



THE ETHIO-SUDAN BORDERLAND IN THE AGE OF NEW GEOPOLITICS: PROTRACTED DISPUTES AND THE LIMITS OF COOPERATION

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Abstract

This article analyses the historical trajectory and current dynamics of the protracted Ethio-Sudan border conflict over al-Fashaga/Mesk Wuha Triangle. Historically, repeated agreements, including the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement, the 1972 Exchange of Notes, and the 2005-2007 joint boundary demarcation, only produced functional coexistence on the ground without legally demarcation. Following the outbreak of the civil war in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region on November 20, 2020, the Sudanese military announced that it has occupied the contested territory breaking down the functional arrangement and fragility of co-existence in the region. By drawing archival and qualitative materials, the paper argues resolving the border dispute has been complicated due to three national and geopolitical developments. First, the geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa that draws Gulf countries like the UAE has elevated the political cost of territorial concessions. Second, the complex linkages of border disputes with the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) negotiations inviting lower riparian countries transforming the dispute into a regional issue. Third, internal political instabilities such as the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the rise of Amhara nationalism, and strong claims over contested territories have all influenced border negotiations and the peaceful demarcation of borders.

Keywords

Borderland, Protracted conflict, al-Fashaga, Ethio-Sudan, Geopolitics

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1. Introduction

Borders in the Horn of Africa (HoA) have been a source of conflict rather than collaboration. Ethiopia, for instance, has fought devastating conflicts with Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan over boundary disputes. Border issues have stifled collaboration and integration in the wider HoA region, causing proxy wars and distrust (Dereje and Hoehne, 2008). Border disputes have hindered economic growth in the HoA. Military spending and defense initiatives have diverted resources away from regional development. Additionally, a lack of collaboration and integration has hindered infrastructure projects, including cross-border transportation networks and commercial routes. As a result of poverty, underdevelopment, and instability, the countries in the HoA continue to experience conflict and contestation (World Bank, 2020).

At the heart of such borderland¹ contestation lies the arbitrary delimitation of colonial boundaries (Zeller, 2013). Ethiopia is unique in that it was the only country to negotiate its international border with the colonial powers of neighboring states in the early 1900s (Belete, 2012). However, this did not spare Ethiopia from ongoing border disputes. In fact, the country has fought multiple wars over territorial claims throughout its history. The earliest attempt to prevent border disputes was devised by the founding fathers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). They agreed to maintain “the borders of African States on the day of their independence as a tangible reality and agreed to respect the borders existing on their achievement of national independence” (OAU, 1964). Although it has prevented wars in other parts of Africa, this mechanism proved ineffective in the HoA.

The Ethio-Sudan border dispute serves as a classic example of boundary conflicts. The border between the two countries was established according to treaties Ethiopia signed with Great Britain and Italy in 1900 and 1902, as well as through subsequent unilateral demarcations made by Major Gwynn in 1903 and 1908 (Bahru, 1976). The contestation over the borderlands stems from ambiguities in the treaties and gaps in the implementation of the terms of the 1902 agreement (Belete, 2016; Alemayehu, 2021).

For most of the first half of the 20th century, the Ethio-Sudan borderland was neither a zone of conflict nor of cooperation. It remained unpopulated, and the state's presence was minimal (Belete, 2016). With Sudanese independence from British colonialism in 1956 and large-scale agricultural development of sesame and cotton production in Ethiopia's Humera, Metema, and Quara borderland areas, also known as the al-Fashaga Triangle or Mesk Wuha, the borderland areas began drawing the attention of both Ethiopia and Sudan. Sudan claimed large chunks of the borderlands cultivated by Ethiopian farmers, based on Major Gwynn's demarcation (Alemayehu, 2019). Here, apart from the historical and legal claims and counter-claims, the economic factor has been a determining variable in the escalation of the border dispute. Al-Fashaga, or Mesk Wuha, covers 250 square kilometers, of which 600,000 acres are fertile land fed by three rivers—Gwang, Angereb, and Setit/Tekeze (Horner and Soliman, 2023). Ignoring the economic factor in the context analysis, therefore, fails to offer the full picture of the border conflict.

To resolve the border dispute, Ethiopia and Sudan have been involved in lengthy negotiations since the 1960s. A significant development in this process was the 1972 “Exchange of Notes” between the foreign ministries of Sudan and Ethiopia. This agreement established that the existing farming and settlement arrangements in al-Fashaga would be maintained until the borders could be officially demarcated (Belete, 2016). However, the status quo has not been respected during various periods, especially during political transitions and crises in Ethiopia in 1974, 1990s, and 2020s.

Since the 1972 diplomatic notes, reaching an amicable solution has become daunting. Both countries are utilizing various joint institutional mechanisms, such as ministerial meetings, technical discussions, and boundary commissions, to explore solutions for borderland demarcation, and temporary arrangements, including a 2005 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), have addressed conflicts arising from new settlements and farmland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 2005).

The repeated negotiation, temporary arrangement, renewed contestation is the puzzle this paper aimed to look into. As such, the paper distinguishes legal or sovereign resolution and functional cooperation throughout the paper. Legal or sovereign resolution refers a boundary that has been demarcated on the ground and mutually ratified by both governments. Functional cooperation refers to mutual arrangements for joint cultivation rights of the borderlands, provisional land titling, and status quo agreement pending a future demarcation. In doing so, the paper specifically asks two questions: how has the historical documents illustrate the across the documented history of the dispute, how has any agreement produced legal or sovereign resolution, a demarcated, mutually ratified boundary, or has the dispute only ever produced functional cooperation, meaning arrangements that manage land use and settlement without resolving the underlying claim? Second, how has the internal/national political contexts and the broader geopolitical developments shaped the borderland cooperation and contestation?

Methodologically, the paper draws archival materials from Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives such as agenda records, agreements, and internal correspondence from 1966 to 2005, key informant interviews, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), secondary historical and policy literature, alongside interviews conducted in 2023 in Gondar, to investigate the developments of borderland cooperation and contestation along the Ethio-Sudan border.

