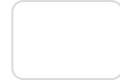


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## Ethiopia and Eritrea Slide Closer to War amid Tigray Upheaval

*Two years after a disastrous war in Ethiopia's Tigray, internal tussles as well as related tensions between Addis Ababa and Asmara threaten to reignite conflict. All with influence should urge the two countries to exercise restraint and avoid adding to the Horn of Africa's troubles.*

Relations between Ethiopia and its neighbour Eritrea have nosedived in recent months, raising fears of a new war between the countries. Their ominous new enmity relates partly to political turmoil in Ethiopia's northernmost region, Tigray, where Addis Ababa and Asmara have aligned with different factions of the ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the aftermath of a brutal conflict. But an additional key reason for the tensions is Ethiopia's bid to regain access to the Red Sea, which it lost when Eritrea won its independence in 1993, through the forcible acquisition of Eritrean territory. Both countries appear to be on a war footing. State-run media in both are whipping up public sentiment, as Ethiopian and Eritrean diplomats pitch their respective positions to their counterparts in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has assured interlocutors that he has no plans to invade Eritrea, but regional diplomats who monitor rumblings in Addis fret that Ethiopia could soon do so, moving into and annexing the Eritrean port of Assab, casting aside norms against redrawing borders by force, and pushing the Horn into yet another conflagration.

It is possible that Abiy is positioning himself for negotiations and would step back before triggering what could be a terrible war in a region that has seen far too many – yet diplomats can hardly bank on that prospect. In a world where the norm against territorial conquest is being tested from Ukraine to the Golan Heights to (at least notionally) Greenland, it is too easy to imagine him deciding to roll the dice in pursuit of a long-held

ambition. Diplomatic pressure from countries that have ties to Abiy and a stake in the Horn of Africa's stability – especially China, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye – is the best hope for dissuading Abiy from seeking aggrandisement with the barrel of a gun and bringing the parties to the table for talks that can defuse the dangerous dynamic between Addis Ababa and Asmara. At the same time, regional countries should hold long overdue serious talks about resolving Ethiopia's demand for an autonomously run port somewhere along the Horn's ample shoreline, in order to tackle an issue that, left untended, will continue to stoke tensions.

## A Seesaw Relationship

Frictions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have ebbed and flowed in recent decades, often pivoting on Eritrea-Tigray relations. Many highland Eritreans and Tigrayans share a common language, Tigrinya, and a cultural heritage. Eritrea's secessionist movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, allied with Tigray's TPLF, also an insurgent group at the time, to topple Mengistu Haile Mariam's military dictatorship in 1991. Eritrea gained independence soon thereafter, while the TPLF went on to dominate Ethiopian politics for three decades. Ties soon frayed, however, due to numerous factors, including a falling-out between Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea. The two countries eventually slipped into the deadly 1998-2000 border war.

Bilateral relations remained hostile until the TPLF lost power in 2018, after a wave of protests paved the way for Abiy Ahmed's rise to the premiership. While Ethiopia had seen significant development gains during the TPLF's tenure, its tight-gripped rule had sown deep resentment, especially among the Oromo and Amhara, Ethiopia's two largest ethno-linguistic groups. (Tigrayans account for 6 per cent of the country's population.) Following Abiy's ascent, many TPLF leaders decamped to Mekelle, Tigray's capital. In June 2018, meanwhile, Abiy and Isaias achieved a rapprochement between their two countries in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Billed as a peace agreement, the deal centred on their common antipathy for the TPLF. Tensions between Tigray and the federal government became especially fierce after the TPLF held elections in September 2020, in defiance of Addis Ababa, which had postponed polls nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. War started two months later, when Tigrayan troops took over the Ethiopian armed forces command located in the region. The Ethiopian national army split, with Tigrayans forming their own forces to fight the government. The government relied heavily on contributions from Eritrea and the Amhara region, both of which border Tigray.

After two years of bloody war, Abiy's coalition gained the upper hand and looked on the cusp of victory, essentially forcing the TPLF to negotiate an end to the conflict on Abiy's terms. In November 2022, the parties reached

a peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa, following mediation by the African Union, but the deal planted the seeds of more crises. Abiy soon fell out with his two main allies in the war, Eritrea and the Amhara, neither of which had been party to the negotiations, and both of which felt its interests were insufficiently represented in the agreement and the new dispensation that ensued.

