# Foreign policy dimension of Ethiopia during the regime of Emperor Theodore II

A. Foreign policy dimension of Ethiopia during the regime of Emperor Theodore II

Theodore II, who reigned in the mid-nineteenth century, was the first modern Ethiopian leader to try to develop a foreign policy that transcended the Horn region. Before Theodore’s time Ethiopia did not have a foreign policy and her relations with other countries were sporadic and spasmodic. His primary concerns were the security of Ethiopia's traditional borders, obtaining technology from Europe (or modernization), and to a lesser degree Ethiopian rights to the monastery of Dar-es-Sultan in the city of [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem).

Theodore’s forerunners among the mesafint, sahale Selassie, ali and oobie and to some extent even the earlier Tigreans Sabagadis and Welde Sellasie had all been receiving explorers and adventurers, missionaries and more or less official representatives of European governments. They had accepted the gifts brought to them and by the eighteen-forties had even started to sign official treaties brought for their signatures. But beyond this and asking for more gifts, usually firearms, the Ethiopian part in opening of the country was passive. All this changed under Theodore, who used foreign policy as an instrument to achieve Ethiopia’s national purposes.

Theodore alone fully appreciated not only the necessary of acquiring firearms but also the importance of producing them and restructuring the Ethiopian society as an effective response to the increasing pressure of European imperialism. Theodore’s foreign policy was not just a response to Europe’s pressure; it was dynamic, anti-imperialistic and anti-Islamic. While it opposed outside imperialism I aimed to promote Ethiopian imperialism, And was thus a forerunner of the policies of the succeeding Ethiopian rulers, particularly Menilic II.

Emperor Theodore II had clear foreign policy goals. He wished to develop close relations with Christian Europe, Particularly Britain and France, as he hoped to procure from them the much aspired “technical aid” to modernize his army. An equally important aim was to check the turko-egyptian imperialism that threatened his country’s independence and to carry on a crusade against those Muslim powers to achieve the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia. Thus close relations with Europe were fundamental to Theodore’s foreign policy.

Theodore was interested in foreign diplomatic relations with as many European countries as possible. However, he was determined to treat with them on equal terms only, to initiate contacts with those powers that might advance his own aims, and to seek technical aid that would be offered without prejudice to his sovereignty. In all these aspects Theodore’s foreign policy was very modern.

B. **Foreign policy dimension of Ethiopia during Emperor Tewodros II**

Emperor Tewodros II designed a foreign policy that would help him unify his domain and consolidate his power in relation to others. Throughout his reign, Tewodros II tried to develop a dynamic foreign policy that reached out beyond the Horn of Africa region. He distinguished Christians and Muslims, i.e. he considered Christians as friends and Muslims as enemies. He perceived the Turkish and Egyptians as the basic enemies and he wanted to have positive relationships with Russia, France and Britain because these countries are Christians.

Besides, Tewodros II possibly thought that an alliance with Britain and France, based on true Christian bonds, could secure Ethiopia from their imperialism. Since he viewed international relations in the medieval context of the cross versus the crescent, he had false hopes of the aid which might come to him from Britain and France in his struggle against the Muslim powers. When the expected did not come, and instead it was learnt that both France and Britain were allies of his enemies, Turkey and Egypt, the earlier distinction between the two imperialisms disappeared, and he prepared to fight them both.

Moreover, Tewodros II was aware that most arms then being sold to Africans were inferior to those possessed by Europeans. While it may appear that he might have overcome the difficulty diplomatically by persuading the Turks to lift the arms embargo against Ethiopia in return for some concessions, in reality this could not be done. The revived Turko-Egyptian imperialism against Ethiopia, his deep suspicions of their designs on his country, and the history of bloody confrontation between Islam and Christian Ethiopia in the fifteenth century, would not allow for a rapprochement between Ethiopia and her Muslim neighbors.

Nevertheless, he would bear to have at first made a distinction between the two. Since European imperialism had not yet threatened his empire or his sovereignty as the Turko-Egyptian imperialism was then doing, he appears to have considered the former as potentially less dangerous than the latter. To overcome the Turko-Egyptian threat he was ready to align himself with imperial Britain and France in spite of his suspicion of their ultimate designs on his country. Moreover, such an alliance did not appear to him to be a contradiction. His intended crusade against Egypt and Turkey would be a fight not only between Ethiopian nationalism and Turko-Egyptian imperialism, but also between Christianity and Islam; and Britain and France were Christian powers.

