Breaking the Cycle: Rethinking Ethiopia's Relations with Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan

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Abstract

This article examined the structural sources of national security threats confronting Ethiopia and the evolution of strategic responses across successive regimes. Situated within a volatile regional landscape, Ethiopia contends with persistent challenges emanating from its immediate neighbors—Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan—which have historically served both as direct antagonists and as transit corridors for external adversaries. Drawing on historical analysis and case study research design, this paper argued that Ethiopia's recurring policy challenges stem from a fundamental mismatch between rhetorical commitments to regional cooperation and the strategic realities of a competitive interstate system. The analysis traced the historical dynamics between Ethiopia and the three core states of the Horn, evaluating both historical contentions and subsequent policy countermeasures. The paper is structured in four parts: an introductory framework, three case studies examining Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea respectively, and a concluding synthesis that identified persistent patterns and proposes analytic recalibrations for Ethiopia's foreign policy.

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Introduction

Ethiopia navigates a perilous regional environment, contending with persistent threats originating from or channeled through its immediate neighbors—Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan. Since their respective independences, these states have posed continuous challenges to Ethiopian national security through direct military confrontation and by functioning as staging corridors for adversarial powers, particularly Egypt, with conflicts centering on border disputes and competition over natural resources. Yet successive Ethiopian regimes have consistently defaulted to rhetorical affirmations of fraternal relations, even in the face of overt hostility. This policy failure is compounded by a history of unsuccessful border demarcation efforts, perpetually hindered by domestic political instability, regime changes, and policy discontinuity.

For the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime (1991–2018), every problem afflicting the nation was conceptualized not through an external threat

framework but as an internal challenge stemming from governance deficits and economic statecraft (Ministry of Information, 2002). This foundational belief served as the primary driver of Ethiopia's foreign policy for nearly a decade, until renewed hostilities from Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea compelled a strategic reassessment. The central argument of this paper is that Ethiopia's foreign policy has oscillated between two unsustainable poles: an idealistic commitment to economic interdependence as a security guarantor and an ad hoc, reactive assertiveness. Neither approach has systematically addressed the structural reality that Ethiopia's neighbors possess divergent incentive structures in which they believed a stable, powerful Ethiopia constitutes a greater threat than a fragmented one.

Historical Continuities and Regional Geopolitics

Historically, both Eritrea and Somalia served as strategic gateways for foreign incursions into Ethiopian territory, most notably Italian colonial forces. In the contemporary era, this pattern has persisted. After its independence in 1993, Eritrea was involved in a direct military conflict with Ethiopia (1998–2000). Despite benefiting from the EPRDF's policy of good neighborliness and having supported the EPRDF's insurgency against the Derg regime, Sudan engaged in anti-Ethiopian rhetoric and harbored destabilizing elements throughout the 1990s. Somalia remains a persistent security challenge, its historical irredentist ambitions having evolved into the export of terrorism. Ethiopian policymakers have consistently failed to develop robust, strategic policies toward Somalia beyond maintaining superficial friendly relations. Furthermore, both Somalia and Eritrea have functioned as key transit corridors for external actors—particularly Egypt—to channel support to Ethiopian armed dissidents operating within Ethiopia or from neighboring territories.

The Sudan Case: Continuity and Change in a Contentious Dyad

Historical Antecedents of Suspicion

From Sudan's independence in 1956 through its Islamization policies beginning in 1983, the two states experienced increasingly murky relations characterized by persistent tension and uninterrupted mutual suspicion. Both imperial and revolutionary Ethiopia were wary of Sudan's political dynamics, and each sought to promote the rise of friendly leaders or groups in Khartoum. When opportunities arose, successive Ethiopian regimes did not hesitate to exploit circumstances that could benefit Ethiopian national interests (Belete, 2014).

The porous border shared by Ethiopia and Sudan—744 kilometers of non-demarcated frontier (Belete, 2016)—remained a persistent source of contention. This permeability presents significant security challenges for Ethiopia, as it facilitated Sudan's support for anti-Ethiopian armed elements since the earliest days of Sudan's independence in 1956. During Numeriri's regime (1969–1985), Sudan bolstered its backing of both the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as part of a destabilization strategy targeting Ethiopia (Belete, 2016). In retaliation, Mengistu Haile Mariam's Ethiopia provided overt assistance to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) (Belete, 2013). The mutual perception that each state harbored elements seeking to overthrow the other's regime further complicated bilateral relations (Belete, 2013: 67).