Isaias bitterly opposed the peace deal, into which he felt he deserved more input given his contributions to the war effort. He would have preferred a military solution that spelled the end of the TPLF, which Asmara still viewed as a major threat. Instead, he got the Pretoria agreement, which required the TPLF to fully disarm within 30 days. It did not do so. Relatedly, Eritrea had invested heavily in helping build up the Amhara militias as part of the war effort, and it was apparently frustrated when Abiy pivoted to dismantling them after signing the peace deal. Subsequently, Amhara militias launched an insurgency against Abiy's government that now engulfs much of the Amhara region. Addis Ababa, meanwhile, believes that Asmara has been channelling support to the Amhara insurgents, partly due to its frustrations with the Pretoria pact.

The major deterioration in ties, however, began as Abiy and his team made clear they were making a serious push to regain sea access, which Ethiopia had lost when Eritrea seceded in 1993. Ethiopia, the world's most populous landlocked country, has repeatedly made the case that a seaport is essential for its future security and prosperity. This view is widely held in Ethiopia, where citizens resent the steep costs Addis Ababa pays for imports, primarily through Djibouti but also via ports in Somalia and Kenya. More pertinently, many remember the lengthy Red Sea shoreline they enjoyed before Eritrea's secession separated the Ethiopian interior from lands along the coast.

Both in private and in public, Abiy casts himself as the leader who will right what he sees as the historical injustice done when Addis Ababa lost access to a sovereign port. He has seemed especially interested in Eritrea's southern coastal strip, including Assab, which sits just 70km from the Ethiopian border. Until relations with Eritrea broke down in the mid-1990s, Assab was Ethiopia's primary route to the sea. Today, the port would seem to be an attractive military target for Addis, as it is isolated from Eritrea's more populous and more easily defensible central highlands. Against this backdrop, Asmara appears convinced that Abiy is bent on trying to seize Assab militarily, despite his occasional [denials](#). It took [Abiy's televised speech](#) in October 2023, in which he claimed a historical right to access to the Red Sea, as an oblique war threat. State media in Ethiopia have also fanned a firestorm of nationalism over the subject.

Although those tensions died down for some time, they have now flared up again. In mid-2023, Western diplomats worked quietly to warn Abiy not

to launch an invasion, while also pressing the Tigrayans not to ally with Abiy in any such military adventure. [Abiy publicly clarified](#) that Ethiopia would not invade its neighbour. Then, in January 2024, Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, a northern region of Somalia that has been de facto independent since 1991, providing that Addis Ababa would consider recognising its sovereignty in return for a lease over a section of its coastline where Ethiopia could build a naval base. Though it greatly angered Somalia, this step helped allay concerns that Addis was determined to gain access to the sea through Eritrea. The easing was only temporary, however: Turkish mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia appears to have shelved the prospect of an Ethiopian seaport in Somaliland, leaving some to worry that Abiy will inevitably turn his sights back to Assab.

Another source of tension is that the two sides appear to be trying to meddle in each other's affairs. Addis Ababa accuses Asmara of supporting insurgents in Amhara and conspiring against its allied administration in Tigray (see below). For its part, Addis is now openly permitting Eritrean opposition groups to operate in Ethiopia. These notably include the Brigade N'hamedu (Blue Revolution), a mostly diaspora-led group with the stated objective of overthrowing the regime in Asmara. It held a conference in Addis in January 2025.

There are other aggravating factors as well. Regional polarisation is one. Ethiopia is a strong ally of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has invested heavily in Addis Ababa and supported Abiy militarily. By contrast, Eritrea has seen its relations with the Emiratis go south and grown closer to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Riyadh appears to see the relationship as helping counter Abu Dhabi's regional influence, while Cairo is almost surely seeking ways to keep Addis off balance because of its development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam upstream on the Blue Nile. Egypt sees the dam as a threat to its water supply.

The rivalry between these two sets of allies is playing out in Ethiopia's neighbour to the north west, Sudan. There, the UAE is supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the country's civil war, with Ethiopia leaning in the same direction. On the other side of the divide, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are backing the Sudanese army, the RSF's foe, while Eritrea has aided army-aligned militias in eastern Sudan. The clustering of Ethiopia and the UAE on one side of fault lines in the Horn – and of Eritrea, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the other – aggravates regional conflict risks and complicates peacemaking.

## A Tug of War over Tigray

A power struggle in Tigray has exacerbated these tensions. Both Addis Ababa and Asmara view Tigray – which lies on their shared border and still has a standing army – as a critical area, control of which could swing an

eventual war one way or the other. After the November 2022 peace deal, Abiy tried to draw Tigray's new leaders to his side, while Asmara also put out feelers. Eventually, the two seemed caught in a tug of war for influence over the region they had allied against to bring to heel.