Furthermore, to secure as wide a support for his plans as possible, he simultaneously dispatched special appeals to the emperors of France, Russia, Austria and Prussia. In his letter to Queen Victoria and Napoleon III Tewodros II complained of Turkey's encroachment on his country, and how he had been prevented access to the outside world by Turkish control over the Ethiopian seacoast. He told of his intention to send ambassadors to London and Paris and requested the two sovereigns to guarantee their safe conduct through Turkish territories. The letters ended with the significant phrase "see how Islam oppresses the Christian." While no formal proposal was made for an alliance, there was an implicit appeal for support. It was indeed unfortunate that when he took the first bold steps towards an alliance with Britain and France in spite of his underlying suspicion of their imperial designs, no efforts were made by those powers either to reciprocate his friendship or to allay his suspicions.

The dimension of foreign policy is explained in terms of alignment, scope and modes of operation. The alignment of the policy is alliance in which Tewodros II forms a formal agreement with Christian states like Britain, France and Russia to get military aid to overcome the Turko-Egyptian threat. The foreign relation is limited to the Christian European countries and refused the relation to the Islam world due to the desire to colonize Ethiopia, and the history of bloody confrontation between Islam and Christian Ethiopia in the fifteenth century. The mode of operation is bilateral negotiation in which Tewodros II tries to contact Queen Victoria and Napoleon III to tell them the situation in the region. To sum up, emperor Tewodros II used alliance in terms of alignment, regional in terms of influence and bilateral negotiation in terms of modes of operation.

# Behavior of foreign policy of Emperor Theodore II (1855 - 1868)

Before Theodore’s time Ethiopia did not have a foreign policy and her relations with other countries were sporadic and spasmodic. There were different actions that Theodore II took to restructure Ethiopian society to the increasing pressure of European Imperialism by producing firearms. Theodore’s foreign policy was not just a response to Europe’s pressures; it was dynamic, Anti-imperialism and anti-Islamic. The increasing Turko-Egyptian imperialism on Ethiopia border and Europe’s obvious commercial and latent political ambitions, made the country to want a strong trial government and dynamic leadership to defend herself. The foreign policy of Theodore was inspired as much by his ideology of the cross versus the crescent as from the belief that he was destined to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims and to carry Ethiopia to heights of greatness.

Theodore had clear foreign policy goals. He wished to develop close relations with Christian Europe, particularly Britain and France, as he hoped to procure from the much aspired technical aid and modernize his country and the much needed firearms and ammunition to equip his army. These countries, Britain and France were also imperial powers with extensive possessions with reported appetite for African territories. The Emperor tried to solve the problem pragmatically. Since he wished for Europe’s friendship without its imperialism, he decided to seek friendly relations with the Christian nations there on equal basis. At the same time he decided against the establishment of foreign consulates in his country, unequal treaties with foreign powers and extra territorial jurisdiction to their envoys as these might become bases of European imperialism in his country.

Despite all of these, he needed to strengthen Ethiopia, unify her and furnish his soldiers with firearms and ammunition. A strong and armed Ethiopia would not help him achieve his conquest but also would hold her own against the advancing, if not always too obvious, European imperialism. To achieve these purposes Theodore needed large quantities of firearms and ammunitions. Although some arms and ammunition continued to come into Ethiopia, their inflow had steadily declined because of the Turkish embargo there against Ethiopia. The British government was reluctant either to supply him arms itself or to force the Turks to end the arms embargo against Ethiopia. The emperor tried to manufacture these arms at home.

However before seeking to accomplish all his foreign policy goals, as a realist Theodore wished to consolidate his position internally. He developed the first five years of his reign to achieving preconditions for a bold external policy. He suppressed the Gallas, captured by Shoa, and quelled the formal rebellion of Negoosie in Tigre.

# Challenges and Successes

Foreign policies can be affected internally by the economic status, military status and leadership behavior of the state, or externally by the existence of superpowers. The foreign policy of Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II was affected both internally and externally. Before the coronation of the Emperor, Ethiopia was an isolated country with half a century old civil war. Externally, there was a rising interest in Africa by western imperialism and continual expansion of the Turko-Egyptian around the red sea. Despite all the challenges, Emperor Tewodros II was able to achieve certain amount of success in his diplomatic relations and was able to create Ethiopia’s first modern foreign policy that transcended the Horn region.

