

# **A Study of the Decision-Making Process and the Strategies of Ethiopia's Foreign Policy (1974-1991), with Particular Emphasis on Ethio-US Relations<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the structures and patterns of decision-making as well as perceptions, intentions and ensuing actions of Ethiopia's foreign policy during the 1974-1991 period. It demonstrates that decision-making responsibility in foreign policy was concentrated in the hands of Mengistu Haile Mariam, despite the existence of specialized government agencies. It also stresses that Ethiopia's political independence and the preservation of its territorial integrity were the foremost foreign policy goals. It then presents the strategies adopted to mitigate threats to these goals including the creation of a strong military force and alliance with the Soviet Union. Moreover, it addresses the United States' interests in the Horn of Africa, which had a relatively important strategic value owing to its proximity to the Persian Gulf's abundant oil deposits and key oil routes. It advances the argument that United States policy in the Horn of Africa aimed primarily at countering any expansion of Soviet influence by securing military bases in allied states and providing them military aid. The article finally notes that relations between Ethiopia and the United States had three phases. The first phase saw military supplies from the United States to Ethiopia maintained and even increased initially, while the second phase witnessed a deterioration of bilateral relations as Ethiopia overtly aligned with the Soviet Union. In the third phase, Ethiopia attempted vainly to normalize its relations with the United States.

## **1. Introduction**

This article is designed to analyse the decision-making process, the goals, instruments, conduct and shifts of the foreign policy of Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. The article also examines the relations between Ethiopia and the United States in that particular time. In order to consider all these issues and processes in the most satisfactory and lucid way, the article is divided into four parts. The first part deals with Ethiopia's internal dynamics between 1974 and 1991, and is also concerned with the foreign policy decision-making of the regime that governed the country during those seventeen years. The second part surveys the foreign policy goals, perceived threats and strategies of the Ethiopian regime. The third part assesses the foreign policy decision-making of the United States. It also addresses the United States' interests and policy in Africa generally and the Horn of Africa

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particularly. The fourth and final part critically evaluates the uneasy relations between Ethiopia and the United States in the 1974-1991 interval in terms of three broad periods: coexistence (1974-1977), confrontation (1977-1989) and rapprochement (1989-1991). The article is based on the available primary documents and secondary resources. These consist of books, journals and unpublished theses.

## **2. Post-1974 Ethiopia's Foreign Policy Decision-Making**

After 1974, a number of variables including the political development of the country, the nature and modality of rule of the political leadership, and the institutional context of decisions influenced Ethiopia's foreign policy decision-making process as well as the foreign policy itself. The following section presents a comprehensive exposé of these variables.

### **2.1 Political Development**

Ethiopia is located at the heart of the Horn of Africa. In fact, from the standpoint of both the United States and the Soviet Union that viewed the Horn of Africa within a competitive superpower framework, Ethiopia was the pivotal state and greatest prize in the Horn of Africa. An intelligence summary, written in 1981, attempted to define the geopolitical environment in which Ethiopia was located. "Ethiopia is bordering the sea route joining Asia with Europe and also the oil route, and near to the oil wells of the Middle East. Any world power that has good or bad intentions on the East African region cannot do so without touching or passing via Ethiopia. Hence, Ethiopia's geographical location has made it very important in global strategy" (Military Intelligence Department 1981:3).

Ethiopia was the oldest established state in Black Africa, and had distinguished itself through adroit diplomacy under the astute Emperor Haile Selassie. It has a large and growing population providing its support in time of crisis or war. Large in geographic size, Ethiopia is endowed with a militarily strategic hinterland constituted by high mountains serving as natural barriers to external military attacks. It is gifted with a variety of agro-ecological zones, which are favourable for agricultural production. It is also well endowed with many natural resources, although lacking the capacity to utilize them. Ethiopia is, for instance, a veritable water tower, practically all states around it receiving Ethiopian water in varying degrees. But, above all, Ethiopia has the most potent, largest and best-equipped Armed Forces in Sub-Saharan Africa, on paper at least. Further, it is

the seat of the Organization of African Unity and of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

Notwithstanding these attributes, Ethiopia experienced political turmoil before and after 1974. For the most part of the 1960s and the early 1970s, political opposition had developed to the autocratic regime of Emperor Haile Selassie. Besides ill-organized and ill-fated plots, conspiracies, peasant rebellions and the 1960 abortive coup d'état, there was a protracted student opposition to the old regime. The students gave prominence to the exigency for land reform as well as the pressing need to do away with the incompetence and corruption of the regime's senior officials (Bahru 1991:209-226). The old regime's credibility was crucially undermined by its indifferent handling of the 1972-1974 devastating famine, which reportedly claimed the lives of 200,000 people in Tigray and Wello provinces. A marked increase in food prices and petroleum products in early 1974 followed the famine. Moreover, the regime's failure to quell insurgency in the province of Eritrea exposed its weakness. This state of affairs led to a wave of mutinies in the Armed Forces, labour strikes and intensified student demonstrations in Addis Ababa, culminating in the Ethiopian Revolution.

In February 1974, in an attempt to stem the tide of growing unrest, a new cabinet took office to implement reforms. But, in subsequent months, continuous mutinies among the Armed Forces occurred and substantive reforms were not carried out. Thus, in June 1974, the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces (Derg in Amharic) was formed, with its original members assumed to be 120 (made up of junior officers and non-commissioned officers), and effectively took over political power. It began by arresting leading aristocrats, top military officials and political figures of the old regime. It forced the new cabinet to resign, and deposed the emperor in September 1974. It finally converted itself into the Provisional Military Administrative Council.

The Provisional Military Administrative Council was initially headed by Lieutenant General Aman Andom, who had "proved himself as commander of the Third Division when Somalia attempted to invade Ethiopia at the end of the early sixties" (Teferra 1997:140). However, the Provisional Military Administrative Council was racked by violent power struggles between rival factions on how best to organize and lead the country. Disputes on how to deal with the Eritrean problem led to the killing of the general in November 1974, immediately followed by the execution of fifty-seven officials and dignitaries of the old regime. General Aman's successor, Brigadier General Teferi Banti, met the same fate in February 1977 following a gun battle at the Derg's main office. The liquidation of Brigadier General Teferi was followed by the purge in November 1977 of Lieutenant Colonel Atnafu Abate, the second vice-chairman of the Derg, marking the centralization of

power in the hands of Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (Halliday and Molyneux 1981:113-114).

Under the influence of leftist intellectuals returning from abroad, the Provisional Military Administrative Council opted for a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Ethiopia was declared a socialist state in December 1974, and within two months around 100 industrial and commercial companies were nationalized or partly taken over. Then, in March 1975, all rural land was nationalized, followed by urban land four months later. A network of peasant and urban dwellers associations was established, and became a key tool of political control along with the ensemble of mass organizations and trade unions. Also, about 50,000 students were sent to the countryside to conduct a literacy campaign, and initiate community development projects (Ottaway 1978:63-80). Nevertheless, there was much unrest throughout the country.

First of all, war escalated in Eritrea, where the bulk of the Armed Forces were bogged down as the insurgent groups intensified their offensives after 1975, gaining control of almost the entire province and besieging Asmera. Secondly, peasant uprisings and a low-intensity war conducted by the monarchist Ethiopian Democratic Union plagued the north-western parts of the country while numerous armed insurrections proliferated in other parts. Thirdly and finally, dissimilar ideological currents clashed and degenerated into open street battles between the regime and leftist movements, which went underground. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, which was founded in the incipient days of the Ethiopian Revolution and commanded considerable student support, wanted the soldiers to go back to the barracks by leaving the revolution to the civilians. It also supported self-determination for the country's minorities, and launched an urban guerrilla warfare involving the systematic assassination of the military regime's supporters. In response, the regime unleashed a murderous campaign of *Red Terror*, which claimed thousands of lives. Mass arrests, torture and summary executions were the norm.

After these turbulent years, the regime managed to extend its control throughout the country, and, with the encouragement of the Soviet Union, to set up the Workers' Party of Ethiopia in 1984. Then, in order to give the post-1974 regime a semblance of popular legitimacy, and to provide it a structural base for the political reality of its *civilianisation* and *Marxist-Leninization*, a Soviet-style constitution was adopted in February 1987, and a one-party form of state, the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was institutionalised in September 1987. The People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was a unitary state, whose organs were supposed to be governed by the principle of *democratic centralism* (Article 4, Section 1; People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1988:57).

Paradoxically, as the post-1974 regime completed its transition into a seemingly civilian Marxist-Leninist regime, it experienced serious military reversals in Eritrea and Tigray. In 1987, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front attacked the strategic town of Afabet, which was fitted out in 1979 as the main Headquarters and supply centre for the area of greatest fighting. Dawit called it the actual "command centre in Eritrea and the largest military garrison in Ethiopia with the heaviest and most sophisticated armaments" (1989:364). The stage was set for the turning point in the country's protracted internal war as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front captured the town after 48 hours of combat (Gilkes 1995). The insurgent group went on to besiege and eventually capture Massawa and then Asmera.

Likewise, the fighting forces of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which at first specialized in small-unit operations such as infiltration and setting ambushes, developed into increasingly well-organized and heavily armed units reinforced by defecting officers and captured weapons. In early 1989, they attained a decisive victory at the battle of Shire. The post-1974 regime suffered its second biggest defeat, and its military forces were effectively pushed out of Tigray (For the most revealing exposés on this episode, consult Tekeste 1994 and Tesfamariam 1998).

The Afabet and Shire debacles, and the subsequent loss of territory, practically reduced to nil the morale and discipline of the Armed Forces, and consequently sapped its military effectiveness. In fact, many demoralized senior officers including the Chief of Staff, the commanders of the Air Force and Ground Force, mounted a coup d'état to oust Mengistu. The one-day coup epitomized the extent of the growing discontent with the war in northern Ethiopia. Yet, this did not deter Mengistu from engaging in a comprehensive purge to eliminate opposition in the Armed Forces. But, the purge further undermined the chain of command, which were plagued by lack of morale and indiscipline.