The paper is structured into four sections. The following three parts trace the historical developments throughout the 20th century of the border dispute and efforts to settle it through negotiation. The paper then engages three factors specific to the contemporary period, the return of multi-polar geopolitical competition, the rise of Amhara nationalism, and the entanglement of the border dispute with the Nile politics and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The conclusion returns to the three questions above.

2. The Treaties and the Silent Years in the Colonial Era (1900-1950s)

The establishment of British colonial rule in Sudan during the latter part of the 19th century has significantly shaped the subsequent relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan. The roots of the border clash arise from Anglo-Egyptian expansion after defeating Mahdist rule in Sudan and extending to the western frontier territories of Ethiopia, and from the Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896 (Bahru, 1976). In 1898, Emperor Menelik II dispatched his army to the frontiers to incorporate Ethiopia's ancient territories along the south and north banks of the Abay River (Blue Nile) (Alemayehu, 2019). Marcus (1963: 83) mentions the emperor also declared Ethiopia's western border to Europeans as:

... a line which starts from Arafale on the sea, the Italian border, stretches across the plain of Jegra toward the west, and extends to Mahio, Halai, Digsä, and up to Gura Adibaro. Starting from Adibaro, it extends to the meeting point between the Mereb and Arated River, and then extends farther south to the meeting point between the Rivers Atbara and Setit where is the town of Tomat. From Tomat, the boundary includes the Province of Gedaref and extends to the meeting point between the White Nile and Sobat Rivers.

To avoid confrontation, Britain appointed Lieutenant Colonel John Lane Harrington to negotiate the borderline with Ethiopia. The Anglo-Ethiopia Treaty of July 15, 1902 was signed following a prolonged period of discussions, stalemates, and push-backs. This agreement was reached between Menelik II of Ethiopia and Harrington (Bahru, 1976). The parties agreed on the delimitation of the frontier and a subsequent actual demarcation of the borderline to be determined in the presence of the delegates of both parties. As to the delimitation of the border, Article I of the Treaty reads:

The frontier between the Soudan and Ethiopia agreed on between the two Governments shall be: ... in duplicate and traced from Khor Um Hagar to Gallabat, to the Blue Nile, Baro, Pibor and Akobo rivers, to Melile thence to the intersection of the 6th degree north latitude with the 35th degree longitude East of Greenwich. (Ullendorff, 1967: 643)

Apart from addressing the pressing border issue and the modalities of the actual demarcation (Article II), the treaty also outlined agreements over the utilization of the Blue Nile and its tributaries and the economic privileges of Britain over the western border of Ethiopia. At this point, the signing of the treaty, as Harold Marcus argued, demonstrates "the care taken in these negotiations can still be appreciated in the fact that the border exists today much as it was set in 1902 and remains undisputed in a part of the world where present border disputes are largely the result of misjudgments in the creation of frontiers around the turn of the century" (Marcus, 1963).

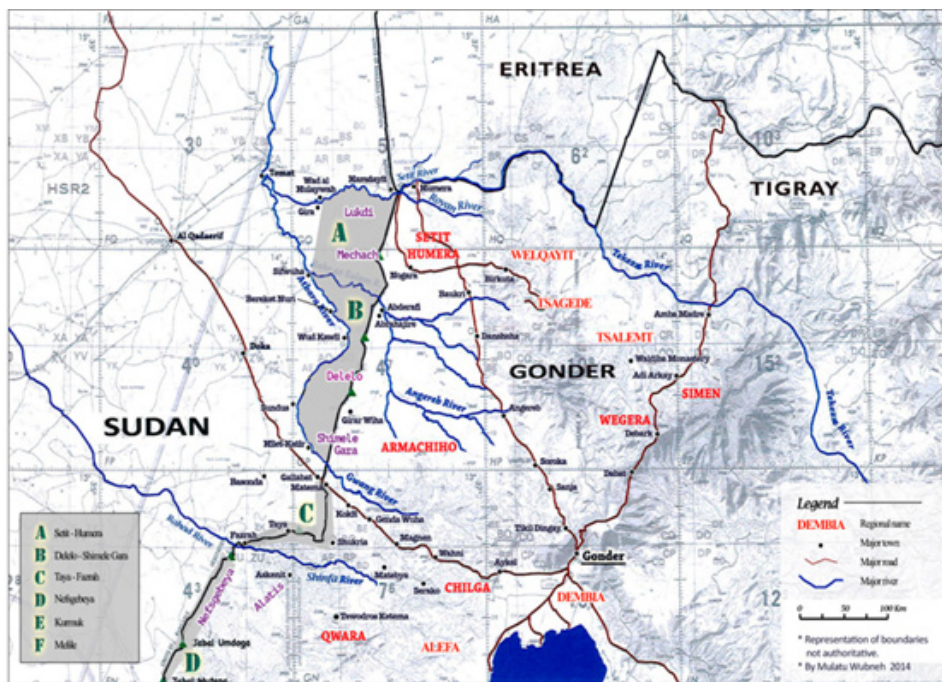
However, the actual demarcation of the border eventually caused strained relations between the two countries, which continue to this day. Without Ethiopia's participation, British Commissioners Major Gwynn and Captain Austin completed the boundary demarcation that the British side recognized in 1903, 1907, and 1909. The rejection of the Gwynn Line ultimately stemmed from a violation of Article II of the 1902 treaty, which requires the presence of both signatories during the demarcation process. Gwynn acknowledged that Ethiopian representatives were not involved in this process, yet he was still permitted to act on behalf of Ethiopia (Gwynn, 1937). Mesfin *et al* (1981) suspect that Gwynn received Menelik's authorization to undertake the demarcation.

Mulatu (2015) specifically outlined the problems surrounding the treaty and the demarcation processes. For instance, the treaty fails to clearly delineate border lines, mentioning only major landmarks, which are difficult to convert into maps or actual demarcations. For example, it does not address the border between Tomat and the junction of Khor Um Hajer and the Setit River. There are also suspicions regarding Menelik's seal on the treaty and map, as well as discrepancies in the dates of the treaty's ratification. These issues have led successive Ethiopian governments to reject the 1902 treaty and the Gwynn demarcation. A historical puzzle that remains unresolved is why Emperor Menelik signed the 1902 treaty despite the significant discrepancies between the territory he claimed and the territory outlined in the agreement (Mulatu, 2015).

