

THE ETHIOPIAN CRISIS: A DANGEROUS PRECEDENT FOR FUTURE CONFLICTS?

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Abstract: This brief analyzes Ethiopia's conflict dynamics and highlights some of its regional and global implications. The Ethiopian military's intervention in the northern region of Tigray in November 2020 has triggered a variety of intra-state and intra-regional dynamics that undermine the stability of the whole Horn of Africa. Although there seems to be no short-term solution to the conflict, the destabilizing effects of the Ethiopian crisis at the regional level are already noticeable, as there are a mix of concerns about the instability spilling over and other countries' ambitions to benefit from Addis Ababa's weakening. From a broader lens, the Ethiopian crisis has become a new ground for confrontation between the United States and China in recent months, with recent trends turning it into a test case for future conflicts and a new global balance of power.

Introduction

The conflict that began last November in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray has transformed several times in recent months, affecting the whole country. In recent months, the conflict has triggered a variety of intra-state and intra-regional dynamics that undermine the stability of a regional complex as highly fragile as the Horn of Africa. Although it is difficult to foresee how the conflict will evolve, the implications of Ethiopian instability will undoubtedly profoundly affect the future of states in the whole region. Over twelve months of conflict have led the leading international players to adopt stances that are, in many cases, completely divergent. The United States (U.S.) and Chinese rivalry has generated a struggle for influence around the Ethiopian conflict that could become a test of future global balances.

1. Conflict Dynamics and the Risks of a War of Attrition

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's decision to militarily intervene in Tigray last November triggered a conflict that has gradually engulfed the whole country. The warfare erupted after two years of tension between the new prime minister and the Tigrayan elites who had dominated Ethiopian politics and economy for over two decades. After coming to power, Abiy Ahmed reshaped Ethiopia's ethnic-political balance, gradually reducing the influence of Tigrayan elites. Tensions, however, boiled over when the Tigray authorities decided to hold regional elections despite the federal government's decision to postpone them. Following the attack on a federal military base on Tigrayan soil, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) intervened. Since then, the conflict has gone through at least four distinct phases. The Ethiopian troops seized most of the northern region, including the Tigrayan capital Mekelle, followed by two Tigrayan offensives in June and August, which led to Addis Ababa's counteroffensive in the fall. The latest stage began in October with a counter-offensive by the ENDF.

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While the two camps have crystallized around the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the ruling party in the northern region, on the one hand and Abiy Ahmed on the other, there are also several other actors. The federal army's operation involves regular troops from other Ethiopian regional states such as Amhara and Afar, plus the active support of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). If the Ethiopian Prime Minister has been able to consolidate the anti-Tigrayan front during the summer, so too have the latter established their own coalition, the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Force, joined by nine groups from different Ethiopian regional states that share a common desire to end the Abiy Ahmed government.¹ The TPLF-led coalition's political agenda aims to revive the country's federal structure through a revised version of Abyotawi democracy, the revolutionary democracy introduced during the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) era. The project has the explicit intention of countering the Prime Minister's political agenda, who in recent years has promoted a pan-Ethiopian vision based on the concept of *medemer* (synergy/being added to). In terms of military aid, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), the TPLF's military wing, has been able to rely primarily on the support of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), led by Jaal Marroo.

In November, the counter-offensive launched by TDF-OLA troops achieved significant success, forcing the Prime Minister to declare a six-month state of emergency. The Tigrayan takeover of some strategically important cities such as Dessie and Kombolcha suggested a forthcoming siege of Addis Ababa.² However, in a few weeks, the balance of power in the conflict shifted yet again. Some strategic mistakes made by the anti-Abiy coalition combined with the arrival of recruits to the regional armies allied to the federal government swung the conflict's momentum back in Abiy Ahmed's favor. Also, the massive increase of Ethiopian air power has played a crucial role in slowing down the advance of the TDF-led troops. In addition to old Russian-made jets, such as the MIG-23 and Sukhoi Su-27 used since the Derg period, the Ethiopian Air Force (ETAF) relies on unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV/drones) of various origins.³ Currently, the Chinese-made Wing Loong I, Iranian Mojaher-6, and, since last August, Turkish-made drones such as TB2 are flying over Ethiopia's skies.⁴ Therefore, the last few weeks have allowed Ethiopian forces to regain ground and ensure safe transit on the route that connects the capital to Djibouti, a vital artery to ensure the continuation of supplies to Addis Ababa.