Fatally weakened by these defeats, the loss of internal legitimacy, the absence of political accountability, escalating corruption and its inability to spur economic development, the regime yielded in 1991 to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which is a coalition created in 1989 and dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The regime's strongman, Mengistu Haile Mariam, fled disgracefully to Zimbabwe on May 21, 1991.

## 2.2 Mengistu Haile Mariam's Managerial Style

The Ethiopian political tradition bequeathed maximum power to the extent feasible to one single leader, and concurrently favoured personality cults. Haile Selassie, for instance, was the centrepiece of the state, tightly maintaining decision-making power, even over matters of limited importance (Markakis 1974:216). Mengistu, after consolidating his hold on power after 1977, gradually became a figure in the mainstream of this tradition, virtually emulating his predecessor in many aspects (Dawit 1989:49, 56 and 59; Clapham, 1988:79).

Though Mengistu is a very different kind of person from Haile Selassie, and the institutions he has set up are a world removed from those of the old regime, the practices of the two are in many respects similar. Decision-making in the imperial regime ultimately reached a point of strangulation because all matters of any importance, and many of none, had to be referred to the Emperor, and as the Emperor aged he lost the ability to deal with such a heavy burden...Mengistu has deliberately sought to exercise tight and very comprehensive control over all the major branches of government and policy (Korn 1986:106).

Although reputed to be intelligent and hard working, Mengistu was dogmatic, rigid, vengeful, cruel and authoritarian in personality, and lacked personal magnetism, powers of oratory, sense of diplomacy and political timing (Korn 1986:114, Dawit 1989:48). His primary concern was the centralization and retention of power at all costs. Indeed, "everything Mengistu has done since 1977 has been with one ultimate goal in mind: to place himself in a position of uncontested power with absolute control over the lives of everyone in Ethiopia" (Korn 1986:114, Dawit: 56). Thus, in all state affairs, he adopted an interventionist managerial style. Mengistu began work at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning, reading at first dispatches about international events (Genet 1994 EC: 326). He would then examine the daily programs making adjustments with Mengistu Gemechu, his "private secretary and confidant ... [who accompanied him] on almost all his foreign visits and has been present at nearly all meetings with foreign leaders" (Indian Ocean Newsletter 1985:36-37). He was incapable of delegating authority, and simply centralized the whole decision-making machinery of the regime, and "by simply giving orders, he expected everyone and everything to fall into step like marchers on a drill field" (Dawit 1989: 49). Already not susceptible to building consensus or to a judicious balancing of contrary opinions, he visibly became intolerant of contrary opinions or "any sort of criticism" (Dawit 1989: 50).

He was "reluctant to accept advice or counsel" (Dawit 1989: 59) from his handpicked advisers and ministers. He manifested arrogance and domineering

behaviour towards them, sidestepped their recommendations, and mistreated them when they cautiously suggested alternatives to his usually aggressive and impulsive approach to all state affairs, and pointed out the repercussions of his policies. Mengistu had simply “introduced a rigidity in policy-making which Haile Selassie was able to avoid. Once government policies become personally associated with the leader, they cannot be questioned without seeming to challenge the leader's own authority” (Clapham 1988: 80). Thus, Mengistu's apprehensive ministers “refuse to make decisions, for the penalty for the wrong move can be quite severe...[and] do not venture dissenting opinions” (Korn 1986: 106-107). Expatriate advisors associated with the regime since 1977 (mostly Soviets) sought to influence, on a regular basis Mengistu and thus the entire decision-making process. Yet, they “had to learn the hard way that Mengistu was not someone they could order around” (Korn 1986: 97).

Even if very little was written and known about the inner workings of the Ethiopian foreign policy decision-making, it is apparent that the personal managerial style of Mengistu had an important bearing on it. Mengistu took “a particularly close interest in, and exerted great control over, the regime's foreign policy, almost every detail of which has been dictated or approved by him” (Amare 1989: 496). Mengistu, who doubtless viewed himself as a competent originator and manager of all policies (Dawit 1989: 59), made decisions and pronouncements on all aspects of foreign policy, without consulting professionals who had the appropriate training and experience in the area of foreign policy formulation and management. Indeed, the state's cadre of foreign policy professionals did not assume its proper function that is offering the experimentation, reflection and deep probing which the complex problems of foreign policy required. After 1974, the most senior and competent staff was continuously purged (or preferred self-imposed exile), and was only replaced by docile political appointees.

Making his own final assessment from the information gathered and presented directly to him by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the regime's intelligence agencies, Mengistu alone established priorities and made all the decisions. Rather than seeking initiatives most suitable for the problems at hand, he minimized uncertainty by altering his perception of the problems. These tendencies led Mengistu, what influential studies of decision-making have revealed in similar cases, to fit incoming information into pre-existing beliefs and to perceive only what he expected to be there (Jervis 1976: 143). Foreign policy decisions were accordingly developed without weighing available options and the probable implications of each, and projecting future trends and reactions. Be that as it may, the centralization of power, absence of institutionalisation and criticism of the leader affected adversely the quality of the country's foreign policy, and made its

orderly formulation and implementation very complicated (Amare 1989: 496). It followed that foreign policy became in most cases the victim of Mengistu's impulse, and was not carefully thought out, both in the short and long terms.

## **2.3 The Institutional Setting**

### **2.3.1 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is the operational arm of any government in the conduct of foreign relations, and which customarily serves as a source of information and advice on major aspects of foreign policy, found itself marginalized, if not excluded, from decision-making. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, remarked that his career staff was not consulted as much as they should have been, given their better experience "in the realities of international diplomacy...[and were] reduced to sending out communiqués and press releases and writing justifications of decisions made by Mengistu" (Dawit 1989: 36-37). They were actually distrusted by Mengistu. This distrust was not justified because the staff was competent and dedicated. They did not wilfully seek to sabotage Mengistu's policies. Their principal interest was to have an opportunity to have an active part in foreign policy decision-making.

Thus, the Ministry used to execute and represent policy rather than formulate it. Just as "foreign policy-making and diplomacy were assumed to be the Emperor [Haile Selassie]'s preserve and not matters of institutional decision-making of the ministry [of Foreign Affairs]" (Negussay 1977: 52), the post-1974 Ministry of Foreign Affairs was "no more than the governmental agency responsible for implementing decisions already reached" (Clapham 1988: 233).

The defective aspect of this system was reflected in the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. His role was practically limited to accompanying Mengistu on his foreign tours or at his pronouncements of a policy he had decided upon, after having conceived his options alone (as described in the foregoing discussion). Furthermore, after 1977, appointment was based on "personal loyalty to Mengistu rather than belief in, and commitment to, an ideological system and its principles" (Amare 1989: 496). Loyalty was "the cardinal - some say the sole criterion - for upward mobility and the key to success" (Amare 1989: 496). Also, the Minister's role as well as access to Mengistu depended largely on whether he had prior close association with him or not (Clapham 1988: 233).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs faced budgetary problems. For instance, it asked for 29 million birrs and was allocated only 21 million birrs in 1987 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1978 EC b). Because of its low salary scale, the Ministry could



not attract highly competent manpower and was short of analysts capable of rigorously analysing the relationship between particular measures to long-term objectives, especially in the information gathering and policy development sections (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.: 3). By the same token, individuals who occupied most of the diplomatic posts did not have the appropriate professional qualifications, and lacked adequate knowledge of the practice and ethics of diplomacy. Diplomacy is a subtle field, and a diplomat's intuition and creativity can only be sharpened by experience. Furthermore, they could not act freely, and possessed in most cases no career background as diplomatic skill and tact were taken as "secondary to the much important one of loyalty to Mengistu" (Amare 1989: 497).

### 2.3.2 Advisory Bodies

To put it briefly, the foreign policy decision-making process was not handled through well-established institutional channels, though there were standard institutions that only acted as supporting mechanisms. A number of advisory bodies were created after 1977 to coordinate the formulation, and supervise the implementation, of Ethiopia's foreign and national security policies. Nevertheless, the emphasis was more on purely military affairs given the omnipresence of various military threats, the ensuing expansion of the Armed Forces, and the fact that military officers held the highest government and party offices. The advisory bodies were not, however, able to achieve significant leverage by virtue of their lack of explicit purpose within the framework of a highly personalized and centralized system, and scant organizational resources. Indeed, they had no bureaucratic structures designed to solicit and incorporate assessed data as they were apparently staffed only with rudimentary administrative and research sections.

The emergence of the personal power of Mengistu largely determined the manner in which these bodies were created and functioned. He had become chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, chairman of the Council of Ministers, Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces in February 1977. In that year alone, in the space of six months, three special bodies were introduced. In July 1977, a Revolutionary Campaign Coordination Centre headed by Mengistu was first in place in Addis Ababa (Legum and Lee 1979: 42). This body was, however, overshadowed by the establishment, in August 1977, of the National Revolutionary Operations Command, which was created in response to the general unrest in the Armed Forces, to opposition leftist

movements, and the deteriorating situation in Eritrea and the Ogaden especially after the outbreak of hostilities with Somalia. It was chaired again by Mengistu.

In December 1977, in addition to the National Revolutionary Operations Command, the Supreme Military Strategic Committee was created. This body included seven Ethiopian, eight Soviet and three Cuban members. In July 1980, the National Revolutionary Operations Command and the Supreme Military Strategic Committee were finally dissolved. In April 1983, the National Defence and Security Council was founded. The Council included the Head of State (Mengistu!), the secretary-general of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Public Safety and Security (these two ministries were separate at the time) and the Inspector General in the Ministry of Defence (Fontrier 1999: 52). At times, Soviet military advisors and sector commanders took part in the Council's deliberations. It was empowered to devise the country's overall security policies. A general officer, Brigadier General Alemu Tibebu (an intelligence officer who was military attaché in Sudan), was appointed as the Council's Secretary (Fontrier 1999: 53).