The EPRDF's "Open Door" Policy and Its Consequences

Following the regime change in Ethiopia in May 1991, the incoming EPRDF enacted a new foreign policy designed to foster peaceful relations with immediate neighbors. The centerpiece was an "open door" policy allowing free movement of people and goods across borders. Ethiopia unilaterally opened its borders for neighboring countries without visa requirements (Kinfe, 1994: 32). Regarding Sudan, the two countries agreed to cease supporting dissidents and to expel them from their respective territories (Girma, 1999: 37–38). Consequently, Ethiopia halted military support for the SPLM/A, operating on the assumption that Sudan would refrain from supporting the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) after its withdrawal from Ethiopia's transitional government in 1992 (Goitom, 2019).

However, the Sudanese government under the National Islamic Front (NIF) engaged in provocative actions by harboring Ethiopian armed dissidents and spreading Islamic fundamentalism through Sudanese non-governmental organizations. During the early 1990s, under NIF guidance, Sudan became what some observers characterized as a rogue Islamist state in the Horn of Africa (Amare, 1996: 501). Hassan al-Turabi, the NIF's chief ideologue, articulated aspirations that threatened all countries in the region. Sudan became a safe haven for extremists globally; Osama bin Laden was permitted to reside in the country and relocated much of Al Qaeda's organizational infrastructure to Sudanese territory[1].

[1] Astill, James, (2001) 'Bin Laden's Sudan Years', *The Guardian*, Available at; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/17/afghanistan.terrorism3. Accessed on 20 June, 2025.

As part of its regional Islamization program, the NIF began in May 1993 providing substantial support to the Eritrean Islamic Front (EIF) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) (Burr & Collins, 2003). This support predictably extended to arming rebel groups in Ethiopia. According to Africa Confidential (1995), cited in Amare (1996: 505), al-Turabi declared that "Ethiopia will self-destruct in the near future, thus paving the way for the establishment of an Islamic Oromo state and resulting in a chain of Islamic polities extending from Sudan to the Indian Ocean."

Sudan thoroughly securitized the political advancement of Muslim communities in Ethiopia (Woodward, 1996). According to Goitom (2019), Sudan took several measures to enhance its actions. First, it expanded the Sudanese Embassy under newly appointed Ambassador Osman al-Saeed[2] and established a Sudanese Consulate in western Ethiopia's Gambella town. This created conducive conditions for the second move: the proliferation of NGOs fundamentally spearheaded by political Islam and operating under NIF auspices. These two factors represented highly dynamic and sophisticated measures designed to spread fundamentalist ideology through both official government representation and ostensibly civil society channels.

The Mubarak Assassination Attempt and International Isolation

Bilateral relations deteriorated sharply following an assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak upon his arrival for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Summit in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly accused the Sudanese government of providing sanctuary to the perpetrators and assisting their travel arrangements to and from Addis Ababa (Molla, 2002). Some scholars attribute this security failure to Ethiopia's open door policy permitting visa-free movement (Goitom, 2019; Molla, 2002). Although declining responsibility for the attack, al-Turabi characterized the perpetrators as "messengers of the Islamic faith" (Burr & Collins, 2003: 189). During this period, Sudan posed a potential threat not only to Ethiopia and Eritrea but was also accused of supporting the Islamic Party of Kenya and radical groups in Tanzania (Burr & Collins, 2003: 189).

Ethiopia's foreign policy began shifting to address threats posed by the Sudanese regime,

[2] Al Saeed was a Sudanese intelligence who had observed London peace process between the then Ethiopia's military government and the TPLF. He was the only foreign observer except the mediators. See Goitom Gebereluel (2019), Strategies for Managing Regional Conflict: Ethiopia's foreign Policy in 1991-2018. [PhD dissertation, Wolfson College]. Available at; https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/ca92e6ba-ad79-44ae-8c00-002ed03b59b4. Accessed 01 May, 2025.

guided by what Ethiopian officials perceived as an extremist cleric. This shift was pursued in alignment with other regional states as well as international and regional organizations. Al-Turabi's determinations were viewed as a viable threat to multiple states in the region, leading Ethiopia to choose alignment with other states as a national strategy to isolate the Sudanese regime diplomatically and exert military pressure (Goitom, 2019).

