782783729664-DJ

²⁰ Ibid. [Wren]

²¹ Christopher S. Wren, “Walvis Bay Journal: At Namibia’s Gateway, South Africa Has the Key,” *the New York Times*, April 27, 1989, retrieved March 25, 2024, from: <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/27/world/walvis-bay-journal-at-namibia-s-gateway-south-africa-has-the-key.html?searchResultPosition=1>

²²See, *Namibia: Historical Dictionary*, Victor Tonchi, William A. Lindeke, and John J. Grotperter, Second Edition, Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2012, p. 458.

administration of Cape Town more than 1,100 miles to the south.” It then “proclaimed the formal annexation of Walvis Bay and the offshore islands by South Africa.”²³

Furthermore, Pretoria also tried to use its control of the port as a ploy to stop the push for Namibian independence. Wallace and Kinahan say, in 1977, Pretoria used Walvis Bay as a tool to block any attempt in negotiations towards independence. “The path to genuine independence was barred by the fact that South Africa retained control over vital areas of government, including military matters, foreign relations, finance, internal security, broadcasting, customs and excise.” Adding, Wallace and Kinahan said, “The possibility of full and viable independence was further undermined when South Africa directly annexed Walvis Bay, Namibia’s only deep-water port in September 1977.”²⁴

In the end, intensified global pressure, which included multi-faceted sanctions and diplomatic isolation steadily grew to force the apartheid regime to end its control over Walvis Bay and the Penguin Islands. Namibia’s independence in 1990 also served as an important turning point in the struggle to liberate the enclave. The newly formed government of former guerrilla fighters launched a global campaign to ensure the port and other remaining parts of Namibia are returned to their rightful owners. The government asserted uncompromising sovereignty over the port. It leveraged the fast-changing situation in South Africa marking the end of the racist system of governance in Pretoria and the beginning of its transition to democracy. The new dynamics weakened Pretoria’s expansionist energy in the negotiation on Walvis Bay and the Penguin Islands.²⁵

Finally, Walvis Bay’s sovereignty was transferred back to Namibia on March 1, 1994, four years after the country’s independence. The official transfer was the outcome of a treaty between the post-apartheid government in South Africa and Namibia and that “ended Namibia’s decolonization process.”²⁶

VI. Conclusion: Lessons Learned and Unlearned

The cases of apartheid South Africa and Namibia on the one hand, and imperial Ethiopia and Eritrea on the other, underscore the complexities of contiguous expansionism and its enduring impact on victim nations. These cases offer two overriding lessons—one in peaceful coexistence and the other in continued conflict unless and until the source of the aggression driving it is removed or transformed.

From 1991 to 1998, the years following its independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea exemplified the benefits of peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation. In the wake of its independence, Eritrea and Ethiopia forged a mutually advantageous agreement that allowed Ethiopia, which does not have a coastline, to access Eritrea’s ports in Assab and Massawa for shipping purposes without incurring duties. This arrangement not only enabled Ethiopia to connect more easily with global markets but also spurred economic growth for both nations. It showcased the advantages of diplomacy and economic integration in fostering shared prosperity. This early period in their relationship demonstrated the substantial benefits of regional collaboration, setting a constructive example for other neighboring countries in how to build economic partnerships and resolve conflicts.

The experiences of Namibia’s Walvis Bay and the landlocked nations it serves—Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—also highlight valuable lessons about the importance of peaceful cooperation for maritime access. By examining the history of these nations and drawing parallels with the cooperative relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1991 to 1998, it becomes evident that aggression is not necessary to secure sea access. Peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation emerge as preferable and mutually beneficial approaches. Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, as landlocked nations, heavily depend on Walvis Bay for their international trade. The cooperative relationship between these nations and Namibia underscores the importance of maintaining peaceful relations and fostering economic cooperation.

²³ Christopher S. Wren, *Walvis Bay Journal; At Namibia’s Gateway, South Africa Has the Key*, the *New York Times*, April 27, 1989; retrieved March 25, 2024, from: <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/27/world/walvis-bay-journal-at-namibia-s-gateway-south-africa-has-the-key.html?searchResultPosition=1>

²⁴ Marion Wallace with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 287.

²⁵ Laurent C. W. Kaela, *The Question of Namibia*, p. 134:

²⁶ *Ibid.*

However, another overriding lesson highlights that the lingering shadows of contiguous ties with expansionist neighbors can also lead to enduring conflicts long after the shackles of colonialism are shattered unless and until the underlying cause of the aggression is totally removed or completely transformed. In the Namibian case, we see the continuous shadows of contiguous relationship with an expansionist neighbor clearing because the source of the colonial and post-colonial aggression was removed and the relationship completely transformed. The winds of change in southern Africa that eventually led to the slow dismantling of the abhorrent policy of apartheid, the source of the underlying aggression, paved a path leading toward a settlement on the Walvis Bay dispute. One year after the independence of Namibia, talks on the enclave as well as the offshore islands that Pretoria claimed started in South Africa and concluded five years later.

However, in the Horn of Africa, such a transformation has yet to occur, despite a comprehensive agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018. Recent threats regarding maritime access suggest that the ghosts of the Ethiopian empire are not done yet tormenting the region. The region will continue to be haunted by its past unless and until the underlying source of the aggression is removed or transformed.²⁷

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²⁷ This will continue in Part 2 of this 2-Part Series. Look for “*The Ghosts of the Ethiopian Empire Continue to Haunt the Horn Region*” in academia.edu.

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