As a final note, it should be pointed out that Article 62 of the 1987 Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia designated the National Shengo as "the supreme organ of state power." A list of specific powers followed, among which the power to determine foreign policy (Article 63, Section 1). Under the National Shengo, the Council of State was established and charged with implementing the National Shengo's decisions. The post of President of the Council of State, occupied by Mengistu, was combined with that of President of the Republic (Article 81, Section 3). By far the most important clauses of the Constitution, pertinent to foreign policy decision-making, were Article 85, which provided that the President represents the Republic abroad, and Article 86, which entrusted the President with the implementation of foreign policy. The President was empowered to conclude treaties, to establish diplomatic missions and to appoint diplomatic representatives (Article 86, Section 2) (People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1988:73-83).

### **2.3.3 The Ministry of Defence**

At first, the Ministry of Defence was virtually restricted to deal with budgetary and administrative matters affecting the Armed Forces, and did not participate in decisions of international significance. Only after the Ogaden military victory and the drastic expansion in size of the Armed Forces, did it manage to progressively participate in the foreign policy decision-making process. An important factor in this direction was the appointment in 1980 of Brigadier General Tesfaye Gebre

Kidan (promoted to Lieutenant General in 1982 and died in 2004) to the post of Minister of Defence. Lieutenant General Tesfaye was a close associate of Mengistu, and was thought to be sympathetic to the Soviet Union. Lieutenant General Tesfaye was preceded in this post by Lieutenant General Aman Andom (the ill-fated first chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council), and Ayalew Mandefro (1976-1977) who was later appointed ambassador to the United States (he resigned in 1978 and sought asylum there). Ayalew was replaced by Brigadier General Taye Tilahun (1977-1980), the only official who had won Mengistu's respect because he refused to carry out orders that contradicted his principles (Dawit, 1989:137). Major General Haile-Giyorgis Habte-Mariam, who was killed during the 1989 abortive coup, succeeded Lieutenant General Tesfaye in 1987.

### 2.3.4 Intelligence Agencies

The post-1974 regime possessed two agencies that undertook intelligence activities pertaining to foreign policy. The first agency was the Public Security Organization. It was the primary civilian intelligence gathering, counter-intelligence and surveillance agency under the aegis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs initially established as the Ministry of Public Safety and Security in August 1978. The new agency merged the old regime's intelligence elements the high-ranking officers of which were purged. Because of their specialized knowledge, however, low-ranking intelligence officers were retained in their positions. After 1978, the Soviet KGB and the East German State Security Service (Pateman 1995: 57) provided organizational, material and training assistance to the new Ethiopian intelligence agency.

The Public Security Organization was set up along the lines that the Soviet and East German services recommended. These services supplied it sophisticated surveillance equipment and cars, and provided its personnel training mostly focusing on surveillance and interrogation. The danger was that the training schemes of both the Soviets and East Germans involved a deliberate attempt to train differently from their standard training methods, and to gain knowledge of the Ethiopian trainees' capabilities and propensities in order to co-opt them and penetrate their agency. On the other hand, the Soviets and East Germans had their activities "carefully monitored and circumscribed" (Henze 1985: 34), and "did not have a totally trouble-free ride in Ethiopia" (Pateman 1995: 58). For instance, in 1986, "Ivan Pavlovski, First Secretary in charge of KGB operations, and another diplomat were expelled" (Pateman 1995: 58). Nonetheless, there was a steady and smooth information exchange among these services as the Ethiopian agency was

able to economize its efforts in areas beyond its financial and experience scope, and the Soviet and East German services were able to obtain access to Ethiopian investigations and reports.

From its inception in 1978 up to 1991, the agency was directly answerable to Colonel Tesfaye Wolde Selassie, who was appointed Minister of Public Safety and Security and then Minister of Internal Affairs. Tesfaye was favoured because he was close to Mengistu, who “is said to have been the best man at his wedding” (Clapham 1988: 113). Thus, he had direct and unfettered access to Mengistu, who was involved in the approval process of all major operations. In addition, he had the background to secure the efficiency of the intelligence-gathering agency. He was a career intelligence officer, who joined the Holeta Military School in 1959, and, after a couple of years in military intelligence, was sent to Israel (1963) and the United States for further training (Indian Ocean Newsletter, 1985: 88). The main functions of the agency included: ensuring internal security and control (watching and neutralizing individuals and organizations, both inside and outside government structure, capable of posing a threat to the regime and the state); penetrating and controlling those insurgent groups with external sources of support and supply; controlling the movements of population groups within the country and across national borders; and, forecasting external conditions and trends that could impact Ethiopia's foreign policy.

In this last respect, the critical department was the Foreign Intelligence Department. It was concerned with the observation of foreign states, the containment of the activities of foreign intelligence services, the surveillance and penetration of foreign diplomatic missions, and the accomplishment of all liaison activities with friendly foreign intelligence services. The department was also active abroad, especially in monitoring the activities of all opposition groups and engaging in disinformation operations by using its agents attached to Ethiopian embassies (Pateman 1995: 60).

The second intelligence agency was the Military Intelligence Department. This department gathered and reported information about the political, socio-economic and military situations of potential and actual enemies. It managed the Ethiopian military attaché system, monitored foreign military attachés in Ethiopia, and produced an annual intelligence assessment (Military Intelligence Department, 1989:1). Located in the compound of the Ministry of Defence, the department had seven directorates among which the Covert Operations Directorate and the Research and Analysis Directorate should be mentioned.

The department operated a small military intelligence school, which offered training in “basic and advanced intelligence, aerial photography and prisoner-of-war interrogation” (Military Intelligence Department, 1989: 3). It also sent selected

officers abroad, usually to the Soviet Union for training in strategic intelligence and code analysis. Its staff was composed of career intelligence professionals with the necessary competence and experience. In the pre-1974 period, some of the brightest officers graduating from both the Harar Military Academy and the Holeta Military School were assigned to intelligence duties, and were sent to Israel for further training. Other officers were sent overseas to serve as liaisons in Ethiopian embassies, under the military attaché system, and often to openly collect information. These two sets of professional officers were complemented by officers who had non-intelligence experience, which was gained during their postings with operational units, and officers having university degrees. Nevertheless, the staff was disenchanted over excessive political control as well as Soviet meddling.

### **3. Post-1974 Ethiopia's Foreign Policy**

The purpose of this section is to present a synopsis of Ethiopia's foreign policy. Included in this synopsis are a discussion of the post-1974 regime's foreign policy goals and perception of the threats posed by neighbouring states, and a short presentation of the strategies it adopted to mitigate those threats.

#### **3.1 Foreign Policy Goals**

Despite the fact that its ideological underpinnings were radically different from those of its imperial predecessors, the post-1974 regime's fundamental foreign policy goals showed conspicuous continuity with long-established concerns. The first and most critical of these fundamental goals was Ethiopia's survival consisting mainly of its political independence, which in turn amounted to the regime's unhindered capacity to make decisions concerning its internal affairs and foreign policies. A second fundamental goal was the maintenance of the fragile fabric of national unity combined with the preservation of territorial integrity. Mengistu incessantly talked about "according the highest priority and utmost attention to our unity, freedom, territorial integrity and national dignity" (1987: 108). Certainly, "the survival of the geographic entity has been an overriding consideration for governments headed by Menelik, Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam" (Marcus 1987: 129). It is also axiomatic that "Menelik might not understand Mengistu's rhetoric, but would appreciate the goal" (Marcus 1987: 129).

These fundamental goals were supplemented by specific goals, which the regime set out to realize. Among these, there were political goals, which included the thwarting of designs to deprive Ethiopia from an outlet to the Red Sea

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), 1976 EC a: 78), the elaboration of an acceptable solution to the Eritrean problem (MoFA 1976 EC a: 62), the equitable utilization of the Nile waters (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976 EC a: 80), the building of mutually advantageous and productive relations with neighbouring and other African states (MoFA 1976 EC a: 60), and the enhancement of Ethiopia's stature globally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976 EC a :71). There were also socio-economic goals, which included the achievement of sustained economic growth in the agricultural, industrial and other sectors, and the advancement of the people's social welfare (MoFA 1976 EC a: 59 and 82). Finally, there were ideological goals, which included the establishment of a socialist order (MoFA 1976 EC a: 59), and the provision of support to African national liberation movements in their struggle against colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism (MoFA 1976 EC a: 60).

### **3.2 Regional Threats**

The post-1974 regime identified three regional threats to the above-cited foreign policy goals. The most dangerous threat was perceived to emanate from Somalia, which expressed its hostile intentions through official statements, diplomatic initiatives and support for the Western Somali Liberation Front. These intentions were backed by a significant increase in military capabilities buttressed by the post-1963 Soviet military assistance that increased after 1974 (Crozier 1975: 4 and 8), and culminated in the 1977 Somali invasion. The threat was certainly curtailed by the Ethiopian repulsion of the invasion, and diminished as a result of unrest within Somalia. But it did not disappear completely because the Somalis still possessed formidable military capabilities by replenishing their military arsenal with Egyptian aid. They were also determined to continue supporting the Western Somali Liberation Front, and were unwilling to renounce their claims to the Ogaden. Indeed, the focal point of the Somali threat was the recovery of this south-eastern province of Ethiopia, which is largely populated by Somalis and forms a wedge deep into Somalia.