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In this context, the country has sunk into an internal conflict that has spread to several regional states from the northern region of Tigray. The outbreaks of protest and fighting are present in all areas of the country, even awakening latent disputes such as the Metekel region. The country's financial situation is also incredibly fragile and the prices of essential goods have increased dramatically. This has worsened living conditions and led to an ongoing humanitarian crisis involving almost six million people in the areas most affected by the conflict, such as Tigray. In addition to the conflict, Tigray has been hit by one of the worst famines in recent years, exacerbated by Addis Ababa's decision to block humanitarian access corridors to the Tigray region for months on end. In recent months, the clash has acquired an ethnic dimension fueled by the parties' conflicting narratives and propaganda. The result has been an increase in episodes of violence and abuses perpetrated by civilians against other civilians. International organizations and NGOs have reported serious and consistent human rights violations by both sides, some of which may amount to war crimes.

In the scenario outlined so far, it is possible to imagine that the conflict could take on a more asymmetrical nature in the coming months. The ongoing advance of the ENDF and its allies is unlikely to be slowed down again. Although TDF troops are staunchly resisting, the weight of different capabilities on the ground will be felt over the long term. For this reason, the Tigrayan forces and their allies could decide to retreat and find refuge in highlands and other areas of difficult access. In this scenario, like last winter, it will likely return to its preferred mode of combat: guerrilla warfare. The Tigray military leadership, under the command of Tigray Regional President Debretsion Gebremichael and supervised by General Tadesse Werede Tesfay, are very skilled in guerrilla strategies developed during the years of struggle against the Derg regime. These developments will generate a stalemate, as the conflict turns into a war of attrition with increasingly violent episodes at the local level. The most significant risk, in the case of a stalemate, is that the country's economic resources, already limited, will be destined solely for war. The country's financial stability is precarious due to the recession and forex crisis. U.S. sanctions could further exacerbate the foreign exchange shortage with rising food prices, and thereby bring the supply of necessities to an almost complete standstill. The emergence of new insurrections and riots in various regional states would further undermine Addis Ababa's authority.

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In this scenario, there would not be regime change, but rather widespread conflict resulting in Ethiopia's fragmentation, putting it at risk of becoming yet another failed state. Ethiopia is ethnically divided, with over 80 major ethnic groups, in addition to clans and sub-clans. Since 1991, ethnicity has formed the basis of political representation. Ethiopia is an ethnic federation in which semi-autonomous regional states are organized along ethnic and linguistic lines. Ethnic-based federalism has provided the major ethnic groups with the right to self-determination.⁵ Over time, however, it became clear that the federal project had only temporarily soothed inter-ethnic rivalries without fully resolving them.⁶ Since 2018, the federal structure has been challenged by a new vision of national unity promoted by Abiy Ahmed. The Prime Minister believes in overcoming ethnic divisions in favor of a pan-Ethiopian nationalism based on inclusive rhetoric and the popular notion of *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopianness). However, the reform project promoted by the Prime Minister has undermined the foundations of unity by re-awakening old rivalries.⁷ The Tigray crisis and its subsequent developments have exacerbated ethnic-nationalist competition, which, as in the case of former Yugoslavia, could result in federal authorities losing power, the birth of different state entities, and a number of disputes.

