



INTERNAL CONFLICTS AS REGIONAL LEVERAGE: HOW HORN OF AFRICA STATES EXPLOIT NEIGHBORING INSTABILITY

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Abstract

Internal conflicts in the Horn of Africa are not only domestic but also tools of geopolitics, hegemonic power struggles, and regional diplomacy. This study aims to examine how the states of the Horn of Africa – Eritrea and Sudan – responded to internal conflicts in Ethiopia. It will explore the actions, inactions, and exploitation of instability caused by conflicts in neighboring states in a bid to strategically advance their interests. The Tigray conflict will be the initial point of reference, with an analysis of how Eritrea capitalized on the internal conflict to advance its regional presence and Sudan's settling of scores along the Tigray–Al-Fashaga border, while maneuvering in the politics of the Nile. This paper argues that the instability of the countries in the Horn is used as a bargaining chip by other regional states. This demonstrates that Horn states have become active players in reshaping regional geopolitical dynamics during conflicts. Using a comparative approach, this research contributes to rethinking African regional agency during and after internal conflicts, focusing on regional independence while finding common ground.

Keywords

Horn of Africa, internal conflicts, regional instability, hegemony, geopolitics

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1. Introduction

The location of the Horn of Africa gives it strategic and political significance, as it lies near the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, two important waterways. This has made it interesting to both local and international powers, who have shown interest in increasing the impact of regional stability and the power dynamics. This region has experienced several serious conflicts, further exacerbating instability. It is important to understand the dynamics of conflict to solve security problems and build peace in the Horn of Africa. Regional conflicts are often connected to global power structures, which helps to understand why regional security cannot be separated from geopolitics (Aemo, 2024). Conflicts arise at various levels – national, regional, and international – and contribute to the complexity of issues in the region. Different actors, including national governments, local groups, regional organizations, and international powers, may collaborate intentionally or operate independently. In either case, their interactions can exacerbate the situation (Bereketeab, 2016). In the paper, the Horn of Africa is defined by both its geopolitical characteristics and its strategic location. It is situated near the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, two of the world's important waterways, and in a strict geographical sense, it refers to four countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. However, in political and development contexts, such as those used by regional organizations like IGAD, the definition expanded to the Greater Horn of Africa, including Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda. See the map below, which shows a labeled map of eight Horn states.

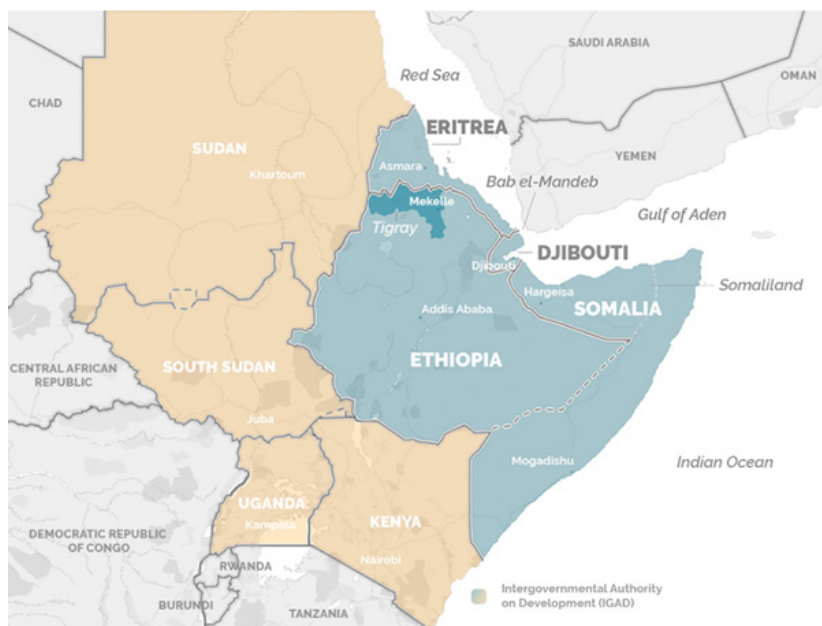


Figure 1: Greater Horn of Africa. Source: ISPI, 2021

Conflicts in the Horn of Africa are difficult to resolve because they are complex, deeply interconnected, and often spill over into one another. These conflicts usually form part of a larger regional pattern (Olika, 2008). Following Buzan and Waever, these conflicts are deeply connected and can be understood as a *regional security complex* (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Most of these countries face internal and external conflicts at some point; however, the intensity of these conflicts differs from country to country. Such conflicts often involve clashes between militia groups, states, and non-government groups driven by competition over resources such as power, water, and land. Because there are few systems for conflict resolution and, when they are available, there is no agreement on shared rules or solutions, these disagreements often become violent, leading to the different types of conflicts that continue today (Berhanu, 2013). Additionally, these conflicts are frequent, intense, long-lasting, and spread widely across the region through proxy groups and central governments. This has led to a pattern in which the use of force is normalized to achieve political goals (Abdikadir, 2015). Due to the lack of a strong regional peace and security structure, public support, and political unity, governments shift their attention from internal issues to involving external actors, turning domestic conflicts into international ones (Berhanu, 2013).

It is a common misconception that African states engage in wars against each other due to a lack of military capacity. However, the 1964 Declaration from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) actively discouraged border conflicts, which has led to fewer significant instances of secessionist invasions. Despite this, the literature has established that most African conflicts are not internal or domestic, but many of them have been internationalized with heavy foreign involvement. This has taken the form of proxy wars in which one side operates within the other's territory (Aidi, 2020; Vörös & Tarrósy, 2025). The region has been heavily influenced by powers beyond Africa, characterized by constant political interference and foreign involvement, making the region more fragile and unstable and keeping it in a state of crisis. For a better path, the region must break this cycle to negotiate with the rest of the world on its own terms rather than be taken advantage of by the great powers. Transforming the Horn of Africa is a challenging task due to its complex and divisive history and distinct colonial legacies, which differ from those of other African regions. Countries like Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan have endured violent conflicts that remain unresolved and have led to significant fragmentation. Additionally, this region is unique in that it permits official secession and has numerous peacekeeping missions, setting it apart from other parts of the world (Mason, 2023).