The Ogaden was to be retrieved along with the Northern District of Kenya and the French-held Somali territory or present-day Djibouti. Djibouti's port was an important component of the Ethiopian trade structure, linked to Addis Ababa by a railway line (carrying more than 60% of Ethiopian trade), which Ethiopia would have relinquished if Somalia were to effectively reclaim both the French territory and the Ogaden. The five-pointed star in the national flag of Somalia attested to this idea of a Greater Somalia, which served to "supersede the internal divisions between the formerly Italian and British parts" (Halliday and Molyneux 1981:201),

and as a unifying purpose for “the consolidation of the various family-clans into one Somali nation” (Mesfin 1964: 56). Somalia also wanted to control the Ogaden grazing lands, the oil and gas deposits reported to be in exploitable quantities in the area, the middle courses of the Wabi Shebelle and Ghenale rivers as well as to gain a more “manageable shape, making transportation and communication easier and economic” (Mesfin 1964: 58).

Ethiopian decision-makers also felt that Ethiopia faced another significant threat from the Sudan. In fact, post-1974 relations between the two states were marred by mutual suspicion and rivalry (Korn 1986: 81), going particularly sour in 1976 when they “threatened to break into open war” (Legum and Lee 1979: 55). From an Ethiopian standpoint, the Sudanese threat took precise form after the 1976 military alliance between Sudan and Egypt (an ally of the United States after 1979), which had evident anti-Ethiopian overtones. At the same time, the Ethiopian decision-makers were also worried about Sudan's support for Ethiopian insurgent groups as well as its troop concentrations along the 1,700-kilometer long border between the two states. In April 1977, Mengistu himself voiced this anxiety by stating “over and above supporting and arming...[Ethiopian] anti-people organizations, [Nimeiri] is now deploying Sudanese army supported by artillery and tanks” (Ministry of Information 1977: 6). Despite occasional but half-hearted improvements, the gap between Ethiopia and Sudan never stopped widening. That was especially true with incidents such as Sudan's connivance with the Israeli Operation Moses, which was undertaken in 1984 to take out secretly Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia.

Nonetheless, the Sudanese threat stemmed almost exclusively from the Ethiopian perception that the successive Sudanese regimes (from Nimeiri's regime through el-Mahdi's post-1986 regime to Beshir's post-1989 regime) provided tangible support to the major insurgent groups within Ethiopia, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. This support took the form of granting supply routes and weapons' transshipments across Sudan from Port Sudan as well as allowing the groups to operate freely in eastern Sudan's huge refugee camps, which had flourished after the post-1977 intensification of Ethiopia's northern war (Woodward 1996: 123-124). Furthermore, Sudanese regimes promoted Islamic ideas and practices despite the existence of a substantial Christian and Animist population in the country. This trend, which got accentuated after 1989, fuelled an unsettled war in the country's southern part leading Khartoum's regimes to expand Sudanese military forces to a significant degree, and employing them over an extended period of time. The regimes that surfaced in Sudan also tended to side persistently with Egypt against Ethiopia on the issue of the Nile River.

Egypt depends totally on the Nile River's waters for its existence, and "the first consideration of any Egyptian government is to guarantee that these waters are not threatened. This means ensuring that no hostile power can control the headwaters of the Nile or interfere with its flow into Egypt" (Heikal, 1978:715). Accordingly, Egypt repeatedly made it crystal-clear that it would resort to military action to preserve its portion of the Nile (the 1959 Egyptian-Sudanese Agreement allocated 55.5 billion cubic meters of the river to Egypt). For instance, after signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 under the patronage of the United States, Egypt's president Anwar Sadat issued a stern warning (well-noted in Addis Ababa) according to which "the only matter which could take Egypt to war again is water."

This policy aimed at preventing upstream states, especially Ethiopia that contributes more than 80% of the Nile's water, from claiming their share of the river's total water. Furthermore, being the Arab world's most populous, politically influential and militarily strongest state, Egypt entertained the larger and long-established ambition of projecting its power into the Red Sea and turning it into an Arab Lake (Halliday 1981: 98; Abir 1974:1 34). Ethiopia was exposed to this power projection, which included support to Eritrean insurgent groups, diplomatic and military logistical support to Somalia during the Ogaden War, and more engaged military support to Sudan.

### **3.3 Foreign Policy Strategies**

The post-1974 regime's foreign policy conceptions undoubtedly stemmed from the need to counter the threats enumerated above. But, they were also firmly rooted in the Ethiopian state's historical experience, which is replete with recurrent foreign invasions. In the sixteenth century, the Turks made repeated and unsuccessful attempts to conquer the northern parts of Ethiopia. Between 1820 and 1876, Egyptian invading forces carried out a series of military raids into Ethiopia from various directions. In the north, they were comprehensively defeated by Ethiopian armies at Gundet and Gura in 1875 and 1876 respectively. There was also the attempt to resist the British expedition commanded by General Napier in 1868. Moreover, warfare against the Italians began in 1887 at Dogali, and culminated in the decisive Ethiopian victory at Adwa in 1896. The Italians came back with a vengeance in 1935, invaded Ethiopia and occupied it for five years.

These preoccupations gave birth to patterns of thought and of reacting to all external challenges that equated security with military over-insurance. Thus, the post-1974 regime embraced a strategy of maintaining large Armed Forces buttressed by the acquisition of sophisticated weapons. It devoted large amounts of government expenditure to recruit, train and arm an enormous military force.



Military expenditure amounted to a steady 10% of Ethiopia's Gross National Product annually (Eshetu 1989: 94). Estimates of the personnel strength of the Armed Forces varied from 250,000 to 300,000. The forces fielded an impressive and essentially Soviet-supplied order of battle with roughly: 800 tanks, numerous armoured vehicles and a wide range of artillery, 150 combat aircraft, 50 helicopters and also numerous missiles of all kinds, 2 frigates and a dozen patrol craft (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1989:127-128). To maintain access to a dependable source of weapons, the regime also secured an alliance with the Soviet Union, which provided it around 13 billion dollars in military assistance until 1990. This strategy was aimed at creating a marked numerical imbalance and weaponry discrepancy in favour of Ethiopia vis-à-vis its neighbouring states.

The regime was convinced that this was the paramount strategy to effectively constrain the policy options, and modify the politically challenging postures of these states as well as those of their superpower patron, the United States. One representation of this strategy was the sheer display of Ethiopia's military power during the regular celebrations marking the anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution every September 12, which the regime wanted all of its actual and potential opponents to take note of. Indeed, the high point of these grandiose celebrations was always the military parade in which about 10,000 men and women representing the different services of the Armed Forces marched past Mengistu Haile Mariam. Along with the demonstration of personnel strength (10,000 exceeded the total armed forces of many African states!), the parade included a display of samples of sophisticated weapons (tanks, rocket launchers, an array of artillery weapons and missiles), and an impressive fly-past of combat aircraft.

The Ethiopian regime adopted an additional strategy, one of coordinating covert activities that took the form of support to insurgencies in Sudan and Somalia. It lent multiform and substantial support to the Sudan People's Liberation Front, which was allowed to use Ethiopian territory as a multipurpose safe haven. It was supplied Soviet-made weapons and ammunition, including anti-tank guns, mortars and mortar shells, and heavy machine guns. Shipments were occasionally conveyed inside southern Sudan by Ethiopian helicopters (Fontrier 1999: 157; Salih, 1990:216). Military training was another important aspect of Ethiopian support. Recruits of the Sudan People's Liberation Front were trained in Ethiopian military schools, and were even sent to Cuba for advanced instruction (Woodward, 1996:123). The Front also operated a number of training centres in western Ethiopia, such as the Bonga and Pagak centres in the Gambela area (Johnson, 1998: 58) where instruction was assured by an Ethiopian battalion (Fontrier 1999: 157). In addition, the soldiers of the Front were supplied food (Dawit 1989:158),

and, when wounded, received medical treatment in the Asosa hospital (Salih 1990: 218). The Ethiopian regime also accorded the Front a financial support in quite generous terms, though the proportions of this support cannot be precisely estimated on the basis of available information, which is incomplete and unreliable.

Exhaustive intelligence on the location and strength of Sudanese bases, troop movements and lines of communications, reconnaissance and punitive over flights, were passed to the Sudan People's Liberation Front, and proved vital in its military operations. In fact, during engagements between Sudanese troops and the Sudan People's Liberation Front, Ethiopian units gave the latter fire support and sometimes directly participated in these engagements. For instance, el-Mahdi, the Sudanese Prime Minister, "accused Ethiopian forces of firing artillery shells and rockets across the border in the attack on Kurmuk [in 1987], and claimed that 20 of their soldiers had been killed and a further wounded" (Salih 1990: 217). The Ethiopian regime also enabled the Sudan People's Liberation Front to broadcast a radio program, which "became essential listening right across Sudan" (Woodward, 1996: 123), from Ethiopian soil.

The regime also gave its support to two Somali insurgent groups. The groups, namely the Somali Salvation Democratic Front and the Somali National Movement, "were cards for the Ethiopians to play against their enemy Siad Bare and a counterpart to the Western Somali Liberation Front, the guerrilla organization sponsored by the Somali government" (Korn 1986:76). The Somali Salvation Democratic Front, which was practically an Ethiopian creation, was composed of defectors from the Somali military, and was backed by Marehan and other Darod clans. It also had "a strong contingent of Marxist intellectuals" (Compagnon 1998: 75). The Somali National Movement, which was a predominantly northern Issak group, was "more nationalistic and pro-Western and more jealous of its independence" (Korn 1986: 76). It was merely searching for a land base adjacent to Somalia to conduct military operations.

All these groups depended for their existence and operations on the Ethiopian regime's support, which was supervised by the Covert Operations Directorate of the Military Intelligence Department. The Directorate closely monitored the groups' training camps as well as refugee camps, which were used as a sanctuary for food supply, recruitment and medical treatment. It managed the aid imparted to the groups in the form of money and weaponry, and tightly controlled the groups' leadership checking internal dissents. Finally, it was responsible for ensuring the secrecy of the support's details since a disclosure of its true extent would threaten its effectiveness and risk major embarrassment to the regime.