Ethiopian Military Retaliation and Diplomatic Success

Ethiopia retaliated against Sudanese threats by resuming political and military backing for the SPLM/A, intending to pressure the Sudanese government. Initially, the Ethiopian government clandestinely offered limited support to South Sudanese opposition while simultaneously applying diplomatic pressure through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). However, following the unsuccessful assassination attempt, the EPRDF took direct military action, supporting proxy forces in South Sudan in coordination with "front-line states" and making diplomatic efforts to isolate Sudan internationally (Doop, 2013). Through these military measures, Ethiopia unilaterally took control of Sudanese territory and provided operational assistance to the SPLA in its offensive operations (Goitom, 2019).

In January 1996, the SPLA gained control of the border town of Kurmuk, with Khartoum accusing Ethiopia of involvement in the conflict (Doop, 2013). Two months later, "the towns of Yabus and Pochella came under SPLA control, with the support of Ethiopian mechanized infantry" (Burr & Collins, 2003: 208). The combined offensive resulted in the acquisition of a significant portion of Sudanese territory, with Eritrea advancing in the northeast, Ethiopia commencing operations in the east, and Uganda invading from the south (Burr & Collins, 2003: 208–209).

Simultaneously, Ethiopia employed diplomatic measures that proved successful in isolating Sudan. Ethiopia collaborated with Egypt to urge the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to pressure Sudan into extraditing the Mubarak assassination attempt perpetrators for trial. Despite Sudan's refusal to extradite, the UNSC passed Resolution 1044, imposing sanctions on Sudan. In April 1996, Resolution 1054 called for the international isolation of the Sudanese regime, including measures to reduce diplomatic staffing levels, restrict movement of Sudanese personnel, and limit entry or transit of Sudanese government and military officials[3]. These actions contributed to political

[3] UNSC (1996) adopted Resolution S/RES 1044 on at its 3627th meeting on 31 January 1996 which imposed sanction on the Sudanese Government. The full document available at; https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/203390 accessed, on 12 July, 2025.

division in Sudan, culminating in al-Bashir's dismissal of al-Turabi in 1999. Bilateral relations subsequently improved, though tensions and threats from or through Sudan have persisted, continuing to impose significant challenges for Ethiopia's national security.

Contemporary Dynamics: The Tigray War and Strategic Exploitation

The period of significant political transformation that swept Ethiopia in 2018 and Sudan in 2019 initially promised democratic reform and regional cooperation. However, this hopeful moment quickly gave way to internal conflict, which subsequently reconfigured the bilateral relationship from cautious cordiality to strategic exploitation.

Here, the historical backdrop is crucial. The TPLF, a dominant force in Ethiopia's former EPRDF coalition, was not a new partner for Khartoum; it had received Sudanese support during its guerrilla war against the Derg regime in the 1970s–1990s. This shared history created a latent channel for collaboration that could be reactivated. When the Tigray war erupted in November 2020, the nascent Sudanese government, perceiving an opportunity to check a regional rival and bolster its own security, chose to leverage this old alliance. By providing support to the TPLF against the Ethiopian federal government, Khartoum effectively weaponized a historical relationship to influence the balance of power in a contemporary conflict.

This maneuver reveals a persistent pattern of instrumentalizing neighborly insurgencies, where regimes in both Sudan and Ethiopia have historically used each other's rebel groups as strategic buffers or bargaining chips. Sudan's support for the TPLF in the twenty-first century mirrors its twentieth-century policy, demonstrating how historical patronage networks can be swiftly reactivated to serve immediate geopolitical goals, often at the expense of long-term regional stability. This cyclical pattern underscores that today's allies can become tomorrow's insurgents, creating a persistent undercurrent of distrust beneath the surface of formal diplomacy.

The Egypt-Sudan Nexus and Proxy Warfare

The dynamic between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia constitutes a critical nexus of regional instability, where internal conflicts and historical contentions are leveraged for strategic advantage. The core of this tension lies in Egypt's determined opposition to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which has driven Cairo to adopt a multi-faceted strategy of containing Ethiopian influence and destabilizing the nation.