A dispute between political factions in Tigray broke out into the open soon after the peace deal. Abiy blocked Debretsion Gebremichael, Tigray's wartime leader and the TPLF head, from taking the reins of the new regional administration. (Bad blood between Abiy and Debretsion dates to the latter's strong opposition to Abiy's rise at a congress of the country's then-ruling coalition in early 2018.) With Debretsion sidelined, the TPLF was forced to nominate another candidate. It chose Getachew Reda, who had been its lead negotiator in Pretoria. Getachew won the position by a single vote in an internal TPLF election, with Debretsion reportedly campaigning against him. Addis Ababa subsequently blamed Debretsion's camp for making the key decisions that set Mekelle and the federal government on a path to war after Abiy assumed power.

Tigray's many post-war struggles have weakened Getachew's position at the helm of the interim administration. Debretsion's TPLF faction and allies in the security forces paint Getachew as too close to the federal government. They blame him for flaws in the November 2022 peace deal – which they say failed to protect the region's interests – and argue that his administration is ineffective.

Getachew's camp, meanwhile, say they have done their best under the circumstances. They accuse Debretsion and elements within the security forces of exploiting Tigray's challenges to justify a naked power grab that risks plunging the region into greater turmoil. Both Getachew's faction and the federal government also say Debretsion's camp has been reaching out to Eritrea. Among other things, they point to a series of meetings among the TPLF leadership, members of Tigray's security forces and representatives of the Eritrean government, including in Asmara, starting in late 2024. While it is unclear what sort of understanding, if any, Debretsion's faction might have formed with Eritrea (he denies any alliance), it is widely perceived in the region that his circles' interests have converged with Asmara's behind unseating Getachew's administration.

Most observers see Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki's manoeuvring as tactical and largely defensive, given Tigray's potential strategic value. Pulling the TPLF to Asmara's side could help deter Addis Ababa from aggression and weaken Ethiopia's position should conflict erupt. Failing that, fanning the flames of division in Tigray would at least rob Abiy of a potential ally in any war with Eritrea, while also dealing a blow to an old foe. Further, some have speculated that Asmara hopes to tie Abiy down with domestic troubles, should he seek to take Assab by force.

Getachew has slowly lost control of the region to the Debretsion faction. In September 2024, Debretsion's TPLF allies expelled Getachew and other senior members of his administration from the party. Over the ensuing months, Debretsion and his allies have slowly taken over local administrative bodies. Support from Tigray's security forces, once seemingly neutral, seems to have turned the tide. In late January 2025, a group of around 200 officers [publicly called](#) for the dissolution of Getachew's administration. In March, Debretsion's groups appeared to rapidly consolidate their hold on major towns, including Mekelle. Getachew and key allies left Tigray. Despite the political upheaval, thus far there has been little violence, a sign of how few generals Getachew has remaining on his side.

As this power struggle unfolds in Tigray, Abiy has thus far shown restraint, calling Debretsion and Tigray's security commander-in-chief Tadesse Worede to Addis Ababa for meetings on the way forward. Many think Abiy's most likely course of action is to replace Getachew with a new leader acceptable to both himself and Debretsion. Yet regardless of whether a resolution emerges, the tumult in Tigray has ratcheted up tensions between Addis and Asmara.

## Mounting Tensions

For several weeks, there have been palpable signs that both Addis Ababa and Asmara are preparing for war. Alarming and credible reports have emerged of military mobilisation on both sides of the border. Observers on the Ethiopian side tell Crisis Group that Addis has made substantial new deployments of heavy weaponry and mechanised units in the Afar region, close to the Eritrean frontier and within striking distance of Assab. Meanwhile, Eritrea is reported to be on [its highest alert](#), believing the worst of Abiy's intentions. While Abiy [asserted to parliament](#) on 20 March that Ethiopia does not intend to go to war with Eritrea over Red Sea access, he also demanded negotiations to secure that right, which Asmara sees as more bullying. The Eritrean information minister, Yemane Meskal, described that part of Abiy's speech as ["dangerous"](#). He had earlier referred to the rhetoric emanating from Ethiopia as betraying a ["war-mongering psychosis"](#).

