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Prospects for the End of Eritrea's International Isolation

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Eritrea remains Africa's most isolated state, accused of sponsoring terrorism and destabilising the region. Reconciliation with Ethiopia, sealed on 8 July, and its neighbours' openness to dialogue may lead to a revitalisation of Eritrea's relations with the outside world. But the Eritrean regime, facing increasing economic expectations from its population, may not survive the shift.

During Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's visit to Eritrea on 8 July, the leaders of the two countries announced the end of the state of war that had lasted 20 years. The agreement is significant because of the political system of Eritrea, a country of 5 million inhabitants dubbed "Africa's North Korea" because it is considered the most repressive on the continent. Since gaining independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Isaias Afwerki, a former rebel leader, remains the country's president. He has never faced an election and his party is the only legal one. The 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia defined his ideology of the state, based on the besieged fortress ethos, hostility towards Ethiopia, and citizen devotion to the state. One of its emanations took the form of "national service", including military service and public works, mandatory for secondary-school graduates. Often, the conditions of service have been close to slavery and the practice is marred by human-rights abuses. Avoiding this service, itself poorly defined and often extended to up to 20 years, pushes Eritreans to flee the country, which the state deems illegal. After imprisoning a group of intellectuals who in 2001 signed an open letter calling for reforms, public debate ceased to exist. Despite this repression, Christian-Muslim Eritrea has avoided extremism and inter-faith tension, unlike other countries of the region, and has built a strong national identity.

Regional Context. Since the start of the war in 1998 to the July agreement, the goal of weakening Ethiopia remained the main driver of Eritrea's foreign policy. Eritrea hosted Ethiopian anti-government armed movements and supported any parties in the region that tried to undermine its greater neighbour's interests. When Ethiopia intervened in Somalia in 2006 against local allies of Eritrea and the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) remained silent, Eritrea ceased to participate in the organisation. The country remains one of the least active members of the African Union. While Eritrea made efforts to revitalise its IGAD membership in 2011, the current rapprochement with Ethiopia has reinvigorated its re-integration. Eritrea's border conflict with Djibouti remains unresolved and worsened after Qatar in 2017 pulled back its forces separating the two sides. Restoring diplomatic relations with Somalia and positive gestures towards Sudan prove Eritrea's determination to end the conflicts with all its neighbours.

Migration from Eritrea and the European Context. Eritrea is the primary origin state of most of the African migrants reaching Europe. Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden are among their top destinations. In the record migration year of 2015, as many as 47,000 Eritreans filed asylum claims in the EU. Eritreans also emigrated to Israel, the Gulf, or joined the 250,000 or so people already in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. In 2017, some 7,000 reached Europe, including 1,000 unaccompanied minors. Most EU states, with the exception of the UK and Denmark, accept Eritrea's "national service" obligation as a justified rationale for granting protection.

Eritrea actively participates in the Khartoum Process, an EU-Africa scheme to reduce irregular migration from the Horn of Africa. In 2015, the EU provided Eritrea with a €200 million package to combat human trafficking and develop renewable energy. However, the Eritrean authorities seem unmotivated by money, making it less likely it will be spent properly. In 2011, Eritrea without providing a reason returned funds awarded by the European Commission two years earlier for the development of agriculture and roads. In recent years, the country has not maintained relations with Western donors and has not allowed in foreign NGOs. German, British, and U.S. groups are trying to renew operations in Eritrea.

Global Dimension. At the start of the century, Eritrea tried to establish good relations with the U.S., competing with Djibouti to host an American military base, but by 2007 the U.S. State Department listed it as a state sponsor of terrorism. The move was justified by Eritrea's support for Somali extremists from the Al-Shabaab group, which later formally became part of Al Qaeda. While Eritrea's ties to the group were not driven by shared ideology but by its intention to harm Ethiopia, it resulted in global ostracism. In 2009 and 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) put sanctions on Eritrean authorities, including an arms embargo, travel bans, and freezing the assets of selected officials, as well as delegating the practice of collecting "taxes" among the Eritrean diaspora. In 2012, Sheila B. Keetharuth, a diplomat from Mauritius, was appointed special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea. During her tenure, she called for Eritrean authorities to be brought before the International Criminal Court. The sanctions also had strong backing from the U.S. administration under then-President Barack Obama. Lifting them is now a major aim of Eritrean global foreign policy. For this reason, the country allowed an OHCHR inspection of its prisons in 2017. In November that same year, a UN panel of experts called on the Security Council to lift the sanctions because Eritrea no longer supported the Somali extremists, but the Council prolonged them, citing the unresolved conflict with Djibouti and objections from Ethiopia. It is expected the sanctions will be finally lifted this autumn.

In the last couple of years, Eritrea has undertaken a few, careful initiatives to open up. Canadian firm Nevsun Resources, in partnership with Eritrean state-owned ENAMCO, launched a gold, copper, and zinc mine in Bisha. Three more are planned. In the port of Massawa, a free-trade zone was established. Starting in 2015, the country allowed some foreign journalists in, and in the following year, it hosted an international scientific conference on Eritrean internal and external policies. In 2016, despite sanctions, it allowed the United Arab Emirates to open a military base in another port city, Assab, and offered troops to support the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. In 2017, the modernist architecture of Asmara became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Perspectives and Conclusions. The peace with Ethiopia will increase regional security and strengthen Eritrea's international position. This may affect the situation with migration. It is unclear if Ethiopia will keep its current policy of automatically granting refugee status to any Eritrean and supporting relocation programmes. President Afwerki may push Ethiopia to return them. Israel has already announced it will deport Eritreans once the rules of "national service" are softened. For European states, the signs of normalisation of relations with Eritrea may provide easy justification for changing the rules on the treatment of migrants from that country.

Under Afwerki, attempts to break from isolation may be slowed by the deeply rooted reluctance to accept foreign dependency and Eritrea's peculiar notion of national pride. The country, which has one of Africa's lowest human-development indicators, will need external financial aid. Prospects for it are limited by the lack of local partners and the requirement to use government channels for aid. Members of the administration who benefit from the lack of financial transparency and relations with criminal groups will be against changing the status quo. Poland conducts development programmes in Ethiopia and could potentially extend them to Eritrea. The atmosphere of warming may encourage demands for internal political reforms for which the government is not ready. These would most likely result in a revolt or coup attempt than in democratisation. Despite the limitations and risks, the EU will push for better working relations with Eritrea, and thanks to the Eritrean-Ethiopian agreement, Polish investors may gain access to Eritrean export ports and its market.