A key pillar of this strategy has been the instrumentalization of Sudan. When Ethiopia's military was preoccupied with the conflict in Tigray, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) seized the opportunity to occupy the disputed al-Fashqa territory. This move, immediately endorsed by Cairo, was more than a bilateral land claim; it was a strategic gambit to open a second front. The SAF's subsequent training of Tigrayan militias constituted a direct attempt to weaken the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and create a potential supply corridor, demonstrating how a regional dispute was deliberately entangled with Ethiopia's internal crisis. This pattern signals a shift from conventional diplomacy to proxy warfare, where Egypt supports a state actor (Sudan) that, in turn, supports non-state militias (TPLF), creating layers of deniability and complicating Ethiopia's response options.

Despite being crippled by a devastating internal war against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the SAF continues to pose a significant threat to Ethiopia. It serves as a conduit for Egyptian interests, providing support to a constellation of militant groups—including Fano, Tigrayan forces, and Benishangul-Gumuz militants—along their shared border. This transforms Sudan into a leaky but lethal corridor, where a weakened central government cannot project traditional military power but can effectively export instability, thereby keeping Ethiopian forces dispersed and preoccupied. The SAF's ability to sustain this external pressure while fighting for its survival at home suggests a degree of dependency on and direction from Cairo, potentially transforming Sudan from an independent actor into a client state within a broader containment strategy.

Recognizing the inherent fragility of its primary partner, Egypt is proactively diversifying its alliances. Recent military drills in the Red Sea and overtures to Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia signal a strategic pivot toward a containment consortium. The objective is clear: to encircle Ethiopia diplomatically and militarily, thwart its Red Sea ambitions, and maintain hydro-political dominance by ensuring no single neighbor falls firmly within Ethiopia's sphere of influence.

The potential spillover from Sudan's internal collapse now compounds these external threats. A massive refugee crisis, the flow of arms, and the entrenchment of militant groups along the border introduce a new layer of complexity. For Ethiopia, the challenge is no longer merely navigating GERD diplomacy but managing a convergence of regional proxy conflicts, internal political fractures, and a humanitarian disaster at its doorstep—demanding responses that are as strategic in statecraft as they are resilient in security.

Dynamic Relations with Somalia: From Irredentism to Proxy Warfare

Historical Foundations of Conflict

To comprehend Ethiopian-Somali relations, it is essential to examine the historical factors that have shaped their interactions since Somalia's independence in 1960. The two countries have experienced complicated and striking relations, with tensions and conflict most often revolving around their porous border and Somalia's aim of establishing "Greater Somalia" (Soomaaliweyn)[4]. Ethiopia was determined to counter this potentially dangerous irredentist ambition that threatened its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Somalia's motive aimed to annex approximately one-fifth of Ethiopia's territory inhabited by Somali and Oromo ethnic groups (Negussay, 1982). This claim has fundamentally influenced Ethiopia's policy toward Somalia.

To achieve the goal of establishing Greater Somalia, Somalia recognized the necessity of weakening Ethiopia. In pursuit of this objective, Somalia—similar to Sudan—provided safe haven for Ethiopian armed dissidents including the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) (Bahru, 2002). Additionally, Somalia publicly expressed sympathy for Eritrean and Tigrayan freedom fighters (Belete, 2014). These actions posed significant threats to Ethiopian security. Moreover, in 1977, Somalia's army launched extensive attacks on Ethiopia, precipitating the Ogaden War (1977–1978). This conflict had a profound and enduring impact on the intricate relationship between the two nations.

The EPRDF Era: Mediation and Pacification efforts

When the EPRDF assumed political power in Ethiopia in May 1991, the regional political landscape underwent significant changes. Somalia had lost its status as a functioning sovereign state, with clan politics and extremism wreaking havoc and further destabilizing effect on the regional states, including Ethiopia. A central authority capable of maintaining peace and security was absent. The EPRDF government's primary focus was supporting peace initiatives in Somalia. From 1991 to 1996, Ethiopia's foreign policy toward Somalia did not involve military incursions into Somali territory or support for specific groups to exert influence over the other. Instead, Ethiopia's engagement was limited to participating in multilateral mediation processes (Goitom, 2019: 86).