In this section we will discuss each challenge that were against the implementation of the foreign policies, their respective impacts and the attempts to overcome the consequences. In addition, we will also explore the successes that were achieved regardless of the obstacles.

**Challenges**

**Internal challenges**

Internal challenges on the foreign policy of Emperor Tewodros II can be generalized as lack of resource, experience and support.

***Lack of support***.

During 1855, Ethiopia was a country divided among princes where each claimed to be the king of the country. Thus, even after Emperor Tewodros II came to power, the princes kept contacting the international community in secret, going against the emperor’s foreign policy. Unfortunately, one of the few sources of unity, the Ethiopian Orthodox church was also not an advocate of the king’s or any other international religious relations because of the previous attempts of the Portuguese to convert the religion of the country in the sixteenth century. Regardless of the emperor’s trial to either convince or force all parties, his actions that followed from his foreign policies were short in support.

For instance: - “during the British expedition to Ethiopia, Emperor Tewodros II could not trust even the four thousand soldiers who still followed him. Given the opportunity, they might abandon him as so many had already done.” (Wikipedia contributors, 2021)

***Lack of economic and military resource***.

As a result of the prolonged isolation of Ethiopia from technological and scientific advancements of the medieval eras, the country had less significant economy and military power. Even though Emperor Tewodros II opened the country to the international relations and tried to import military goods as well as knowledge, the external replies were ambiguous and futile. This lack of such resource led the rest of the world to undermine the foreign policies of the emperor.

***Lack of experience***.

As the diplomatic relations of Emperor Tewodros II was limited to the circle of neighboring princes, one of the most mentioned challenges was the lack of experience in foreign policy. Special example is the way he handled his relations to Europe with bold rush to war leading to the British invasion and the end of his era.

**External challenges**

External challenges on the foreign policy of Emperor Tewodros II can be classified as Turko-Egyptian expansion and Anglo-French imperialism.

***Turko-Egyptian expansion***

In the 17th century the Ottomans ruled almost the entire north coast of Africa and west to Egypt and the Holy Lands (modern-day Israel and Palestine). Their navy ruled the waters of the Mediterranean while their traders rivalled those of Spain, Portugal and the Italian city-states. Egypt on the other hand was on the march to control the Nile River from its source. Therefore, both empires imposed clear threats against the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. Emperor Tewodros II wanted to go to London and Paris to improve the foreign relation but due to the weak Naval Army he couldn’t cross the Red Sea. The blockage of the red sea also prevented the transport of military equipment. In order to overcome the problems, the emperor asked for assistance from Britain and Russia other Cristian countries, he even tried to diplomatically solve the issues with the Ottoman Turks but the end results of both attempts were futile.

***Anglo-French imperialism***

The drawback of the emperor’s foreign policy was his false hope in Britain and France. He thought the alliance between those nations was due to the Crusade of Christianity vs Islam and Britain and France were Chrisitan Powers, when in reality both were interested in politically, strategically and commercially cooperating with the Ottoman Empire.

Keeping his suspicion of the Anglo-French imperialism, the emperor did not stop trying to form relations with the Christian superpowers of the world both to get technical aid like firearms and ammunition and technological knowledge. Most responses were missionaries and adventurers. Looking at this the emperor stopped accepting any missionaries unless they are skilled.

In the end though the continuous undermining and neglection led the emperor to suspicion alliance between the Anglo-French imperialism and the Ottoman Turk empire. The final challenge was when British attacked and at Magdala he fought against the Britain army and lost, and killed himself rather than surrender in disgrace.

**Successes**

Despite the difficult challenges and failures, Emperor Tewodros II was able to use his foreign policy to achieve historical successes in Ethiopia. Some of the major successes are as follows: the foreign policies were able to:

* + keep territorial integrity of the country
  + opened the country to international relations after long years of isolation and abnegation
  + import some knowledge to the country from the western world
  + start the Gaffat factory with aid from Britain, France and employed 2000 Ethiopians to manufacture firearms.
  + domestically produce 28 guns and 9 mortars which was a great achievement considering the lack of previous connections and knowledge.
  + imposed a big psychological influence of equality and the spirit of modernization to his successors and the rest of the world.