The dispute over the Setit-Mount Dagleish (Sikuar Terara) line, also known as the al-Fashaga (Mezega or Mesk-Wuha) Triangle, arose from the lack of consensus regarding the political boundary established by Gwynn. As Zewde points out, the claims to this territory remained dormant until the 1950s because the frontier was largely unpopulated and agricultural practices were limited (Alemayehu, 2019).

3. Post-colonial Era Border Disputes and Resolution Attempts (1950s- 1974)

The political developments that transpired in Sudan and Ethiopia during the late 1950s played a paramount role in changing the existing status quo of the territorial boundaries (Mulatu, 2015). The two critical early developments that defined the trajectories of the frontier's status quo were the introduction of mechanized agriculture in the Setit-Agareb-Guang basin in Ethiopia in the 1950s and 60s, and Sudan's independence and fears over Ethiopia's action along the frontier (Belete, 2021). The relationship between the two countries has faced significant challenges due to border disputes. These challenges include ongoing border contestation, support for secessionist groups such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), local border skirmishes, and geopolitical competition (Young, 2007).



▲ Map 1. The Contested al-Fashaga Triangle (A and B). Source: Mulatu, 2015: 12

To resolve their differences, compelled by internal and geopolitical factors, the two countries held various discussions and exchanged diplomatic notes. For instance, in 1964, the foreign ministries of both Sudan (Said Mohammed) and Ethiopia (Ketema Yifru) convened in New York, where Ethiopia rejected the Gwynn Line but agreed to settle any dispute diplomatically. With such initiatives, diplomatic missions were exchanged in the years that followed. This eventually led to the establishment of the Joint Ministerial Consultative Committee (JMCC), the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC), and the Joint Boundary Commission of Experts (JBCE) in 1965 (Alemayehu, 2019).

The Commission started its work with the premise of maintaining the existing status quo along the territorial frontier (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1972). The problem the JMCC encountered was narrowing down the position of Ethiopia, which insisted on the 1900 and 1901 treaties, and Sudan's push for the 1902 and 1903 Gwynn demarcation with little or no rectification (Taha, 1971). The 1900 Treaty was signed between Emperor Menelik and Major Narazzini, the governor of Eritrea, and specified Tomat (the intersection of the Setit and Atbara) as the starting point of Ethio-Italian Eritrea. The April 16, 1901 Treaty delimited the Sudan and Eritrea boundary, following the Setit-Atbara junction as a starting line of the boundary (Marcus, 1973). These two earlier treaties totally diverge from the 1902 Ethio-Sudan delimitation and the subsequent Gwynn demarcation. By signing the Addendum to

the 1902 Treaty, Menelik rendered the previous agreements void and null. Articles I and II of the Addendum changed the boundary lines between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as those between Sudan and Eritrea. The negotiations encountered a stalemate and were discontinued until 1972 (Mulatu, 2015).

To simplify the demarcation process, the JBC offered a solution of dividing the boundary line into four sections (see Map 1): the Northern Part (extending from Ras Kasar to the Setit River), the Northern Middle Part (extending from the Setit River to Mount Daglash), the Southern Middle Part (extending from Mount Daglash to the intersection of 6°N latitude and 35°E longitude), and the Southern Part (extending from 6°N latitude and 35°E longitude to the end of the common border) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 1967). After extensive consultations and discussions, neither country was able to reach a final agreement on the demarcation of their border. Each country's position was contradictory: Sudan insisted on avoiding any re-demarcation of the boundary, claiming that Major Gwynn had concluded the demarcation after consulting existing treaties. They argued that the commission's only task should be to locate some of the lost boundary markers. In contrast, Ethiopia contended that the boundary demarcation between the two countries had not been legally finalized. They maintained that Major Gwynn's demarcations in 1903 and 1909 were conducted unilaterally and that Ethiopia would not accept them (see Belete, 2021).

Following this failed attempt to resolve the border contestation, particularly in the aftermath of Nimeiri's accession to power in Sudan, the frontier was beginning to be militarized as never before, with the establishment of military garrisons within the contested territories of Jebel Gana, Suf Wuha, and Lugedi. As a countermeasure, Ethiopia moved its Second Army Division to the Setit-Humera area. Such border militarization caused sporadic violent engagements, including confiscation of grains, burning of houses, death of farmers, etc., which eventually led to demonstrations in Humera town (Alemayehu, 2019).

A new development and policy change on the Ethiopian side sparked the reassembling of the JMCC in 1972. In a letter written to the Foreign Minister of Sudan, Dr. Minase Haile, the Foreign Minister of Ethiopia declared, with the authorization of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the acceptance of the 1902 treaty out of a desire to maintain friendship between the two countries and to quickly settle the border dispute.² The cause for the policy change, apart from the diplomatic mention of friendship, was not clear. However, the Exchange of Notes by the two foreign ministries endorsed basic acceptance of the 1902, 1907, and Gwynn Line treaties, agreed to re-demarcate the contested frontiers, and to find an amicable solution when disputes arose in the demarcation process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1972). In this regard, Alemayehu (2019) argues "basic acceptance" of the Gwynn Line does not mean inheriting the original demarcation. However, as Belete (2021) remarked, the Sudan delegates considered the Exchange of Notes a success, and President Nimeiri immediately approved the document and started working on registering it with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), though it was not successful.

Following the 1972 milestone, to demarcate the Ethio-Sudan borderline, the JBC agreed to divide the sectors into four: the Northern Part (from Ras Kasar to River Setit), the Northern Middle Part (from River Setit to Mount Dagleish), the Southern Middle Part (from Mount Dagleish to the junction of Pibor and Akobo Rivers) and the Southern Part (from the junction of Pibor and Akobo Rivers to the tri-junction). To specifically demarcate the river Setit to the Mount Dagleish line, the Exchange of Notes proposed the establishment of a special joint committee to study and document land ownership status (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1973). While preparing the actual demarcation of the frontier, the 1974 revolution erupted in Ethiopia, which subsequently impeded the peaceful demarcation of the contested frontier (Mulatu, 2015).