## 4. The United States and the Horn of Africa

### 4.1 Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the United States

The charge of making United States' foreign policy is constitutionally conferred on the president. Each president "will define his role and responsibilities somewhat differently and fulfil them in a manner that reflects or is at least compatible with his own needs, temperament, and operating style" (Sapin 1966). The Department of State and the Secretary of State are traditionally expected to be the president's sole foreign policy advisors and executioners. Apart from the Department of State, the Department of Defence and the Central Intelligence Agency provide information and analysis to the president. The National Security Council provides the mechanism whereby the vice-president, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defence and other senior officials participate in decision-making. The National Security advisor, supported by a small staff, oversees the preparation of policy analyses and proposals, which serve as a basis for discussion in the National Security Council.

"As a rule, presidents will gravitate for foreign policy advice toward the dominant personality in their administration, the individual who displays a solid understanding of the political and policy needs of the White House - regardless of his or her institutional slot" (Johnson 1991: 136). For instance, Gerald Ford [Republican, 1974-1977], inexperienced in foreign policy, completely relied for the setting of his foreign policy's agenda and direction on Henry Kissinger, who took up the post of Secretary of State in 1973. A realist and renowned scholar, Kissinger favoured a policy of defending the United States' interests through the creation of a favourable balance of power (Cleva 1989: 61). Kissinger had served as Richard Nixon's National Security advisor between 1969 and 1973. During those years, Nixon and Kissinger "centralized foreign policy making power in the White House, circumventing State Department" (Dickson 1985: 74).

Jimmy Carter [Democrat 1977-1981] was a former governor of Georgia who had no experience in foreign policy. A lacklustre president, he was "accused of leading a confused and muddled administration" (Kupchan 1987: 128). This image was partly caused by strong policy differences between Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State who resigned in 1980, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the aggressive National Security advisor. The two men had "different conceptions of how the world works" (Brzezinski 1985: 43), and, while Vance favoured conciliatory and quiet diplomacy to deal with the Soviet Union and emerging crises, Brzezinski advanced a policy of confrontation. When taking office, Carter shared Vance's foreign policy views. He

modified his approach as a result of the Soviet Union's involvement in the Horn of Africa and its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. At the end of his term, Carter largely adopted Brzezinski's tougher policy line (Moens 1986: 42-43).

A former movie actor and governor of California, Ronald Reagan [Republican, 1981-1989] was disinterested in many foreign policy questions (Dickson, 1985:150). He nonetheless sought to limit bureaucratic infighting, and to restore a measure of coherence in the making of foreign policy. He made the Secretary of State his principal advisor and spokesman. George Shultz, Reagan's longest serving Secretary of State, had an expanded authority. He was "even-handed, conciliatory, and a team player" (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986:294). Further, "the role of the National Security advisor and his staff was deliberately scaled down" (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986: 292), and he was made to focus only on the coordination among departments and agencies.

George Bush [Republican, 1989-1993] was more experienced in foreign policy because he had served as ambassador to China, Ford's Central Intelligence Agency director and Reagan's vice-president. In fact, he felt "more at home with foreign policy than with domestic issues" (George 1990: 26). A cautious and reactive president, Bush did not make radical foreign policy changes, and had "a clear understanding of the emerging geostrategic realities [the waning of the Cold War] and the ways in which they can be turned to advantage" (Read 1990: 20). He also "dealt directly with foreign leaders rather than operate through bureaucrats and diplomatic intermediaries" (Hastadt 1991: 122). Nonetheless, Bush consistently sought the advice of, and relied during difficult decisions on, Secretary of State James Baker and National Security advisor Brent Scowcroft who held the same post in the Ford administration.

#### **4.2 Interests and Policy of the United States in Africa**

The successive presidents of the United States between 1974 and 1991 and their senior advisors did not have the concern, knowledge and experience for managing relations with Africa. In any case, Africa represented only a tiny portion of the vast range of states, regions and issues involved in the formulation of United States foreign policy (Dickson 1985: 146). For instance, in the Reagan administration, "one had to move down to the level of the Assistant Secretary [Chester Crocker] to find an individual with a large reservoir of knowledge and deep-seated interest in Sub Saharan Africa" (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986). Accordingly, "African issues more so than other regions remained the esoteric concern of a few during the Reagan presidency ... By default, African questions remained the domain of

middle levels of the executive branch” (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986: 152). Similarly, Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, “spent very little time worrying about Africa, essentially leaving policy to [Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Cohen]” (Cohen 2000: 54).

Thus, the issues that emerged from day to day in Africa were handled by lower layer officials, who were supposed to be guided by an understanding of the objectives and priorities of the president. The National Security Council's Interdepartmental Group for Africa (known as the Policy Coordinating Committee for Africa during Bush's administration) assessed the United States' interests in Africa and formulated options accordingly. It was chaired by the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and drew members mainly from the Department of State, the Department of Defence and the Central Intelligence Agency that were involved in Africa (Cohen 2000: 11).

One major problem in the conduct of relations with Africa was the ad hoc approach of the United States. When a new president assumed office, he replaced the whole upper layers of officials concerned with foreign policy, from the Secretary of State and National Security advisor down to the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (six different Assistant Secretaries for African Affairs between 1974 and 1991). The turnover of officials meant that conceptions of the United States' interests were incessantly redefined, and the strategies for protecting them equally changed. Foreign policy initiatives would clearly suffer since there was no sufficient time for them to take root, and for their authors to know their shortcomings, and to see the reactions of other states.

The professionals in the Department of State (including embassies), the Department of Defence and the Central Intelligence Agency were the main sources for the specialized knowledge and analysis on African issues. There was no shortage of in-depth expertise on Africa. Sound policies often require insight and understanding regarding the political and social forces, the culture of African states in order to analyse events, inclinations and proposed actions (Dickson 1985: 172). That kind of knowledge about a state or region comes from specialized study, living there and mastery of the language. Such specialization was available (Cohen, 2000:13, 41 and 221), but was at times underutilised. For instance, Kissinger's grip on the foreign policy decision-making implied that “decisions on African issues often ignored the empirical evidence that could have been acquired from consultation with specialists on Africa” (Dickson 1985: 74).

Despite Africa's varying geographical and political scope, officials and analysts of the United States viewed the continent in terms of the global strategic situation. They divided in three levels the United States' interests in Africa, which were evidently limited in comparison with its interests in other areas. On the

strategic level, Africa was near the world's sea lanes like the Red Sea and the Cape route through which oil and vital minerals were shipped (Shultz 1984:19). Further, African states provided useful airfields, ship-repair, staging or communications facilities. On the political level, there were in Africa more than fifty states, which played a large role in international forums, and possessed a consequential voting strength in the United Nations (Shultz 1984:19). There was also a concern that the political instability of African regimes invited Soviet intervention to the detriment of the United States' interests and credibility (Shultz 1984: 21). For instance, United States' interests as defined by Kissinger related to "the prevention of radicalisation of Africa" (Price 1978: 6). On the economic level, Africa's importance to the United States was obviously minimal by European or Asian standards. Yet, the United States had a significant stake in Africa's oil in as much as Nigeria was one of its substantial suppliers. It was also near-totally dependent on Zaire and southern Africa for strategic minerals, some of which were essential for its defence industries (Dickson 1985:124).

#### **4.3 The Horn of Africa's Strategic Importance to the United States**

In a narrow geographic sense, the Horn of Africa is that north-eastern part of the African continent, which faces in the east the Red Sea, in the southeast the Indian Ocean, and in the west the Nile Valley. It is separated from the Arabian Peninsula by the Strait of Bab el Mandeb, which is only thirty kilometres wide at its narrowest. The Horn of Africa conventionally comprises of the states of Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. Nevertheless, it embraces geopolitically the adjoining states of Sudan and Kenya, and Egypt is not less involved in the issues and processes of the region. During the Cold War, the Horn of Africa never acquired a strategic importance for its raw materials and mineral resources, for the potential markets within it (consequently insignificant as an outlet for trade and investment) or for any other continental advantage (Imru 1989: 57). Two specific rationales were most commonly used to explain that the Horn of Africa was strategically important to the United States.

In the first place, the strategic significance attached by the United States to the Horn of Africa was primarily determined by its geographical location. The Horn of Africa sits astride to the largest oil deposits and most important producer states of the world, which are located in the Persian Gulf. Western states are strongly dependent on this region for their oil imports. During the 1970s, Japan purchased 90% of its oil imports, and Europe 60%, from the Persian Gulf. And, despite a substantial domestic oil production, the United States purchased 15% of its total oil imports from this region (Halliday 1981: 19). The Horn of Africa also commands

the Red Sea, which is the navigation route through which oil is transported to consumers in the United States, Europe and Japan (Legum 1985: 193).

In fact, expressions such as lifeline, jugular vein or blood vessel for Western economies are used to describe the Red Sea as a large share of the oil imports were transported through this route. The unimpeded access to oil in the Persian Gulf caused a serious concern to the West as “the Arab-Israeli conflict was integrally linked to developments in the Persian Gulf and that the Gulf states were willing to use their oil reserves as a source of leverage over the West” (Kupchan 1987: 29). Moreover, connecting the open seas of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans through the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab el Mandeb, the Red Sea was a vital and expeditious route for United States' combat and logistical support vessels moving between overseas facilities and their home bases (Sterner 1984: 117). Hence, the Horn of Africa directly affected the economic well-being and military security of the United States.

Secondly, the initially unnoticed expansion of Soviet naval capability raised the United States' awareness of the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa. The Soviet Union was “engaged in a concerted drive for maritime superiority - particularly for control of key sea lanes which crisscross the seas and, most especially, for dominion over the choke points through which the planet's shipping passes” (Hanks 1980: 42). Considerations of this presumed Soviet threat were conditioned by the assessment of Soviet objectives in the Middle East, Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa. The Soviet Union aimed at establishing positions of influence by controlling the largest number of ideologically compatible regimes.