The EPRDF government began mediating Somalia's conflict with regional and international partners immediately after assuming power. Consequently, Ali Mahdi was

[4] From independence onwards the Somalis have dreamed of incorporating Somali speaking regions to what so called 'Greater Somalia' encompassing, Djibouti, Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and Northern Frontier of Kenya. See Lewis, M. (1965), The Modern History of Somali Land: From Nation to State. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. And Mayal, J. (1978), the Battle for the Horn: Irridentism and International Diplomacy. The World Today. 34 (9), 336-345.

elected interim president by six participating organizations. However, this outcome was rejected by Farah Aideed, another warlord, inadvertently sparking political tensions that erupted into armed conflict devastating much of Mogadishu in late 1991 (Menkhaus, 2010).

In 1993, Ethiopia hosted UN-sponsored conference in Addis Ababa. Fifteen Somali factions, including those led by Ali Mahdi and Aideed, participated. The conference aimed to reach an agreement ending hostilities and establishing a transitional government[5]. However, the agreement failed to impact the Somali conflict significantly; factions led by Ali Mahdi and Aideed continued fighting throughout the period (Goitom, 2019).

Another round of mediation was convened by Ethiopia in 1996/97, known as the Sodere conference. Its objective was to decentralize and establish a federal state system in Somalia. However, rival peace talks in Cairo, Egypt, opposed the Sodere conference, aiming instead to promote a centralized Somali state and strengthen factions that had rejected the Sodere negotiations (Menkhaus, 2010). These conferences triggered antagonism and fomented political divisions in conflict-ravaged Somalia for subsequent years (Menkhaus, 2010). Despite these efforts, the EPRDF's foreign policy had no clear strategic purpose with defined policy priorities and objectives (Goitom, 2019: 87). Ethiopia's engagement with Somalia remained largely reactive to the dynamics of the Somali conflict and the changing interests of neighboring countries.

The Rise of Islamist Extremism and Ethiopian Intervention

During the early 1990s, in an effort to address contentions, the EPRDF implemented a foreign policy that included opening political space in Ethiopia. Consequently, Ethiopia's Somali region was established as a regional entity to calm domestic political tensions and instability. This allowed Islamist parties like al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI) and the ONLF to operate as legal political parties. However, disagreements arose between the EPRDF and these groups regarding the fate of the Somali Regional State, ultimately leading the ONLF to resume insurgency across the region. Simultaneously, the EPRDF created a parallel party in the region—the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL)—to govern the regional state

Amid this chaos, radical Islamist groups, including al-Shabaab, emerged, posing serious

[5] United States Institute of Peace (1993), Addis Ababa Agreement concluded at the first session of the Conference on National Reconciliation in Somalia. Available at; http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/somalia_03271993.pdf.

security threats to Somalia and its neighbors, particularly Ethiopia. In 2006, Ethiopia intervened militarily in Somalia to counter the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), aiming to prevent Islamist groups from seizing power. However, this intervention fueled anti-Ethiopian sentiments and inadvertently strengthened al-Shabaab.

The 2024 Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding: Strategic Recalibration

The January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland did not simply reignite historical tensions with Somalia; it fundamentally recalibrated the strategic architecture of the Horn of Africa. At its core, the deal—whereby landlocked Ethiopia would gain naval and commercial port access in exchange for potential recognition of the breakaway region of Somaliland—represents a high-stakes gambit. For Ethiopia, it is a pragmatic pursuit of a strategic imperative to break its geographic confinement. For the Somaliland government, it is a decades-in-the-making bid to leverage de facto statehood into de jure legitimacy, using Ethiopia as its primary sponsor.

This agreement have created a dangerous precedent of reciprocal secession politics. By engaging Somaliland as a sovereign partner, Ethiopia has effectively weaponized the very principle of territorial integrity it fiercely guards in its own domestic conflicts, such as in Tigray and Ogaden. This move invites retaliatory logic, potentially encouraging neighboring states to extend similar recognition to Ethiopian separatist movements, thereby destabilizing the region's foundational principle of *uti possidetis juris* (maintaining colonial-era borders).

Somalia's vehement rejection of the deal and President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's immediate diplomatic trips to Cairo are deeply symbolic. This alignment resurrects a historic axis, with Egypt positioning itself as the guardian of the Nile and the patron of Somali sovereignty to counterbalance Ethiopian ascendancy. The crisis thus instantly became a proxy for the wider Egypt-Ethiopia rivalry centered on the GERD.