2. Regional Implications: The Cases of Eritrea and Sudan

The persisting crisis in Ethiopia and the prospect of a prolonged state of instability have raised concerns among neighboring countries. Some of them have concerns that the instability could spread to their own country like a contagion. Others, to the contrary, see Ethiopian instability as an opportunity to reconfigure the regional balance of power. In the first case, the fear of spillover is driven by the structure of the regional security complex. The Horn of Africa can be described as a conflict-inner region, where a state's internal and external threats overlap.⁸ Accordingly, the security and stability of each country is strongly connected to its neighbors' stability. As a result, even the slightest spillover effect of the Ethiopian crisis could have a devastating impact on its neighbors' stability. On the other hand, the Ethiopian internal conflict has triggered a general reshuffling of regional balances. Over the past decades, Ethiopia has operated as a regional hegemon, albeit imperfectly.⁹ The ENDF military interventions in Somalia, Eritrea, and South Sudan have given it the reputation of being the region's gendarmerie. Above all, Ethiopia is at the core of one of

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the prominent African disputes: the controversy over the Nile waters or the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) issue. The ongoing internal crisis could result in a downsizing of Addis Ababa's relative power in favor of Sudan and Egypt in the GERD dispute. In order to better understand the regional dynamics triggered by the Ethiopian crisis, the positions of the two most involved neighboring countries, Eritrea and Sudan, will be analyzed.

As aforementioned, Eritrea is the country most involved in the Tigray conflict. Since the beginning of the Ethiopian military intervention in November 2020, the EDF has coordinated with the ENDF, effectively encircling Tigrayan positions. The Eritrean troops stationed in Western Tigray, especially around the city of Humera, have been responsible for several violent attacks against Tigrayan civilians. The rivalry between President Isaias Afwerki and the Tigrayan leadership dates back to Eritrean independence and the subsequent war of 1998. Over the past four years, the Eritrean leader has allied with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, with this convergence being ratified with the Jedda agreement in 2018.¹⁰ At the root of the alignment lies both the desire to reconfigure the regional order on the Asmara-Addis Ababa-Mogadishu axis and the desire to reduce the political power of their common Tigrayan rival. With his decision to actively support the military intervention against Mekelle, Isaias Afwerki has tied his political future to Abiy Ahmed. The stance adopted by the Eritrean leader has provoked domestic discontent on many levels. Even though Isaias Afwerki has complete control over the country, some members of his party have not liked the imbalanced relationship with Abiy Ahmed, considering it excessively subordinate. Even within the EDF ranks, several officers have shown skepticism about engaging in a prolonged conflict with the risk of spillover effects. While they have been suppressed by the Isaias Afwerki regime, these positions have repeatedly surfaced in recent months. Finally, Eritrean public opinion doesn't like how the president established relations with the Ethiopian Prime Minister. These feelings explain why Isaias Afwerki did not attend the inauguration ceremony of the Ethiopian Prime Minister's new government. Today, the Eritrean leader is aware that the future stability of his country and regime rests on the success of the conflict in the Tigray region, as Abiy Ahmed's eventual fall would provide new impetus to domestic and diaspora anti-regime forces.

The second most involved Ethiopian neighbor is Sudan. As opposed to Eritrea's direct involvement, Khartoum has mostly tried to take advantage by watching from the sidelines. This posture is partly conditioned by the troubled political phase the country is going through itself. However,

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Sudan is confident it will be able to capitalize on the Ethiopian domestic crisis. Over the last two years, the two countries' relations have worsened due to the new Sudanese regime's choice to side with Egypt on the GERD issue.¹¹ In recent months, tensions have especially increased. Sudan and Egypt hope that the protracted crisis in Addis Ababa will reduce Ethiopia's relative power. Although there is a lack of evidence, there are increasing rumors about Sudanese-Egyptian assistance to the TDF. Conversely, two areas along the Ethiopian-Sudanese border have become the site of skirmishes and low-intensity conflict: al-Fashaga and Metekel. Al-Fashaga is a historically contended area due to its strategic value and fertile land.¹² Beginning last winter, Sudanese troops took advantage of the relocation of ENDF and Amhara troops away from the disputed area to restore Khartoum's authority. Today, there are regular clashes between Ethiopian paramilitary groups operating in the area, such as the Amhara militia known as Fano, and Sudanese Army Forces settled along the border. If Sudan mobilizes its troops further south in al-Fashaga along the border with the Ethiopian regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz, it will opt to support the local armed groups.