4. Third-party intervention and strained border dispute (1974- 1991)

With Derg's rise to power, the border issue remained a significant challenge in the relations between the two countries. Nimeiri's government openly supported the secessionist groups in Ethiopia, while Ethiopia countered this support. The conflict eventually drew the attention of the OAU, which intervened to mediate the situation. This effort resulted in the issuance of an eight-point communiqué in Freetown on December 1977, which emphasized the need to respect the principles of the OAU's charter and called for the immediate reconvening of the Joint Ministerial Commission, among other points (see Belete, 2012). However, these efforts did not improve the situation. Consequently, the border issue remained a protracted conflict without a viable or lasting resolution. After the final exchanges of diplomatic notes between the foreign ministries of both countries, no efforts were made to demarcate the border until another "secret" agreement was signed in 2007 between Ethiopia and Sudan. Unfortunately, much like the previous attempts, this agreement proved to be ineffective (Alemayehu, 2019).

Through the years, Ethiopian governments have demonstrated a strong policy commitment towards protecting the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. However, the presence of the state in the frontiers hinged on the existence of a strong central government. As a result, in transitional periods, particularly post-1974, Sudan successfully occupied the contested territories, including major towns along the border (Interview, September 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). The post-1991 period also witnessed another expansion of Sudan's territory into the hinterlands of Ethiopian territory, to the point of trespassing the Gwynn Line. Following the outbreak of war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, the Sudan Armed Forces declared their intention to reclaim Sudanese territory by displacing Ethiopians along the contested border. This action contradicts agreements established in 1972 and 2007 to maintain the status quo in the region. Amid these complex and ongoing border conflicts, local Ethiopian militias and farmers have consistently played a key role in responding to these incursions up to the present day (Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 2023).

5. Post-1991 developments: policy changes and continuities in the age of globalization

The newly established Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government inherited the boundary dispute over al-Fashaga. The paradox, however, is that during the insurgency years of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Sudan was the major supporter of the group in various facets, including allowing the front to operate freely in Sudan, importing and transporting ammunition to Tigray, etc (Aregawi, 2008). While Ethiopia was focused on its internal issues, the border dispute was not a top priority for the ruling party. The two countries enjoyed peaceful relations until 1995. However, relations became strained following a failed assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa during the OAU summit that same year. The attackers were believed to have been sent from Khartoum (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The Government of Ethiopia (GoE) also accused the Sudanese Army of occupying lands beyond the contested territories between 1995 and 1997 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1967). A former administrator of Metema Woreda recounted how this conflict led to a large-scale border dispute that lasted three months. This conflict involved local militias and farmers, during which the Ethiopian side achieved significant victories, regaining territories that had previously been occupied by the Sudanese Army. The interviewee also noted that the ENDF played a supportive role alongside the local militia and farmers (Interview with Local Official, September, 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). The troubled relations of the two countries continued into the early 2000s.

The two countries resumed border negotiations between 2001 and 2008, holding eleven meetings with their joint ministerial committees and border experts. In the meantime, GoE adopted a more pragmatic approach to resolve the al-Fashaga conundrum and the overall border dispute with Sudan. Indeed, a continued reliance on unilaterally and jointly researching the historical dealings, spatial settlement, and effective control of the borderlands guided the decisions of the GoE. The imperial and Derg governments paid equal attention to conducting prior research with a group of experts on the Ethio-Sudan frontier before signing any agreements, including the 1972 diplomatic Exchange of Notes (Mesfin, 1981). Given the constant fluctuation of settlement patterns due to conflicts, particularly the cultivation of frontier land by either party, practically identifying who has effective control over the contested territory of al-Fashaga has become the primary concern of GoE. As a result, in 2000, a group of experts under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) was established to consult the Boundary Commission of Ethiopia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 2001).

The two countries later established a joint boundary commission on May 2, 2001, in Addis Ababa. The rules of engagement for the commission were determined according to the 1902 treaty and 1972 Exchange of Notes. The main task of the commission was “to study the issues relating to the settlement and cultivation by nationals of either country in the territory (North of Mount Dagleshi) of the oth-

ers with a view to finding an amicable solution” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 1972). The commission, assigned through the Joint Select Working Group (JSWG), is responsible for ensuring legal registration of land titles for both Ethiopian and Sudanese farmers. It aims to create conditions that allow Sudanese small-scale farmers to continue cultivating the land east of the Gwang River. Additionally, Ethiopians will not be displaced from their holdings, and the issuance of new land titles and settlements will be halted (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 1972). A mutual agreement was struck on April 11, 2005, to resolve the farming and settlement disputes over the border north of Mount Daglish to the junction of the Gwang and Angereb rivers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 2005). The commission operates on the principle of mutual cooperation, enabling citizens of both countries to grow crops, engage in trade, and carry out other activities in the area without the immediate need to demarcate the contested territory (Addis, 2023).

In the years following, the Joint Boundary Working Committee (JFWC) conducted extensive preliminary work and surveys to identify border lines while completing several key tasks. They decided to divide the Hilat Ketir, or Number Three, farming land equally between Ethiopia and Sudan, amounting to 3,450 hectares. Based on a ministerial agreement between Sudan and Ethiopia in 2007, it was determined that the land between Abdul-Mejid village and the junction of the Gwang and Angereb rivers would be allocated to 1,998 Sudanese farmers, even though this land was officially registered in Ethiopia. To ensure Ethiopian farmers had access to the Gwang River, the JFWC identified twelve routes. However, delegates from both countries were unable to agree on the geographical positioning system. Overall, north of Mount Daglish, the JFWC decided to transfer 39,255 hectares of land to Sudan. As of now, the actual transfer of this land has not yet been completed (Belete, 2021).

Despite the ongoing state-level push-backs, diplomatic maneuvering, and temporarily peaceful relations, the people on both sides of al-Fashaga have been the primary victims of these dynamics. Over the years, effectively co-opting local elites has been vital in transforming state-level competition and cooperation into tangible impacts at the grassroots level. Additionally, the ongoing border issue has been exacerbated by each state’s internal political conditions, the dispute over Nile waters, and the broader context of regional security.