The threat to Ethiopia from Somalia is no longer merely diplomatic; it is a convergence of state and non-state perils. The Somali government's anti-Ethiopian rhetoric, while serving domestic purposes of national unity, simultaneously fuels the propaganda and recruitment efforts of al-Shabaab. This creates a dangerous synergy: Mogadishu's political hostility delegitimizes Ethiopia in state-to-state arenas, while al-Shabaab's territorial gains and cross-border attack capabilities present direct security menaces. Ethiopia now faces a unified front where a state's political stance and a terrorist group's military actions are mutually reinforcing.

In this volatile landscape, Ethiopia's foreign policy must navigate an axis of adversity stretching from Cairo through Mogadishu. A well-crafted strategy is not merely advisable but essential—one involving sophisticated diplomatic outreach to reassure regional partners, a robust security posture to deter al-Shabaab, and careful calculation of whether the strategic prize of Red Sea access is worth the long-term cost of a perpetually hostile and destabilized neighbor.

Eritrea's War of Attrition: From Federation to Proxy Warfare

The Federation and Its Unraveling

Ethiopia has a distinctive history of both conflict and cooperation with Eritrea. The federation of Eritrea was implemented in 1952 (Andargachew, 1980), but its formulas were unhappily welcomed by Eritreans. According to Bahru (2002: 219), "both unionists and advocates for independence of Eritrea were unhappy with the federation formula; thus, it could be argued that neither party was ready to give the federal scheme a chance." After a decade, the imperial government took several measures to dismantle Eritrea's federal status, ultimately resulting in its union with Ethiopia in 1962. Following the termination of federation, Eritrea's quest for independence gained momentum (ibid).

The separatist movement emerged after the abolition of Eritrea's autonomous status. The liberation movement first manifested itself in 1958 with the establishment of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), whose goal was achieving an independent Eritrean state through political and diplomatic means, including seeking UN intervention (Bahru, 2002). The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), consisting of dissidents exiled in the Middle East, framed their independence struggle within Pan-Arabism (Bahru, 2002), enabling substantial support from the Arab world stretching from Egypt to Syria and Iraq (Aklilu, 2014). Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt promised backing to Eritrean rebels immediate after the federation's dissolution (ibid).

Eritrea's creation is viewed by many Ethiopians not merely as the birth of a new nation but as the successful implementation of a buffer state doctrine. This project, historically supported by actors in Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, which was strategically designed to sever Ethiopia's sovereign access to the Red Sea—a waterway long considered by Arab nationalists as within their sphere of influence (Aklilu, 2014). With a plain explanation, the primary objective was permanently reducing Ethiopia's geopolitical weight and maritime capabilities.

The EPRDF's Uncommon Position and Its Aftermath

In 1993, the EPRDF took an uncommon position by endorsing Eritrea's right to secede under framework of self-determination. Following partition, Ethiopia's economic and security policies frequently prioritized trust and solidarity over self-interest. Bilateral relations were formalized through a generic agreement called the "Principles of Cooperation" (Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2000), established during the process leading to Eritrea's independence. These principles outlined a framework acknowledging Eritrea's right to self-determination on one hand and Ethiopia's right to duty-free use of the port of Assab on the other (Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2000). After Eritrea's *de jure* independence in 1993, the two states signed the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (also called the Asmara Pact), which aimed to serve as a foundational framework for cooperation. The Pact consisted of twenty-five protocols outlining an ambitious plan to integrate the two states and societies across different economic and social areas, ranging from education and tourism to defense (Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2000: 31).

The 1998–2000 Border War and Its Aftermath

Despite Ethiopia's victory in the border war, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) awarded Badme—the flashpoint of the conflict—to Eritrea as undisputed territory[6]. The commission reported in April 2002, and Eritrea welcomed the findings. However, instead of accepting the commission's findings, Ethiopia requested further boundary negotiation and retained its military presence over the disputed area (Reid, 2018). Eritrea accused Ethiopia of illegally occupying its territory, and both states engaged in reciprocal accusations of supporting armed groups against each other. Hence, although the war supposedly ended in December 2000 with the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement, its repercussions and aftermath have been highly substantial, remaining a destabilizing force in the region. The Algiers Agreement itself has not contributed to a strong, enduring political settlement but rather has been used by elites on both sides for a mutually convenient cessation of overt hostilities, at least temporarily (Reid, 2018).