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# Foreign Instruments used during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia

Tewodros II, English Theodore II, emperor of Ethiopia(1855–68) is seen as one of Ethiopia's most notable emperors and the first modern leader who unified the various kingdoms into one empire. Not only did he reunify the various Ethiopian kingdoms into one empire, but he also attempted to focus loyalty around the government rather than the Ethiopian church, which he sought to bring under royal control. He worked to abolish the feudal system and create a new nobility of merit, dependent on the ruler alone. Although he failed in these aims, his example was ultimately followed by his successors.

Before Tewodros’s time Ethiopia did not have a foreign policy, and her relations with other countries were sporadic and spasmodic. In 1848, at the battle of Debarki, he suffered the only serious defeat in his early career. This defeat in the hands of Egyptians shaped the attitude of the future Tewodros with regard to foreign policy, discipline and modern firearms. He had remarkably bold and original ideas regarding the foreign relations of his country.

He was very eager to build a strong modern national army. Above all, he wanted to import the technical know-how for manufacturing firearms locally. He did not fully appreciated the necessity of acquiring firearms only, but also the importance of producing them and restructuring the Ethiopian society as an effective response to the increasing pressures of European imperialism. With amazing resourcefulness he attempted to use its advance guard, the missionary and the explorer, in effecting the change.

Tewodros used foreign policy as an instrument to achieve Ethiopia’s national purposes. This is not to say that Tewodros’s foreign policy arose in a vacuum. It grew in the context of Ethiopia’s encirclement by the Muslim powers and her need to reach out to the world beyond in the face of the growing menace to her need to dependence by Turko-Egyptian imperialism. It was derived as much from Tewodros’s view of Ethiopia’s past and his hopes for her future as from his desire to acquire western technical aid and arms to modernize and strengthen Ethiopia, and his fears of European imperialism. It was inspired as much by his ideology of the Holy Land from the Muslims and to carry Ethiopia to heights of greatness.

His foreign relations also were affected to some extent by the prevailing beliefs of his own people with regard to all foreigners, by his own knowledge of the resident and visiting Europeans and by information acquired through his people returning from Jerusalem, Massawa and the Sudan.

Tewodros had clear foreign policy goals. He wished to develop close relations with Christian Europe, particular;y Britain and France as he hoped to procure from them the much aspired “technical aid” to modernize his country and the much needed firearms and ammunition to equip his army. An equally important aim was to check the Turko-Egyptian imperialism that threatened his country’s independence and to carry on a crusade against those Muslim power to achieve the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia. Thus close relations with Europe were fundamental to Tewodros’s foreign policy. He was also interested in forging diplomatic relations with as many European countries as possible. However, he was determined to treat with them on equal terms only, to initiate contacts with those powers who might advance his own aims, and to seek technical aid that would be offered without prejudice to his sovereignty.

His foreign policy was not just a response to Europe’s pressures; it was dynamic, anti-imperialistic and anti-Islamic. While it opposed outside imperialism it aimed to promote Ethiopian imperialism, and was thus a forerunner of the policies of the succeeding Ethiopian rulers, particularly Menelik II.

He wanted to reorganize and modernize the army. To get the necessary weapons, he demanded first that European missionaries and adventurers then living in Ethiopia build him a cannon (successful after much trial and error), and then he brought in artisans, especially arms makers, from England. Contemporary European accounts portray him as an Ethiopian Peter the Great, both for his hot temper and cruelty and for his courage, ambition, military genius, and interest in technology.

His [modernization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernization) program, however, failed. Several incidents in the 1860s, including a letter to Queen Victoria that remained unanswered, led Tewodros to feel insulted by [England](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-United-Kingdom). When he imprisoned several British missionaries and envoys, accusing them of plotting against him, Great [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom) sent the Napier’s expedition (1867–68) to rescue the prisoners. Aided by rebellious nobles along the way, the British force attacked Tewodros’s forces at Magdela on April 10, 1868. Here he fought the British courageously, lost the battle for reasons he could not help, and killed himself (ironically with the very pistol that had been a gift to him from Queen Victoria) rather than surrender in disgrace. He knew that a major cause of his defeat was the failure that attended his efforts to arm his country adequately. Yet if Tewodros failed to reach his foreign policy goals, it was because he lacked both the resources and the experience needed to handle the European powers properly. As his diplomatic experience was limited to the circle of neighboring princes, neither the real designs and capacities of France and England nor their global diplomacy which transcended religious considerations were within his powers to calculate.

In spite of these shortcomings, Emperor Tewodros emerges as one of the greatest rulers of nineteenth century Africa and as a champion of Africa's struggle for equality with the rest of the world.

# SUMMARY