The post-1991 developments are clear, every negotiated de-escalation efforts through 2000-2001 boundary commission, the 2005 MoU, the 2007 land-titling, is a functional arrangement. There were no ratified transfer of territory during this period. The 39,255 hectares the 2007 Joint Boundary Working Committee agreed should pass to Sudan north of Mount Daglish remains, as of this writing, untransferred. What collapsed in 2020 was therefore the functional arrangement, not a prior legal settlement; the distinction matters as it means the object to be restored, if de-escalation resumes, is again functional cooperation rather than a resolution that never existed to begin with.

6. The geopolitical competition and the political dynamics of the Horn

Recently, the Horn emerged as a central stage for geopolitical contestation, mainly driven by regional realignments, maritime competition, and ideological contestation (De Waal, 2018). The region has recently transitioned from a long history of fragility to becoming a strategic hub, largely due to the interests of Gulf countries, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, and Western nations. Factors such as regional proximity, global shipping lanes, and an untapped economic corridor contribute to the renewed geopolitical interest in this sub-region (Mason, 2022). Multipolarity has become the defining feature of the Horn's geopolitics.

The rise of middle powers has led to a pluralization of power, resulting in an increased economic and military interests in the Horn, alongside a decline in the influence of traditional big powers. These middle powers are actively involved in promoting peace processes, developing port infrastructure, and establishing military bases. For example, the UAE played a significant role in facilitating the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which resolved two decades of a 'no peace, no war' situation, although this progress has been challenging to sustain. Additionally, the UAE has invested in the Berbera port (Somaliland) and Assab (see DW, 2022). Turkey has also established a military base (TURKSOM) in Somalia (Daily Sabah, 2025) and mediated the animosity between Ethiopia and Somalia over the use of Berbera port and recognition of Somaliland (Republic of Türkiye, 2024). These actors are redefining regional alliances, transactional politics, and infrastructural investments (Verhoeven, 2022).

This section asks what, specifically, connects this wider multi-polar competition to outcomes at al-Fashaga, rather than treating it as regional atmosphere. The clearest direct test of this mechanism at al-Fashaga is the UAE's 2021 mediation initiative, and it points the same way. The UAE reportedly held a mediation initiative aimed at facilitating discussion between the two countries, including a request or offer of agricultural investment in the contested borderland as part of a broader peace and development project. The Emirati proposed 25 percent of the al-Fashaga land to Sudan and Ethiopia, 50 percent of the land to the Emirati for a 99 years lease; and the 6-8 billion dollars investment in Sudan. The proposal was initially accepted in principle by Sudan's transitional cabinet and proceeded with the establishment of a technical committee to appraise the UAE's terms. However, differences over land ownership and sovereignty divided the committee, leading to the UAE's suspension of mediation efforts by mid-2021 (ICG, 2021, Sudan Tribune, 2021; Ajansi, 2021). The initiative did not fail for lack of external resources or goodwill; it failed at the precise point where mediation required the two governments to commit to a sovereignty position, which is the legal-resolution threshold this paper's framework identifies as structurally difficult regardless of which external actor is involved. This single case is not sufficient to generalize from, but it is consistent with, rather than contrary to, the paper's broader claim that the return of geopolitics has expanded the space of actors whose interests a legal settlement would need to satisfy, without providing an equivalent mechanism for producing one.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the UAE have become significant players during the political transition and the ongoing civil war in Sudan. These nations' strategic interests heavily influence the internal political landscape regarding Sudan's two generals, Al-Burhan and Dagalo (Salih, 2025). Such intervention was indeed apparent in the northern Ethiopia war, increasingly reaffirming the geopolitical configurations that existed before 1991. Volatile geopolitical dynamics and the multi-polarity of actors have fed internal political contestation.

7. The Nile disputes and implications for the Horn

Dispute over controlling the Blue Nile waters has been going on for more than a century. In 1889, Lord Salisbury decided to retain control over the entire Nile Basin as well as Egypt, and Ethiopia became a source of anxiety to British policy-makers (Harold, 1973). The incorporation of the Nile issue in the 1902 border treaty attests to the British interest in controlling the Nile basin. Article III of the treaty specifies:

His Majesty the Emperor MENELEK II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic Majesty not to construct or allow to be constructed any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Tsana or the Sobat, which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile except in agreement with His Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of the Soudan. (Ullendorff, 1967: 643)

Throughout the last century, the Nile dispute has been a critical variable in shaping foreign policies in Sudan and Ethiopia. The struggle for control over the Nile not only impacts the countries directly involved, but also has far-reaching implications for the entire region's security and stability. Thus, there is an intricate relationship between the border dispute and the Nile waters (Yohannes, Khalil & Salem, 2017). The protracted Nile dispute between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt further complicates a mutually amicable agreement over the contested frontier. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in particular has reinforced a hardline position regarding the border (Institute of Security Studies, 2021).

The GERD transformed the border dispute into a regional issue, attracting the involvement of other states such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and other relevant parties. The optimal use of the Nile resources, in accordance with the 1959 water-sharing agreement, would typically result in mutual advantages for both Sudan and Egypt, with a preference for a less influential Ethiopia (Corda, 2023). To check Ethiopia's influence over the Nile, Egypt and Sudan held a joint military drill amid the stalled GERD talks and the Ethiopian crisis under the banner of protecting the Nile – Guardians of the Nile (Mohamed, 2021). Furthermore, the GoE accused Khartoum of backing the Benishangul-Gumuz militia to thwart the completion of the GERD (ACLED, 2021). Such acts further complicate the delicate border issue.