In the post-war period, leaders in Ethiopia and Eritrea focused primarily on domestic affairs—specifically weakening opponents to establish unyielding political power. Their foreign policies toward each other were characterized by covert actions aimed at regime change in both countries. In its revised 2002 foreign policy document, the Ethiopian government emphasized two main objectives to prevent future wars: first, the country must enhance and update its military to deter Eritrean aggression; second, to overthrow the regime in Eritrea (Goitom, 2019; Ministry of Information, 2002). According to this

[6] Unted Nation News, (2008), available at; https://news.un.org/en/story/2008/10/277802. Accessed; April 2025.

document, Ethiopia's first policy option was establishing strong deterrence capacity. The second, instead of engaging in another round of military confrontation, was to employ containment policy by mobilizing international and regional political, diplomatic, and economic pressures on Eritrea (Ministry of Information, 2002: 71).

Proxy War Strategies

According to Abbink (2003: 413), proxy war strategies were pursued by both parties not only in the enemy country but also in neighboring states such as Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Sudan. In this strategy, Ethiopia worked through two types of insurgent movements: first, organizations entirely established by Ethiopia, including the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front and the Afar Red Sea Democratic Front; second, those already founded with some basis in pre-existing rebellions in Eritrea and Somalia, such as the ELF, the One Kunama Movement, the One Afar Movement, and the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF).

Conversely, Eritrea utilized pre-existing insurgent groups like the OLF and the ONLF, with whom they had established long-lasting contact (Abbink, 2003). They also strengthened relations with Somali groups, particularly warlord militias opposing Ethiopia-backed groups in the Baidoa, Beledweyn, and Bakool areas along the border. Additionally, evidence indicates Eritrea transported weapons to Somalia's Transitional National Government in Mogadishu (Abbink, 2003: 414).

The EPRDF's proxy war strategy involved extending support to existing armed opposition groups and establishing new movements, aiming to pressure the Asmara regime while avoiding conventional war. However, the partnership between the EPRDF and Eritrean opposition groups was marked by mutual dissatisfaction (Goitom, 2019). The EPRDF, having previously engaged in guerrilla warfare, was disappointed by the Eritrean opposition's lack of capability, ongoing internal conflicts, and fragmentation (Goitom, 2019). Additionally, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi hoped to maintain retaliatory capacity in case of Eritrean attack, aiming to send a clear message to President Isaias Afwerki by demonstrating Ethiopia's readiness to retaliate if necessary[7].

Shift to Proportional Response and Isolation Strategy

In 2011, Ethiopia shifted from deterrence policy to proportional responses to

[7] Yearbook of the UN (2004). UN-ilibrary available on https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210545860 pp; 266-270.

provocations. Meles Zenawi announced:

> Until now, our strategy has been defending sovereignty by speeding up our development. Now, we found that we could not go any longer with passive defense. Therefore, we have to facilitate ways for the Eritrean people to remove its dictatorial regime. We have no intention to jump into their country but we need to expand our influence there. If the Eritrean government tries to attack us, we will also respond proportionally[8].

Ethiopia simultaneously built deterrence capacity to respond proportionally to any attacks from Eritrea while working diplomatically to isolate Eritrea. Eritrea's already weakened relationships with Horn countries and Western states, coupled with allegations of its involvement in Somali affairs, made it a collective security concern. The emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia and Eritrea's covert support for the group became pivotal in Ethiopia-Eritrea post-war relations, leading Ethiopia to pursue isolation policy toward Eritrea. Eritrea's substantial support for the ICU, as part of its proxy strategy against Ethiopia, aimed to prevent an Islamist victory by late 2006 (Goitom, 2019: 192).

The Fragile 2018 Peace and Its Collapse

After the 1998–2000 war, the two countries found themselves in a prolonged state of "no war, no peace" for nearly two decades—a period of stalemate marked by ongoing tensions and absence of formal diplomatic relations. The breakthrough came in 2018 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that Ethiopia would fully accept the terms of the Algiers Agreement. This led to rapid normalization lasting approximately two years. However, following the end of the Tigray War, long-standing tensions resurfaced and escalated. Eritrea reignited hostilities by engaging in proxy warfare, providing support to armed insurgent groups within Ethiopia.

Eritrea's role in Ethiopian affairs is not a series of isolated interventions but the execution of a long-standing strategic doctrine aimed at ensuring its survival by directly influencing Ethiopian stability. The 1998 border war, far from being anomalous, manifested this strategy, where the EPRDF government's initial stagnation in responding to Eritrean provocations revealed a fundamental miscalculation of the Asmara regime's objectives.