This political influence provided the Soviet Union with considerable military advantage in the form of “access to local ports, where supplies can be obtained and repairs made that cannot be done satisfactorily at sea” (Remnek 1981: 129). These naval facilities in turn facilitated the maintenance of a sizeable Soviet fleet in the Red Sea and India Ocean, able to gather intelligence on the disposition and movements of Western forces. According to worse case scenarios, the Soviet Union would be in a position to imperil oil tankers bound to the West via the Red Sea (For the unlikelihood of such a scenario, see Price 1978 and Remnek 1981). The net result was the opportunity for the Soviet Union to apply sufficient military pressure in order to influence the course of events in the Middle East. In this way, the Soviet Union was about to achieve its long-range policy of gaining ascendancy in the global competition with the United States whose influence in the above mentioned strategically significant regions was drastically reduced.

#### 4.4 The Policy of the United States in the Horn of Africa

The United States was compelled to respond to the expansion of Soviet power and influence. In fact, its credibility as a superpower was challenged by a “global image of American indecision and hesitation” (Griffith 1979: 51). The United States tried to regain lost ground and to pre-empt the Soviet threat by employing the following policy instruments. In the first place, it acted forcefully on the diplomatic front by using economic incentives, for instance doubling economic aid to Kenya in 1980, and increasing arms sales to Kenya and Somalia (Bowman and Lefebvre 1985: 416). In this way, it was able to determine the political orientation of local states and shape favourably the regional balance of power.

The Carter Doctrine, which was announced in 1980, vowed to safeguard the United States' vital interests in the Persian Gulf by means of military force (Allison and Williams, 1990:15). It was meant to deny the Soviet Union local influence in the Persian Gulf and the contiguous Horn of Africa. The United States organized and maintained a naval-air task force known as Rapid Deployment Force (Halliday 1983: 226-227) that became Central Command in 1983, securing access to airfields and ports from local states. It arranged access to the port of Mombassa and the Nanyuki airbase in Kenya, the Soviet-built port facilities at Berbera in Somalia and those of Ras Banas in Egypt, the port of Muscat and the offshore airbase of Masira in Oman (Legum 1985: 204, Bowman and Lefebvre 1985: 417 and 421). These military facilities would serve as staging points for the storage of fuel, equipment and other goods, and for the mobilization and movement of military elements in the case of an emergency. The United States used the Rapid Deployment Force to protect the oil fields of the Persian Gulf and to reassure its allies of its commitment's seriousness.

The United States developed air and sea facilities on Diego Garcia, an island situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Diego Garcia was to be the lynchpin of the United States' policy of countering Soviet power projection and deterring Soviet-engineered aggressions. Plans to expand the island, which was acquired from the British in 1971, were designed in 1973 and accelerated after 1979. The island possessed a sophisticated communications centre. It also had a 3,600 meters long runway to accommodate B-52 bombers and reconnaissance aircraft, a deepened harbour providing anchorage for nuclear powered aircraft carriers and ballistic missile launching nuclear submarines (More 1980: 63-64).

The coming into office of the Reagan administration marked a return to a more conventional policy of containment in Africa. Reagan, who deeply distrusted the Soviet Union, took a more ideologically aggressive stance towards the Soviet



Union's involvement in Southern Africa and the Horn of Africa. He criticized Carter's policies as complacent and indecisive, reversing the emphasis on human rights as he was more concerned by the build up of Soviet military power, and the vulnerability of the Middle East after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986: 280, Dougherty and Pfaltzgraf 1986: 390).

The Reagan Doctrine called for vigorous support to insurgent groups against Soviet-supported African regimes with "covert action as the most viable and prudent *modus operandi*" (Johnson 1991: 243). The United States covertly provided military aid, financial support and political encouragement to insurrectionary movements engaged in armed struggle. Covert actions were designed to modify the attitude of or even change leading personalities of regimes deemed unfriendly when their policies became incompatible with the interests of the United States (Lemarchand 1980: 14).

## **5. An Appraisal of Ethiopia-United States Relations (1974-1991)**

No scheme of periodising the relations between Ethiopia and the United States from 1974 to 1991 is completely satisfactory, mainly because of the many and different factors that affected the two states' foreign policies. Nevertheless, three periods may be marked out. The first period began in 1974 with the eruption of the Ethiopian Revolution. It ended in 1977 when Mengistu effectively took over power and Carter got elected. These phenomena generated overt and covert confrontation between Ethiopia and the United States that lasted until 1989. This year, which heralded the third period, witnessed a superficial rapprochement between the two states until 1991. This section briefly surveys these three periods.

### **5.1 Coexistence (1974-1977)**

#### **5.1.1 The Imperial Era**

The Haile Selassie regime signed in 1953 a military assistance agreement with the United States, which initially undertook "to train and equip three six-thousand-man divisions at a total cost of about five million dollars, a generosity then and subsequently considered a form of rent" (Marcus 1995: 89-90) for the use of the Kagnew communications base in Eritrea. "Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and the Eisenhower administration were anxious for an agreement on Kagnew because they saw the base and Ethiopia as important assets in the US policy of worldwide opposition to communist expansion" (Lyons 1986: 57). The United States became Ethiopia's primary supplier of military hardware and training, and

provided a model for the Ethiopian army's doctrine and structure. Ethiopia ranked first as the United States' military aid recipient, getting at least 60% of the United States' military funds for Africa. It had received between the early 1950s and 1970 around 147 million dollars (Markakis 1974: 257). Also, in the same period, around 2,800 Ethiopian officers, including Mengistu Haile Mariam (Korn 1986: 72), were sent to the United States for various courses.

### **5.1.2 Increased Military Assistance**

In the immediate years preceding and following the Ethiopian Revolution, the United States "felt it prudent to let events take their course ... [and] followed a hands-off policy" (Spencer 1977: 35). The fact was that, owing to the Watergate political fallout, "at the top of the US administration there was evidently very little time to be concerned over what was happening in Ethiopia" (Korn 1986: 7). Nevertheless, despite its close association with the old regime, the United States sought to establish workable relations with the new Ethiopian regime, which "was largely a mystery to the Americans" (Korn 1986: 7). This policy coincided with the need of the Ethiopian regime to consolidate its power and contain mounting internal as well as external pressures.

To this end, Lieutenant General Aman Andom, the Minister of Defence and later chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, visited the United States in August 1974, holding talks with the Departments of State and Defence (Korn 1986: 7). The general's visit was worthwhile and productive as the flow of military supplies from the United States to Ethiopia increased substantially. In the early summer of 1974 alone, the United States "approved a new program of credits and cash sales that would allow Ethiopia to obtain \$ 100 million in American military equipment during 1974 and 1975" (Korn 1986: 8). From 1974 to 1977, the United States "supplied Ethiopia with approximately \$ 180 million in arms, in dollar value approximately one and a half times more than everything it had furnished up to 1974" (Korn 1986: 21).

"The large supply commitment of 1974 was rationalized at the time as needed to offset stepped-up Soviet arms deliveries to Somalia" (Korn 1986: 14). But, the main rationale behind this extended assistance was to neutralize the radical elements and bolster the position of the moderates within the new Ethiopian regime. In a memorandum to the National Security Council intended for briefing president Ford, the Department of State declared:

As long as there exists a distinct possibility that the present situation will result in a strengthened, more moderate state, and in a continuation of the

traditional Ethiopian ties with the West, we should continue to carry out our program of military aid and sales as agreed. Suspension of these shipments would only strengthen the hands of radical elements among the military and further frustrate the moderates, perhaps leading them to concur in more radical initiatives (Korn 1986: 8; originally quoted in Peterson 1986).

The inadequacy of this rationale was exposed by the summary execution of Lieutenant General Aman and leading officials and dignitaries of the old regime in November 1974. This forced the United States to announce that no major decision on military supply to Ethiopia would be made until the political situation was clarified (Merahehiwot 1995: 12), and to suspend military assistance in due course. The United States was further estranged by the nationalization without compensation of companies owned by its citizens (Korn 1986: 13).

Entirely dependent on the United States' military supply and facing increased attacks from Eritrean insurgent groups, the Ethiopian regime requested "for an American airlift of \$ 30 million in small arms and ammunition ... [and] confronted the Ford administration with a dilemma" (ibid: 14). After some delay, the United States resumed its military assistance because of the intensification of the offensives of the Eritrean insurgent groups, which besieged Asmera (Ottaway 1978: 163). The United States was wary that, if Eritrea would become independent, it would give the Arab states complete control over both sides of Bab el Mandeb (Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 220). Apart from this strategic consideration, the United States wanted to continue using Ethiopia "as a regional counterweight [to Soviet-supported Somalia], and as a guarantee of the US credibility in the world as whole" Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 220). Secretary of State Kissinger maintained "so long as the Derg retained some pro-Western orientation it was important to back it in the face of the Soviet diplomacy and military build-up in Southern Africa and Angola" (Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 221). He subsequently "approved the provision to Ethiopia of two squadrons of F-5E fighter bombers and agreed to take under consideration a request from the Ethiopian government for approximately one hundred million dollars in additional military supplies" (Korn 1986: 16).

### **5.1.3 Creeping Deterioration**

Meanwhile, the Ford administration undertook a reappraisal of its relations with Ethiopia. In the first place, the strategic value of the Kagnew base to the United States was basically eroded by the development of satellites and the establishment of a larger communications centre in Diego Garcia (Korn 1986: 9). The base's

personnel were significantly reduced from 3,200 in 1974 to 36 in 1976. Yet, the base remained valuable for the reason that the satellites were not fully operational. The administration also observed that the Ethiopian regime “had deliberately decided to alter Ethiopia’s previous reliance on the West, and has consequently strengthened its relations with the Socialist countries” (Statement of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Shaufele to the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee, quoted in Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 222).