Throughout the last century, the Nile dispute has been a critical variable in shaping foreign policies in Sudan and Ethiopia, with far-reaching implications for

the entire region's security and stability (Yohannes, Khalil & Salem, 2017). The protracted Nile dispute between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt further complicates a mutually amicable agreement over the contested frontier. The GERD in particular has reinforced a hardline position regarding the border, transforming the border dispute into a regional issue that has drawn in Egypt, the UAE, Arab League, the US, and other parties (see Institute of Security Studies, 2021). Two distinct causal channels are worth separating here, since they carry different implications and the existing literature does not always distinguish them. The first is leverage: Sudan's border posture at al-Fashaga has, at points, tracked the state of GERD negotiations, consistent with the border functioning as a pressure point Khartoum can use in the Nile dispute rather than as a grievance independent of it. The second is retaliation: to the extent GERD's physical completion removes Ethiopia's need to accommodate downstream objections, the border dispute could instead become an outlet for downstream frustration once negotiating leverage over the dam itself is no longer available. These channels predict different trajectories, the first implies border tension should ease once GERD is resolved one way or another; the second implies it should not, and distinguishing them is necessary before this paper's framework can generate a falsifiable claim about the dispute's trajectory as GERD moves from a contested to a completed project. The optimal use of Nile resources under the 1959 water-sharing agreement would typically favor Sudan and Egypt over a less influential Ethiopia, (Corda, 2021) and to check Ethiopia's influence, Egypt and Sudan held a joint military drill amid stalled GERD talks and the Ethiopian crisis, under the banner "Guardians of the Nile" (Sabry, 2021). The GoE has further accused Khartoum of backing the Benishangul-Gumuz militia to obstruct GERD's completion, compounding the border dispute (ACLED, 2021).

The GERD reservoir filling was completed in September 2024, and the dam was formally inaugurated on September 9, 2025, in a ceremony attended by regional heads of state, though notably not by Egyptian or Sudanese leadership (Webuild Group, 2025). The evidence available since inauguration favors the retaliation channel over the leverage channel, though the two are not mutually exclusive and the evidentiary base remains thin. Rather than easing, border tension escalated sharply in 2026: in May, Sudan accused Ethiopia and the UAE of conducting drone strikes on Khartoum airport launched from an airbase in Bahir Dar, an allegation Ethiopia denied, and reinforced troop deployments in East Gallabat, Basunda, and Greater and Lesser al-Fashaga in response (Sudan Tribune, 2026). Egypt and Saudi Arabia publicly condemned the alleged strikes on Khartoum, and Sudanese sources noted the accusations arrived amid Sudan's civil war rather than as a discrete bilateral dispute (Mada Masr, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026). A Sudanese security analyst warned at the time that the escalation risked being exploited by Ethiopian militias and Amhara forces to "impose a new reality" in the contested territory while Sudan's army was distracted by the wider war, and separately noted that the tension "casts negative shadows over the future of final negotiations regarding" GERD, evidence that the two disputes remain linked even after physical completion, but through continued

mutual leverage over unresolved technical and legal questions (filling and operation rules, downstream notification) rather than through the construction-phase leverage (The New Arab, 2026). This is consistent with the retaliation and continued-leverage channels operating together rather than the dispute channel switching cleanly from one to the other, and it means GERD's physical completion has not, on the evidence to date, narrowed the border dispute's geopolitical entanglement in the way the leverage-only channel alone would predict. The presence of Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) in Sudan has also complicated the relations of the two countries where the ENDF took military operation on August 1, 2026 at Shererina, a territory within al-Fashaga (ACLED, 2026).

8. Internal political instabilities

Over the years, domestic instabilities in both Sudan and Ethiopia have contributed to borderland disputes, which have been used to rally support for national unity. Political instabilities have also been exploited by both parties to gain an advantage and further their interests in the contested territories. As the Institute of Security Studies (2021) reported, "each country has also exploited the shifting geo-political context, its own internal strength and the stability of the other to extract concessions regarding the area. The border dispute therefore has become an indicator of the relative strength of one compared to the other, and the nature of their relationship." Such actions have jeopardized peaceful settlements and complicated the long-standing dispute over al-Fashaga. For example, Sudanese incursions into the contested territory occurred following the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, the 1991 transition, and the outbreak of the war in Tigray in 2020. The political transitions in Ethiopia created a power vacuum that obstructed ongoing border negotiations as well. This situation can be traced back to Emperor Menelik II's illness and the unilateral demarcation of the border by Anglo-Egyptian authorities. Furthermore, the rise of the Derg to power led to the discontinuation of the 1973 border demarcation agreement in the following years (Belete, 2012).

Sudan and Ethiopia have both attempted to assert control over al-Fashaga. This issue has become a rallying cry for national unity in Sudan. It brought together various political actors and produced a rare instance of agreement between political parties and the armed forces.[Ibid] The most recent development following the outbreak of war in Tigray on November 6, 2020, was General al-Burhan's declaration from the Sudanese Sovereign Council regarding the recapture of Sudanese territory. This statement came after a reported request from Abiy's government to secure the border and prevent the infiltration of TPLF forces between Sudan and Tigray (Addis Standard, 2022; Horner and Soliman, 2023). In its statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs blames the Sudanese side for overturning and undermining the efforts of the joint boundary committees that have been making tireless efforts to finalize the re-demarcation process of the common boundary (Fana Broadcasting Corporate, 2021). Three key factors contribute to the occupation of al-Fashaga and the subsequent destruction faced by its residents and farmers. First, General al-Burhan

and his army have been operating in Gedaref State and along the contested border. After suffering military defeats at the hands of Ethiopian local militias and farmers, he seeks to rebuild his image through territorial occupation, driven by a desire for vengeance. Second, land, oil, and gold play crucial roles in Sudanese national politics. By occupying large tracts of fertile land, al-Burhan aims to address the economic implications of rising food prices, which are a major factor in Sudan's political instability (De Waal, 2019). The third and principal factor is to divert the ongoing polarized transitional process and mobilize unity through pronouncing or reasserting the return of what they consider Sudanese legitimate territory of al-Fashaga (Horner and Soliman, 2023). The influx of Ethiopian refugees from Tigray to Sudan and the active support of the Government of Sudan (GoS) of the TPLF/TDF had also contributed to the frequency of attacks through al-Fashaga (Interview, official from Central Gondar Zone, September 2023). This later impacted PM Hamdok's efforts to mediate between the federal government and Tigray forces which the GoE rejected the initiative for lack of impartiality in the GoS (The Sudan Tribune, 2021).

