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### **Historic peace declaration between Ethiopia and Eritrea: what's next?**

On Monday 9<sup>th</sup> of July, a momentous “Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship” has been signed by Ethiopia and Eritrea in Asmara, officially ending the twenty years long state of war that has been agitating the border between the two countries since 1998.

Paradoxically, the agreement saw the light as much unexpectedly as it was sought and hoped for by the locals and the international community after the election of the new Ethiopian Prime Minister in April 2018. On the one hand, in fact, in just a few months from the appointment, Abiy Ahmed not only delivered a series of democratic reforms that rapidly eased the social and political upheaval that had plunged his country into a severe governmental crisis at the beginning of the year; he soon also assumed the role of a regional appeaser, announcing his openness to discuss borders' revision and peace with neighbouring Eritrea. On the other hand, though, such an intention had an unfortunate record: neither a UN resolution in 1998 [*UN Security Council Resolution 1177*], nor a peace plan promoted by the US and Rwanda in 2000 or the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission's ruling of the same year, were effective in definitely ceasing the war. Besides, the authoritarian and repressive closure of the Eritrean regime, never represented a favourable factor: President Isaias Afewerki notably used the conflict to uphold the suspension of the constitution, the establishment of a permanent compulsory military service and the ban of free press, criminalising any form of dissent and perpetrating human rights' violations.

This notwithstanding, the rapprochement did happen. Once Ethiopia recognised the city of Badme and the surrounding disputed territories as Eritrean in early July, for the first time in two decades embassies in both countries were reopened, flights and phone connections restored, troops on the border withdrawn.

Economic interests clearly play a prominent role in this timely reconciliation. Both countries will indeed greatly benefit from the resumption of the road connections between Addis Ababa and two main Eritrean ports - Massawa in the north and Assab in the south. For twenty years, landlocked Ethiopia has been relying solely on Djibouti ports to gain access to the sea, but its major and swift economic growth is

increasing the demand of goods: two closer ports could reduce transportation costs and boost the country's foreign trade and hard currency income. From Asmara's side, restoring commerce with its much bigger neighbour is a potential first step in order to get investments and financial aid: the long-term conflict and the self-imposed isolation exacerbated the already stagnating economy. If business develops, the privileged position of Djibouti will be contested both in commercial and strategic terms.

UN Secretary General, António Guterres, hailed "a new wind of hope blowing across Africa" [*Ethiopia and Eritrea say war over, U.N. hails "wind of hope" in Africa*, Reuters, July 9, 2018]: this declaration of peace may end one of the continent's longest conflicts, as well as one of the Horn of Africa's main destabilising factors. Yet, regional turmoil could not be so easy to overcome.

Peaceful and diplomatic relations still have to be restored between Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, while the unrest shaking Somaliland remains a threat to Ethiopian borders in the east. Finally, a crucial question to which only time will give an answer concerns Asmara's future politics: what will be the consequences of the overture towards democratic Ethiopia on its totalitarian system? Will Afewerki extend this liberalising process internally, offering some concessions to his people in terms of social and political rights, or will he risk his power, intensifying popular discontent?

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