After 1976, relations between the United States and Ethiopia continued to deteriorate. The Ford administration was “pressed by members of Congress, the media and human rights organizations” (Korn, 1986:20), and had to take into account the opposition of conservative allies led by Saudi Arabia (Tekeda 1983:16). On the Ethiopian side, the regime radicalised its foreign and domestic policy stances in order to neutralize the leftist opposition movements.

## **5.2 Confrontation (1977-1989)**

### **5.2.1 The Rupture**

The deterioration of relations between Ethiopia and the United States was aggravated by measures taken by both sides. “On February 24 [1977], [Secretary of State] Vance appeared before the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriations and announced that the administration planned to reduce foreign aid to Argentina, Uruguay and Ethiopia because of human rights violations ... Ethiopia would retain its credits but would no longer receive grants” (Muavchik, 1986:28). The decision came barely three weeks after Mengistu effectively consolidated his hold on power after eliminating Brigadier General Teferi (February 3, 1977), reflecting the displeasure of the United States. As a reaction to this measure, the Ethiopian regime ordered in April 1977 the closure of the Kagnew base and the Military Assistance Advisory Group office.

The Carter administration reciprocated by nurturing Somalia as a counterweight to the increasingly hostile Ethiopian regime that flirted with the Soviet Union. The use of the strategic port of Berbera also figured in United States thinking. In April 1977, President Carter issued instructions to Secretary of State Vance and National Security advisor Brzezinski to seek better relations with Somalia (Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 226). The signals sent by the Carter administration to Somalia were, at best, mixed. At worst, it can be argued, they were taken by the Somali decision-makers as representing a green light from Washington for an Ogaden invasion (Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 226).

### 5.2.2 The Ogaden War

Towards the middle of 1977, the Somali decision-makers took note of the fact that Ethiopia's post-1974 regime was led by inexperienced and exhausted military officers who faced multiple crises, had their eyes fixed on Eritrea, and feared a two-front war. It was also undermined by internal power struggles, was preoccupied by urban and rural unrest, and had "alienated almost all its neighbours as well as the United States for different reasons (Ayoob 1980: 149). It could not get all the weapons it requested from the United States, and its military forces were increasingly short on weapons and spare parts. The forces had lost most of their best-trained and senior officers in the tumult of the Ethiopian Revolution, and were suffering from weakened discipline and military organization (Gilkes 1994: 721). It was for the Somali decision-makers the best possible moment to escalate the long-standing conflict over the Ogaden to the brink of war, and launch a full-scale invasion.

In July 1977, the Somali forces operated a 700 kilometres-long advance into Ethiopia, capturing 90% of the Ogaden, which comprised up to a fourth of the latter's geographical area. In August 1977, the Somali forces suffered two setbacks when they tried to capture Dire Dawa, which was Ethiopia's third largest city, an important rail, industrial and commercial centre, and the site of a strategic forward air base, and Jijiga, which was the easternmost Ethiopian stronghold, and a tank and radar base. The Somali troops' principal success of the war came in September 1977 when they captured Jijiga in their second attempt (Nelson 1981: 245; Gilkes 1994: 725). Then, in October 1977, the Somali forces successfully breached the strategic Marda Pass, which was the gateway to the rugged and dry Amhar Mountains running east west and forming the strongest defensive barrier to the flat Ogaden, thus forcing the Ethiopian forces to fall back on Dire Dawa and Harar, which was the Ogaden area's Ethiopian military command centre.

By the end of October 1977, the Somali forces were "essentially stalemated at various points along the road to Harar" (Gilkes 1994: 725). A shortage of supplies and spare parts reduced Somali forces' fighting capacity, especially after the Soviet Union ceased the delivery of weapons. In November 1977, Somalia abrogated its Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union and expelled Soviet military personnel. It sought to enlist military aid from the United States, which refused as it was susceptible to the risk that "a shipment of arms to Somalia would exacerbate the conflict and perhaps increase the probability of a clash between the superpowers" (Dickson 1985: 109).

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, with the limited objective of expelling the Somalis from the Ogaden (Remnek, 1981:140), organized after November 1977 one of the largest long-distance military support operations in recent military history (Legum and Lee 1979: 34). This assistance covered the supply of about one billion dollars worth of weapons, including hundreds of tanks, armoured vehicles, combat aircraft, helicopters, surface-to-air missiles, diverse artillery items as well as light weapons (Porter, 1984:201). It also involved the launching of a control satellite, and the strengthening of the Ethiopian forces by as far as 1,500 Soviet advisors and the deployment of 17,000 Cuban troops (Ayoob 1980:159). In 1978, Ethiopia concluded a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. This accord secured for the Soviet Union the use of the Asmera airfield from which maritime reconnaissance flights were made. The Soviet navy was also provided dry-dock and other support facilities on, and unrestricted use of, the Dahlak Islands (Dawit 1989: 104). This greatly extended the Soviet naval presence and surveillance in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The Ethiopian counter-offensive was launched in early February 1978, and involved around 40,000 regular Ethiopian troops (augmented by 80,000 troops of the People's Militia and reinforced by Cuban troops). The Ethiopian counter-offensive "consisted largely of slow advances along the entire front, employing artillery barrages and massed columns of armour"(Porter 1984: 202). In addition, in a carefully engineered manoeuvre, Ethiopian and Cuban forces crossed the Amhar Mountains "bypassing Somali troops dug in around the Marda Pass" (Porter 1984: 202). Soviet Mi-6 helicopters airlifted pairs of tanks from Dire Dawa around the Amhar Mountains to Jijiga (Legum and Lee 1979: 35). This surprise attack on their rear, which was combined with a strenuous frontal assault from Harar, severely mauled the Somali positions.

Jijiga was recaptured in March 1978, and the Ethiopian forces swept through the parched Ogaden desert to recover the major towns (Nelson, 1981:246). The Ethiopian counter-offensive scored major successes in a short period of time, roughly five weeks. Among the principal factors that accounted for these Ethiopian successes, the most notable ones were the massive Soviet weapons' transfer and better strategic command. In fact, the strategic command of the Ethiopian counter-offensive was taken over by Soviet officers, including General Vassily Petrov who was First Deputy Commander in Chief of the Soviet Ground Forces and General Grigory Barisov whose involvement was crucial because "he was in charge of the Soviet military aid program prior to the [November 1977] expulsion and thus had intimate knowledge of the Somali Armed Forces" (Porter, 1984:204).

### 5.2.3 Options for the United States

In the midst of the large-scale infusion of Soviet weaponry into Ethiopia, Carter's National Security advisor Brzezinski called numerous Special Coordination Committee meetings in December 1977 and January 1978. In these meetings, he warned that "the consolidation of Soviet influence in Ethiopia, combined with USSR presence in South Yemen, would endanger the security of the Suez and the Arabian oilfields" (Moens, 1990:97). During two Special Coordination Committee meetings in February 1978, Carter's senior advisors met to consider prevailing conditions and offer recommendations. Brzezinski argued that "the United States could no longer afford to sit idle ... [giving] the Soviets the impression that they could aggressively expand their influence in the Third World" (ibid:98). He further contended that "American prestige in the Middle East would suffer badly if the United States did not counter the Soviets" (ibid).

Brzezinski proposed that "the United States allow its allies [Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia] to supply arms to Somalia and that it send a Carrier Task Force off the Somalian coast" (ibid) in order to counter Soviet involvement in the Ogaden war. Secretary of State Vance and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Moose objected to Brzezinski's options. They argued that the United States should consider the war as a local conflict, and that the best way to restrain Soviet initiatives in the Horn of Africa was through world opinion (ibid:98-99). President Carter rejected Brzezinski's idea and instead sent David Aaron, the Deputy National Security advisor, to Ethiopia on February 16, 1978. Aaron sought Mengistu's assurance that Ethiopian forces would not cross into Somali territory, and "stressed that the United States wanted better relations with Ethiopia" (Korn, 1986:50).

### 5.2.4 The Ethiopian Famine and the United States' Response

Relations between Ethiopia and the United States exceptionally worsened during the Reagan administration's first term, especially after Ethiopia got associated with Libya and South Yemen by the 1981 Aden Treaty. In 1984, a severe famine swept northern Ethiopia overshadowing such strategic concerns. The post-1974 regime, just like the old regime a decade earlier, took almost no action until foreign news agencies reported the tragedy. It was busy organizing the inauguration with great pomp of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (Korn, 1986:123-124). The regime appealed for food aid to the international community as the famine was reaching a disastrous level. Owing to the large level of public concern, the Reagan administration responded positively to this appeal. It contributed the largest amount

of relief assistance despite its misgivings about the Ethiopian regime. "Assistant Secretary Chester Crocker met Foreign Minister Goshu Wolde in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly ...[and] told the Ethiopian that the United States intended to step up substantially its deliveries of food" (ibid:125).

Nonetheless, disagreement notably appeared on the issue of resettlement, which the regime designed to move a large section of people from famine-hit areas to unused and more fertile lands. The Reagan administration opposed the resettlement program (Hagos, 1989:152) apparently on the ground that it was politically motivated - forcing those families living in the provinces of Tigray and Eritrea to reduce their support to insurgent groups. It also contended that the resettlement program was unplanned, unduly diverted the scarce resources available for relief, and forced numerous peasants to seek refuge in Sudan (Korn, 1986:127-129). Moreover, the Reagan administration opposed the villagization program, which aimed at regrouping scattered villages, claiming that it effected negatively Ethiopia's already frail agricultural production. The Ethiopian regime, on its part, blamed "the severity of the food crisis on the West's slow response" (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994:63). It feared that the United States would deliberately use food aid as a means to extract political concessions. It was also angered by the administration's decision to channel food aid to insurgent-controlled areas through Sudan.