As for the Metekel area, for several years now Sudan and Egypt have supported the Gumuz Liberation Front or Gumuz militias.¹³ The area is crucial as it is the location of the GERD dam. As a result, Addis Ababa has strengthened its defenses in recent weeks to counter Gumuz activities and to be prepared for a possible Egyptian raid. The recent establishment of a new Sudanese Sovereign Council could prompt Khartoum to increase its pressure on Ethiopia. The Council resulted from a new agreement among the several groups that form the Sudanese security apparatus. Therefore, the choice to enhance involvement in Ethiopia could prove to be a win-win for the Sudanese military, as it would both divert attention from the ongoing struggles with Sudanese civil society, while also dealing another blow to Abiy Ahmed's leadership.

3. The Ethiopian Crisis as a Test Case for Future Conflicts

From an international point of view, the main interest in the conflict lies in how it has been affected by the US-China rivalry. The Ethiopian internal conflict is becoming a test case for future global balances more than other international crises. The attitudes adopted by Washington and Beijing towards the Ethiopian crisis show how the two great powers have

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engaged in diplomatic confrontation within various international and regional organizations. Consistent with the Biden administration's foreign policy approach, the United States has attempted to employ various international instruments to reach a ceasefire between the parties. The U.S. President opened two distinct diplomatic channels during the summer to establish a room for dialogue between Addis Ababa and TPLF. Firstly, Biden pushed some regional players such as Sudanese Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok to act as intermediaries.¹⁴ However, the U.S. President further secondly sent some of his closest advisors on Africa - such as Senator Chris Coons, the special envoy for the Horn Jeffrey Feltman, and U.S. diplomat and longtime human rights advocate Samantha Power - to deter the Ethiopian Prime Minister's hardline stances.¹⁵ However, this double strategy has only met firm intransigence from Abiy Ahmed. As a result, the U.S. administration signed an executive order in September allowing U.S. government agencies to impose economic sanctions on all actors guilty of fueling the conflict.

U.S. pressure has had little effect on Addis Ababa's choices, generating, to the contrary, a wave of anti-Americanism led by government propaganda. The Ethiopian Prime Minister's confidence in the face of U.S. criticism is driven by the support of China and other powers such as Russia. Contrary to the United States' more ambivalent position, China has provided full diplomatic support to the Addis Ababa government since the conflict's onset. Chinese policymakers consider the crisis in Tigray as a matter of Ethiopian domestic politics that should be treated as such. Since the beginning of the conflict, Beijing has repeatedly criticized Western countries for their interference, accusing Washington of instrumentally exploiting the humanitarian crisis to try to influence the course of the conflict.¹⁶ In addition to public statements, China has supported the Abiy government within international organizations, preventing UN Security Council resolutions and debates within General Assembly sessions.¹⁷ Chinese influence also extends to the African Union. The regional organization's ambiguous attitude towards the Ethiopian crisis is due not only to the role traditionally played by Addis Ababa, but also Beijing's leverage over several members dependent on Chinese financial aid. Finally, China's support for Ethiopia also has a military dimension, with the supply of armaments increasing after the introduction of U.S. sanctions.

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The two major powers' divergent attitudes show how Africa is becoming an arena of competition between the United States and China. Unlike the former administration, President Biden aims to revitalize U.S. African policy.¹⁸ After taking office, Biden had set an agenda to seek possible areas of cooperation with Beijing in Africa. The Ethiopian crisis, however, has highlighted the shortcomings of that approach, compelling the U.S. administration to undertake a rapid overhaul. Meanwhile, Beijing has pursued an assertive policy to maximize its economic and political gains.¹⁹ China has adopted an approach of opposition to the U.S. regardless of the danger of raising the level of confrontation over local crises. Beijing's stance on the Ethiopian crisis could have implications that transcend regional boundaries. The unconditional Chinese support for Addis Ababa is likely to provide other African states with the incentive to seek military solutions to internal or interstate political disputes. As is currently the case in Ethiopia, Chinese support would reduce the political and economic costs of actions contrary to the norms of international law. In other words, China can help such states overcome the difficulties of sanctions imposed by the U.S. and international organizations. For this reason, the Ethiopian crisis, besides endangering regional stability in the Horn of Africa, risks triggering a broader dispute over future global governance.

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