The contemporary pattern of Eritrean involvement—first aligning with the Ethiopian

[8] Ahram Online (2011), 'Ethiopia Vows to Support Eritrea's Regime Change' full article available at https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/2/10533/World/Ethiopia-vows-to-support-Eritrea-regime-change.aspx, accessed, on 01 July, 2025.

federal government against the TPLF and subsequently allegedly supporting TPLF, Fano, and OLA (Shane) factions—is a classic application of this strategy. This is not contradiction but consistent tactics of playing all sides to perpetuate controlled instability within Ethiopia (Crisis Group, 2026). This meddling is a deeply ingrained practice with roots tracing back to the dynamics of the Eritrean war for independence.

For the EPLF/PFDJ's regime, a continuous, low-to-medium-intensity war of attrition against Ethiopia is a core instrument of statecraft. It serves to justify its militarized domestic policy, rally nationalistic sentiment, and position Eritrea as an indispensable (if volatile) player for external powers seeking to leverage regional balance. Eritrea acts as a gateway of threats, facilitating pressures that other states wish to exert on Addis Ababa indirectly. While Eritrea projects an image of defiantly independent agency, its historical and current actions are deeply enmeshed in wider geopolitical webs. Its ability to meddle is often tolerated or tacitly supported by regional powers whose strategic goal is keeping a potentially dominant Ethiopia preoccupied with internal and peripheral conflicts, thereby curtailing its regional ascendancy.

The 2018 peace agreement, which ended a two-decade diplomatic standoff, was built on a fragile premise of mutual economic and security benefits. For Ethiopian leaders and policymakers, engaging with Eritrea requires recognizing that its actions are strategic, not merely adversarial. Any diplomatic process must be approached with the understanding that the regime's foundational logic may hinge on maintaining a certain level of tension. Therefore, policy cannot be based on transient alliances but must be grounded in a comprehensive strategy that anticipates and neutralizes this deeply institutionalized doctrine of attrition, while accounting for the broader international actors for whom a divided Horn of Africa remains a strategic preference.

Conclusion

The post-2018 foreign policy recalibration is necessary but insufficient. To achieve sustainable security guarantees, Ethiopia requires a doctrine of vigilant balancing with four pillars. First, differentiated bilateralism. Ethiopia must treat each neighbor according to its demonstrated behavior, not aspirational rhetoric. Sudan and Eritrea require containment and deterrence: credible military capacity to impose costs for their insurgent support, combined with diplomatic isolation when necessary. Somalia requires a combination of counter-terrorism cooperation to prevent Al-Shabaab and IS Somalia sanctuaries and diplomatic pressure to prevent Egyptian alignment. While, Somaliland requires continued engagement but with clear red lines regarding reciprocal secession.

Second, credible coercive capacity. Ethiopia must maintain the capability to impose costs on neighbors that host insurgents or facilitate Egyptian proxy operations. The 1996 SPLA offensive remains a model: proportional, militarily effective, and diplomatically plausible. This does not mean aggression, but deterrence: neighbors must know that supporting anti Ethiopian insurgents carries a credible risk of retaliation.

Third, diversification of partnership. Ethiopia cannot rely on any single external ally. Balancing Gulf states, maintaining Western partnerships on development and security, engaging with China while limiting over-dependence, and preventing any single power from gaining veto over Ethiopian policy are essential. The recent alignment of Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia—with tacit support from some Gulf actors—demonstrates the risks of diplomatic isolation.

Fourth, domestic foundation. Foreign policy success ultimately depends on internal stability. Ethiopia's post-2018 internal conflicts *inter alia* in Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara regions have repeatedly invited external intervention. The Tigray War provided Sudan with the opportunity to seize Al-Fashqa; it provided Eritrea with the opportunity to re-enter Ethiopian affairs; it provided Egypt with a distracted Ethiopia less capable of defending GERD negotiations. A doctrine of vigilant balancing must prioritize domestic pacification as the first line of defense.

Generally, the Horn of Africa will not become a liberal cooperative community in the foreseeable future. The structural conditions for cooperation—strong states, shared identities, institutional capacity—are absent. Ethiopia's choice is not between idealism and realism but between realist statecraft and perpetual vulnerability. The era of good neighborliness is over. The era of vigilant balancing has to begin.

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