Moreover, internal political instability in Ethiopia or Sudan increases mistrust. There are substantial evidence that illustrates the involvement of the GoE and the GoS in proxy conflicts by assisting rebel groups inside each other's territories (De Waal, 2021). During the 1970s and 80s, the GoS supported the armed groups such as the TPLF and Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fighting against the Derg regime. Currently, al-Burhan (SAF) provides support to the TDF and Fano forces. Conversely, the GoE historically supported to Sudanese People's Liberation Front (SPLF) in their war of independence, and now backs the Rapid Support Force (RSF) in Sudan's conflict.

Such actions are motivated by checking the rise of a hegemonic state in the region, given the manifold causes of contention in the region, including the Nile waters. The political maneuvering that occurred during the majority of the 20th century hindered the development of mutual trust and the exploration of other methods of administering the borderlands. Rather than persistently insisting on demarcating the borders of the disputed territories, other approaches may have been pursued. Indeed, close personal ties between al-Bashir and Meles reduced tensions, allowing Ethiopians to cultivate most of the contested land with the tacit approval of the Sudanese government. According to Sudan Tribune (2018) in November 2014, the former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and President al-Bashir instructed their Foreign Ministers to fix a date for resuming the border demarcation. The operation had stopped following the death of Ethiopia's former premier, Meles Zenawi. In post-al-Bashir Sudan, the policy towards al-Fashaga has changed. As Col. Abadi el-Tahir, a field commander in the Sudanese military, told The Washington Post, "We are working day and night to take it back." "al-Fashaga is not totally under our control yet, but almost" (Bearak, 2021).

9. Amhara nationalism: territorial claims and mistrust over agreements

The rise of Amhara nationalism in the post-2016 in Ethiopia challenged the existing ethno-federal order by claiming what they call Amhara “ancestral territories”, including the contested territory of al-Fashaga. From the outset, Amhara nationalists have been accusing the post-1991 TPLF/EPRDF regime gave up or “sold” the “Amhara land” to Sudan north of Mount Daghish (Interview with former governor, September 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). However, the central government’s effort since the period of Haile Selassie I to the latest 2007 functional cooperation agreement on the border conflict, has been viewed with suspicion by local Amhara (see Belete, 2016).

This section argues that sovereignty over al-Fashaga is now contested at two distinct levels that existing accounts of the dispute. The first is the interstate level examined throughout this paper: the unresolved claim between Addis Ababa and Khartoum. The second, and increasingly consequential, level is intrastate: whether the Ethiopian federal government retains effective command over the armed actors who physically occupy and administer the Ethiopian side of the frontier. Before the fall out of the Fano armed groups and the GoE in August 2023, agricultural land had been conferred to the Fano groups who took part during the Tigray war as a reward along the contested borderland. This is not something new, different regimes utilized similar *modus operandi* to oversee and protect external incursion along the Ethio-Sudan border. This has been causing fierce dissent from the local community whenever there are discussion of border demarcation between Addis Ababa and Khartoum. Attempting to enforce future agreement against actors who are non-signatories and who have their own claim to the land in question would complicate the situation. As such, the Ethiopia federal government alone is not the relevant sovereign counter-party on the Ethiopian side of the frontier.

The recent border conflict that erupted following the outbreak of war in the Tigray region brought the issue of Amhara nationalism to the forefront. Amhara nationalists, including the Government of Ethiopia (GoE), accuse the Government of Sudan of providing a haven to the group known as Samri, which they believe was responsible for the Mai-Kadra massacre on November 9, 2020. This tragic event resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians (Ethiopia Human Rights Council, 2020). Sudan, in turn, accuses what it described as Amhara armed forces of being responsible for the recent border tension. A senior Sudanese military official laments what he calls “an Amhara occupation of al-Fashaga,” the disputed border area between Ethiopia and Sudan. Sudanese Irrigation and Water Resources Minister Yasser Abbas also said: “The rise of the Amhara in Ethiopia’s politics is threatening the future of relations between our nations — not countries, but nations, peoples with literally thousands of years of shared history” (Bearak, 2021).

A senior Ethiopian diplomat confirmed that the ongoing reference by Sudanese politicians to the contested border claim as simply a matter concerning the Amhara region is unacceptable, and the issue should be treated as a unified federal matter (Workshop report, 2023). Local elites have always played a critical role in shaping

the central government's policy towards the contested al-Fashaga Triangle. A case in point is Puddu, who asserted that the large sectors of the ruling elites in Gondar strongly opposed the 1972 agreement of the two countries (Puddu, 2017). An informant from Gondar also recalls "the heated debate and fistfight in the parliament over the border issue and the physical confrontation among the representatives of Gondar province and others over prioritizing the agenda of the parliament" (Interview, former member of parliament, September 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). Ethiopia's Ministry of the Interior reported "suspicious activities by certain high-level politicians in Gondar, who were inciting landholders at the frontier to ignore orders from the central government", and accused them of framing Addis Ababa as having sold 60 km of national territory to the Sudan" (Puddu, 2017). Contemporary opposition to demarcation in Gondar rests, according to interviews conducted for this paper, on three claims: firstly, they view the contested territory as an integral part of Ethiopia, both historically and rightfully. They believe that relinquishing this fertile land would have significant economic and moral consequences. Secondly, they are confident in their military strength, which they perceive as an advantage in defending their farmland and continuing to cultivate the land. Lastly, the people of Gondar and the Amhara region have developed little trust in the GoE as a credible negotiator, particularly given the existing political polarization and the ongoing failure to recognize the contested territory as part of map of Ethiopia.

There is a strong sentiment among the Amhara to forcibly regain the territories occupied by Sudan since November 6, 2020. Many of the interviewees for this paper expressed frustration that Abiy's government has attempted to resolve the border issue peacefully. They feel that Sudan took advantage of Ethiopia's internal challenges to gain control of al-Fashaga. As a result, they believe Ethiopia should respond by confronting the Sudanese Army following the outbreak of the civil war in Sudan (Interview with local government official, August, 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). Indeed, the Ethiopian National Defense Force had briefly occupied part of the territory. The aforementioned activities presented Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed with a challenging predicament, especially in the context of the conflict involving the TPLF/TDF. Abiy relies on formidable Amhara militias to effectively safeguard his holdings and counter any possible comeback of the TPLF in the northern region. However, it is unlikely that he has the financial means to engage in an international confrontation that would inevitably draw in other entities such as Egypt, due to the ongoing disputes surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 2023).