### **5.2.5 Anti-Ethiopia Covert Activities**

The United States basically did not wish Ethiopia's capability to grow beyond a certain level and thereby weaken three of its allies in the Horn of Africa, mainly Kenya and Somalia (Korn, 1986:56). Already in 1977, the Central Intelligence Agency had prepared a paramilitary unit code-named TORCH to assassinate Mengistu in order to destabilize his regime to the extent that it changed its nature and radical commitments (Dawit, 1989:35-36; Yonathan, 2002:25-26). Yet, given the opposition of the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency's inability to control the variables and uncertainties that might have arisen, it is doubtful the agency would have set out to do it. Thus, the TORCH plan might simply have been a KGB disinformation operation (Bittman, 1981) though it provoked the expulsion of two United States diplomats (Pateman, 1995:54).

During the Reagan administration, the Central Intelligence Agency mounted a series of covert operations, which obviously cost it little in the way of financial and human resources as well as in the way of direct risk. Despite the sparse and fragmentary information on them, two kinds of operations were undertaken. In the first place, the Central Intelligence Agency channelled 500,000 dollars (annually,



up to 1990) to the London-based Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance. The Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance was a conservative dissident group, which was created in 1982, had no military presence within Ethiopia, and organized propaganda campaigns against the Mengistu regime (Pateman, 1995:54; Yonathan, 2002:29-33).

In addition, it recruited well-placed civilian government employees and military assignees, who were handled by its officers operating in Ethiopia under the traditional diplomatic cover. Such recruitment was undertaken to penetrate deep into the Ethiopian regime for the purpose of gaining insights on its inner workings, on the motivations and intentions of its leaders, and on the pressures exerted on it by the Soviet Union. In this recruitment mission, the Central Intelligence Agency was particularly successful as it managed to recruit "a senior Ethiopian official, a secret Central Intelligence Agency source of such sensitivity that his reports went only to the BIGOT list [which denotes Top Secret reports exclusively given to the most senior United States officials]. The Directorate of Operations evaluated him as generally reliable to excellent" (Woodward, 1987:167).

### **5.3 Rapprochement (1989-1991)**

#### **5.3.1 The Soviet Union's Disengagement**

After Mikhail Gorbachev's assumption of power in 1985, the Soviet Union cooperated diplomatically with the United States in reducing regional tensions in the Third World. It used its leverage to get Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia in 1989. In 1990, it pressured the Sandinistas to allow free elections in Nicaragua, which led to the downfall of a Marxist-Leninist regime (Inside, 1990:30-36). The Soviet Union's spirit of cooperation was prompted by two factors. "The economic cost of providing third-world regimes with mounting military assistance in pursuit of apparently unwinnable wars came to be regarded as an increasingly onerous burden on the Soviet economy" (Webber, 1992:4). Furthermore, the Soviet Union wanted to improve relations with the United States in order to conclude arms-control agreements on long-range nuclear weapons and conventional forces in Europe. These agreements could improve its worldwide image, lower its military budget and free up resources to bolster its dilapidated economy, which badly needed the financial assistance, technology and investment of the United States (ibid:22). Economic problems would actually inflame nationalist sentiments ultimately tarring the Soviet Union apart in 1991.

Ethiopia appeared to be “the most promising area for greater US-Soviet cooperation in resolving regional conflicts” (Putting, 1989:10). This was true after 1989 considering that the Bush administration's priority was to “demonstrate active cooperation with the Soviet Union in solving regional problems” (Cohen, 2000:3). The Soviet Union had no overriding interests in upholding the Ethiopian regime, which owed it billions of dollars for arms purchases. It reduced progressively its military commitments refusing to conclude any more weapons contracts, and withdrew its advisors from war-zones. The quantity and value of weapons deliveries significantly declined after 1985, with 774 million dollars in that year and 292 million dollars in 1986. In fact, “Gorbachev has put the Mengistu regime on notice that Soviet military assistance will be declining and that Mengistu will be well advised to seek a political settlement of the civil war” (Breslauer, 1990:456-457). Webber remarked that

The entry of the United States into the diplomatic process ... appears to have been taken as an opportunity by the Soviet Union to wash its hands of the Ethiopian problem. Having already began the process of military disengagement, and aware of the inflexibility of Mengistu and the difficulty of reaching agreement between the host of rival rebel movements, Moscow willingly allowed Washington to take the lead role in the moves being made to promote talks between the Ethiopian regime and its opponents (1992:14).

### **5.3.2 Decreasing Tensions**

The Ethiopian regime tried to bring about rapprochement in its relations with the United States. It took the first step in 1989, asking for a high level delegation to visit Ethiopia (Cohen, 2000:19). It also appointed Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Tibebe Bekele (formerly Permanent Secretary) as ambassador to the United States, a futile exercise as consent never materialized (Merahehiwot, 1995:17). The regime denounced Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, signed up to the United Nations-imposed economic sanctions, and supported the deployment of the United States' military forces. “Its mission to the UN was instructed to take a most helpful line in the General Assembly and in the Security Council (Ethiopia was a member that year) on the Gulf War issue” (ibid). The regime's overtures to the United States were clear signs that it could no longer find cover in Cold War divisions, and was definitely losing ground in the two war fronts.

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Cohen visited Ethiopia in August 1989, and met with Mengistu whom he found “relaxed and informal, chain-smoking Marlboro cigarettes” (Cohen, 2000:24). He raised the issues of the protracted civil war and the Ethiopian Jews' plight (ibid:24-25). He added that the

Bush administration could help “to achieve a negotiated peace between the government and its internal enemies” (ibid:20). An attempt was already underway to mediate between the regime and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front by former president Carter.

The regime's delegation, led by Dr. Ashagre Yigletu (the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia) and including Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Tibebe Bekele, held talks with representatives of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in September 1989. The talks were held in Atlanta “under the auspices of an informal group known as the International Negotiating Network, which operates out of the Carter Centre” (Kurylo, 1989:A41). “At the first meeting in Atlanta, general matters were discussed, and agreements reached on such issues as venue, working language, co-chairman, observers and agenda for substantive talks” (Teferra, 1997:294). In November 1989 and in April 1990, two meetings were held in Nairobi, Kenya. After the breakdown of these talks, the Department of State became directly involved after October 1990, organizing another round of talks between the two warring parties in Washington. Despite moving from procedural technicalities to substance, the talks failed to produce concrete results (Cohen, 2000:41-44).

### **5.3.3 The Ethiopian Jews**

One major policy objective - persuading Mengistu to expedite “the departure of the Ethiopian Jews” (ibid:31) - pushed the Bush administration towards decisive engagement in the Ethiopian problem. Indeed, mindful of the “inevitability of Mengistu's fall” (ibid:28), the US took the opportunity to press for an agenda that had been foisted upon it by Israel and the Jewish lobby in the USA, namely the exodus of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. While the Dergue sought the US to arrange for negotiations to stave off a final defeat at the hands of the EPLF and EPRDF, the US was talking about something else: arrangements for Ethiopian Jews to leave. In fact, the US in the end linked the issues promising to facilitate talks if the Jews (Felashas) were permitted to leave (Merahehiwot, 1995:17).

The departure of the Ethiopian Jews would be the last bilateral issue handled in the maundering and torturous relations between post-1974 Ethiopia and the United States (Merahehiwot, 1995:17).

### 5.3.4 The Denouement

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and the United States heavily relied on personal diplomacy in which three United States officials were central players. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen<sup>3</sup> “kept contact between Derg officials and the EPLF leadership from breaking off and at every juncture prodded all parties to a commitment to limit further violence” (Henze, 1991:11). Robert Frasure, the National Security Council's Africa director (1990-1991), went to Sudan and Ethiopia in October 1990 “to talk frankly both to insurgent leaders and Mengistu. He took full advantage of the exceptional leeway permitted to him by president Bush's normally cautious and self-effacing National Security advisor [Brent Scowcroft]” (ibid:12). Frasure had served as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Crocker's chief of staff on conflict resolution from 1981 to 1988. He was also Deputy Chief of Mission in Ethiopia from 1988 to 1990, and was thus well acquainted with the Ethiopian predicament.

In Ethiopia, Robert Houdek (the Chargé d' Affaires) “steadily increased the pressure on Mengistu to convince him of the hopelessness of his situation and the desirability of extricating himself in time to save his life” (ibid). On that account, Mengistu's exit was neither planned in detail nor fortuitous. “Starting weeks before, Houdek and Frasure had talked to him frankly about stepping down and departing. US officials encouraged Mugabe to be forthcoming and in early May suggested that the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister visit Ethiopia to pin down final arrangements. He came the weekend before Mengistu fled” (ibid:13).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

One individual - Mengistu Haile Mariam - centralized the decision-making authority of the military-dominated and Marxist-leaning regime that progressively took shape in post-1974 Ethiopia. This political occurrence altered the manner in which the country related with the United States, especially after the regime's alignment with the Soviet Union in 1977 after the Ogaden war. Its ideology and

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen was a career diplomat who specialized in African affairs. He served in United States embassies in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Zaire, and also as United States ambassador to Senegal (1977-1980). He worked as director for Central Africa (1970-1974) in the Department of State, and as senior director for Africa in the National Security Council (1987-1989). Cohen was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in 1989, and retired from the Department of State in 1993 after 38 years in the Foreign Service. During his National Security Council assignment, Cohen worked closely with the Reagan administration's Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker.

policies openly became incompatible with the strategic interests of the United States, which was mainly concerned with keeping secure the flow of Persian Gulf oil to the West by way of the Red Sea. The United States accordingly perceived Ethiopia, "the most strategically valuable regional actor" (Dickson, 1985:126) in the Horn of Africa, in terms of the Cold War exigency of countering the Soviet threat to its interests in and around the Persian Gulf, and of meeting head on pro-Soviet radical regimes nearby. It followed that, between 1974 and 1991, four successive administrations of the United States adopted in varying degree a confrontational stance towards Ethiopia. In short, both Ethiopia and the United States were in no position to sufficiently exploit rare opportunities for accommodation, thus making their bilateral relations worse than they had to be.

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