Abiy's strategy toward Tigray and Eritrea is the subject of much speculation among regional diplomats and others who fear a new war in the Horn alongside the destabilising conflict in Sudan. Some think that Abiy has decided to take Assab by force, believing that the Ethiopian army can achieve this objective with a limited operation launched from the Afar region. Abiy may also calculate that he can manage any negative reaction from within the region, or from Ethiopia's international partners, even though such a land grab would contravene African Union and UN Charter principles. Confining the war to Assab and its environs, or at least Eritrea's

southern lowlands, however, would likely be an unrealistic aim, as Asmara would almost certainly try to open another front in Eritrea and increase its support for anti-Addis groups in Ethiopia. The risk of the war spilling into Tigray, with Asmara activating its new links with the TPLF, would be high. Fighting could then spread across Ethiopia's northern regions.

Another interpretation is that Ethiopia's reported military build-up, the state media's revving-up of nationalist fervour and Abiy's message that a Red Sea port remains an "existential issue" are all part of an escalation designed as a prelude to negotiations. In such talks Ethiopia would be seeking a deal on sea access via Assab and an agreement that Asmara will cease its backing for Ethiopian anti-Addis groups, particularly sections of the TPLF and Amhara insurgents. Getting to such a deal would be fraught with problems, however. It is doubtful that Isaias would be willing to open Eritrea's tightly protected border to Ethiopia in order to allow it free use or control of Assab. He would be loath to set aside his hard-won relations with various armed actors that give him leverage over Addis Ababa – especially the militias in Amhara and factions within the TPLF. He also surely fears a future Mekelle-Addis pact, which he has studiously guarded against since Abiy rose to power.

## Addressing the Tensions

Fissures running through Addis Ababa, Mekelle and Asmara could still widen into violent ruptures in the coming months – or sooner – if cooler heads do not prevail. Whether or not Abiy or Isaias is planning for war, the risk of a conflict breaking out by accident has been heightened by the military mobilisation and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides.

The standoff is unlikely to ease until Asmara believes Abiy's assertion that he has no plans to use force to achieve his aim of gaining a seaport. On Ethiopia's part, halting and beginning to reverse the military build-up in Afar would seem to be a prerequisite for making credible assurances in this respect. Regional and outside powers should press Addis Ababa to take such steps immediately.

But achieving a durable de-escalation is likely to require something more – ie, talks between Asmara and Addis Ababa, which would likely have to be brokered by a third party. The goal for these talks should be a series of pledges, with Ethiopia promising not to invade, both countries committing to stop interfering in each other's affairs and both also agreeing to open a quiet back channel which they could use to talk about how to keep escalation risks under control. Candidates for brokering talks are China, which has major economic interests in Ethiopia and strong historical ties with Eritrea (Isaias trained in Mao Zedong's China); Saudi Arabia, which helped mediate the 2018 rapprochement between Abiy and Isaias; and Türkiye, which recently carried out a successful mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia. Kenya, whose former President Uhuru Kenyatta

was a key player in negotiating the Pretoria agreement, could also be involved. All those with an interest in the region – including the U.S., European powers, Gulf states and continental neighbours – should signal their support for talks and urge restraint in the meantime.

In the medium term, whichever of these mediators takes the lead should also convene talks among Ethiopia's neighbours to seriously explore options for Addis Ababa to gain free access to a port along the region's shoreline. At the height of the Ethiopia-Somalia tensions over the overtures to Somaliland, Djibouti offered Addis use of its ancient northern port of Tadjoura. Mogadishu has also periodically suggested options for Ethiopia, but none has advanced, due to mistrust and the absence of structured dialogue. Without a settlement of this issue, Ethiopia's frustration with what it sees as its geographical strangulation will continue to be a source of discord with its neighbours.

Finally, though Tigray no longer looks like the most worrying fault line, that could quickly change. While thus far Getachew has been shunted aside with little bloodshed, no replacement leader for the regional administration has been announced, leaving Tigray in limbo waiting for Abiy and the TPLF leadership to conclude their talks. Given his animosity for Debretsion, Abiy is unlikely to allow his faction to assume overall power in Tigray. Absent the identification of a compromise candidate, that leaves a risk of escalation between the two sides, which could spin out of control in the coming weeks or months. The guarantors of the Pretoria agreement, namely South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, should return to mediate among the federal government and TPLF, helping unite them behind a way forward that avoids violence. One goal could be to reintegrate Tigray into Ethiopia's political order, from which it remains largely separated, including without clear representation in parliament.

The last thing the Horn of Africa needs is more conflict. But the danger of more lurks, in the form of either war between Ethiopia and Eritrea or renewed violence in Tigray. Fortunately, there is still time and space for concerted diplomacy to defuse these risks. Those positioned to play a mediating role should move with urgency to do so.

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