Moreover, historical evidence indicates that the Amhara local militia play a crucial role in maintaining effective control over the al-Fashaga/Mezega Triangle by checking aggression from Sudan (Interview with local government official, August, 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). As one informant explained, "the local militia and farmers have always been involved in small scale skirmish with Sudanese forces. They are effectively farmers and soldiers" (Interview with senior opposition party member, September 2023, Gondar, Ethiopia). Sporadic raids, burning of crops, looting of

properties, kidnappings, killings, etc. were common in the borderlands, sometimes backed by authorities from both sides (Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 2023). For instance, in 2015, following major clashes between local groups on both sides of the border, the Sudanese ambassador to Ethiopia vowed to the Ethiopian government to contain violence at the border, but blamed the Amhara regional state for encouraging armed disturbances against Addis Ababa's wishes (Daniel, 2023). In this regard, ACLED reported that, in response to or in retaliation for the forced displacement of Amhara farmers in the contested territory since the mid-1990s, the Amhara regional militia and later Special or *Liyu* Police attacked Sudanese forces (Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 2023). Amid periodic clashes and attacks in the area since 2014, the arrangement was finally dissolved with the deployment of Sudanese troops in November 2020. These forces have been accused of driving out Amhara farmers and Tigrayan farmers in northern areas of al-Fashaga after Amhara forces re-deployed to assist the federal government in the war against the TPLF in the northern Tigray region (Amhara Communications, 2020).

The presence of Fano groups, as state above, inside the disputed territory till late 2023, is an epitome of intrastate claims of the land. According to a survey conducted by a team of researchers in Gondar, in Metema Woreda of the West Gondar Zone, it has been observed that since 2020, over 100 farmers, both large- and small-scale, have lost their land and possessions. More than 11,000 hectares of land have not been cultivated due to the ongoing clashes and displacement in Metema Woreda alone. As a result, the government has lost an estimated 3,655,762.86 Ethiopian Birr from taxes alone, without counting the foreign currency that could have been gained by exporting the cash crops (Internal report, 2023). The presence of the Fano groups in the contested territory has now absent, instead in the August 1, 2026 clash with TDF forces stationed in the contested territory, the ENDF and Tekeze Zeb (local militia established by the interim Welkait-Tegede Setit Humera Zone administration to defend the TDF incursion) have controlled the area.

10. Conclusion

This paper has examined the historical trajectory and post-1991 political developments of the contested Mesk Wuha (al-Fashaga) borderland, situating the dispute within the broader return of geopolitics in the HoA. The historical record reveals a striking continuity across more than a century of negotiations. The 1902 treaty and subsequent Gwynn demarcation generated a legal basis for competing claims, but did not produce a mutually ratified and implemented territorial settlement. Later arrangements including the 1972 Exchange of Notes, the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding, and the 2001–2007 Joint Boundary Commission process similarly prioritized functional accommodation over definitive sovereignty. These arrangements permitted forms of status-quo farming, land use, and provisional titling, but did not culminate in a completed transfer of territory. The breakdown in 2020 should therefore be understood not as the collapse of a previously settled border, but as the

collapse of a historically contingent system of functional cooperation that had operated in the absence of a mutually accepted legal settlement.

This distinction between legal resolution and functional cooperation is central to understanding the contemporary dispute. The durability of such arrangements, however, depended upon political conditions that have subsequently changed. Multipolar competition involving Gulf states and other external actors has increased the number of interests surrounding the frontier and, consequently, the political transaction costs associated with a durable sovereignty settlement. The failed 2021 UAE mediation attempt is consistent with this interpretation: the critical obstacle emerged precisely at the point where mediation encountered the sovereignty question.

At the same time, the contemporary frontier differs from earlier periods because sovereignty within the Ethiopian side of the border has become more internally fragmented. The evidence of non-state armed groups occupation and cultivation within the disputed territory, alongside the longstanding involvement of Amhara regional authorities and local armed actors, points to a second layer of sovereignty contestation beyond the interstate dispute. The divergence between federal claims that al-Fashaga constitutes a unified national concern and the realities of local and regional authority creates an important constraint on diplomacy.

These developments also place the al-Fashaga dispute within a wider transformation of the HoA's geopolitical landscape. The borderland's significance has been amplified by tensions surrounding the Nile, the politics of the GERD, the resurgence of Amhara nationalism, Sudan's civil war, and the expanding engagement of Gulf and Middle Eastern powers in the Horn and Red Sea region. Consequently, al-Fashaga has become simultaneously an agricultural frontier, a site of territorial contestation, and a strategic space embedded in wider regional competition. The return of geopolitics has therefore not replaced local political economy; rather, it has connected local struggles over land and livelihood to increasingly internationalized contests over territory, resources, security, and influence.

The central implication is that the prospects for resolving the dispute should be assessed against a realistic hierarchy of outcomes. A comprehensive legal settlement remains the most difficult objective because it requires a mutually accepted sovereignty commitment that has eluded successive negotiations for more than a century. Functional cooperation, by contrast, has historical precedent and has repeatedly provided a means of managing an otherwise unresolved territorial question. Yet even this narrower objective now faces conditions that did not exist in earlier periods: contested authority on the Ethiopian side, the consequences of Sudan's civil war, displacement and militarization, and intensified external geopolitical competition. ✨

Notes

- 1 For conceptual clarity, this paper adopts the Oscar Martinez's conceptualization of border, borderland and frontier. Border refers to a line that separates one state from another. Borderland is a region that lies adjacent to the border. Frontier "denotes an area that is physically distant from the core of the nation; it is a zone of transition, a place where people and institutions are shaped by natural and human forces that are not felt in the heartland" (Martinez, 1994, p.6)
- 2 As to Emperor's change of policy, an informant argued it was out the emperor's intention to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The researcher has, however, no evidence to verify the truthfulness of this assertion of an informant from Gondar.

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