Due to the ongoing instability in the Horn of Africa, including issues such as Ethiopia's fragility, lack of recognition, and isolation, countries in the region often interfere in each other's affairs. For example, they may host insurgent groups from neighboring nations, thereby strengthening one state while increasing the vulnerability of others. The dynamic described creates an environment conducive to proxy wars and overlapping conflicts (Gebrewahd, 2023). Proxy warfare has become common in the Horn of Africa. Many countries support rebel groups in rival territories to weaken

them and gain leverage in negotiations. These rebel groups usually originate from neighboring countries and aim to destabilize opposing governments. Such a tactic has led to widespread mutual interference, with nations continually backing each other's adversaries, operating under the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The same strategy continues today; in the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, both sides have been accused of supporting opposing factions (Berhanu, 2013).

The present article argues that patterns of interference have shaped the region, and political crises have been influenced by external actors. Such interventions exploit domestic crises and exacerbate regional instability. These interventions follow patterns shaped by long-standing rivalries, historical grievances, and resource competition. It argues that neighboring states have capitalized on Ethiopia's internal conflicts, particularly the Tigray conflict. These dynamics highlight how Ethiopia's internal conflicts are significantly influenced by the strategic actions and interventions of neighboring countries. Additionally, the efforts of regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have not been effective in mediating these conflicts. By examining Eritrea's and Sudan's involvement in Ethiopia's recent internal struggles, this study demonstrates that the political crises in the Horn of Africa stem from both domestic issues and external interventions. It also offers insights into potential solutions for addressing these regional tensions.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach, employing a case study inquiry, with Ethiopia, particularly the Tigray War, as the main case study, a case chosen because of the spillover effects and high level of intervention by neighboring states. Additionally, Sudan and Eritrea were complementary cases used to show the regional complexities of their involvement in Ethiopia's conflict. The cases were selected based on their direct involvement, geographical proximity, and clear evidence demonstrating their interests in an active conflict. It also made substantial use of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, studies, newspapers, social media posts, other Internet sources, public documents, and reports. Additional insights were drawn from the authors' previous fieldwork in Ethiopia, including interviews and informal conversations with key informants in Addis Ababa and Mekelle.

3. Ethiopia's Internal Conflicts as a Regional Trigger

The conflict and instability in Ethiopia have escalated into a significant crisis in recent years. Ethiopia's stability is crucial to the region; when the country is embroiled in internal conflict, it cannot be a dependable partner. Ethiopia has historically played a key role in maintaining regional stability in neighboring countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan (Gavin, 2021). The nation has made efforts to uphold fragile unity and has been a driving force behind diplomatic initiatives within the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD). However, tensions are rising due to border disputes that could escalate, as discussed in the following sections.

Ethiopia's internal conflicts, particularly the Tigray conflict, have significant implications for both its future and that of its neighboring countries. Shortly after the conflict began, it escalated to regional and international levels, involving military forces from Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Amhara region, and Somalia. Each of these groups actively participated in military actions against their opponents, which included attacks on civilians (Melicherová et al., 2024). This pattern sends a troubling signal, especially when countries such as Eritrea continue to break international laws without ramifications. Besides the conflict, the government has also struggled to maintain law and order as crime and lawlessness have risen, even in the capital, Addis Ababa. Some prominent figures have been killed in broad daylight without any justice being served. This incompetence within the Ethiopian justice system has fueled public frustration and protests. Additionally, ethnic violence has been on the rise, manifesting in conflicts such as Oromo versus Amhara, Afar versus Somali, and Amhara versus Tigray, among others. Since 2018, large-scale violence has targeted different regional populations, including the Amhara and Oromia regions. This has worsened in Tigray since November 2020 and has expanded to various parts of the region. Despite the scale of these events, international engagement has been limited, mostly focusing on maintaining relations with the Ethiopian government (Vaughan, 2025). The Ethiopian government has been distant from the rural majority, pursuing urban development ambitions that have deepened this gap (Informal interview, Addis Ababa, 2025).

The Tigray conflict has been extremely devastating and has led to a regional war, fueled by historical tensions, political rivalries, territorial disputes, language issues, competition for resources, weak institutions, ethnic federalism, and divisions within the government. These underlying problems have been exploited by extremist groups, exacerbating ethnic divisions (Siyum, 2022). Currently, Ethiopia is caught up in multiple crises, further threatening its unity and stability (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). This shows that conflict dynamics in Ethiopia are complex and have worsened over time, leading to the devastating Tigray War, which pushed the country to the brink of disintegration.

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3.1. Tigray conflict (2020–2022), Oromia unrest, Amhara insurgency

The Tigray conflict evolved from the country's ethnic-based political system, established in 1991 under the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Tensions escalated when Abiy Ahmed, who represented the Oromo in the EPRDF, became Prime Minister and announced a reform agenda to remove TPLF figures from key positions. Disputes over elections intensified in 2020, leading the federal government to postpone national elections due to COVID-19. In response, the TPLF held regional elections, refusing to recognize Prime Minister Abiy's authority. This situation resulted in both parties exchanging threats, with Tigray becoming the focal point of the crisis. The conflict escalated when TPLF forces attacked several federal army bases in Tigray, causing thousands of casualties and the seizure of heavy weaponry (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

The Tigray conflict began on November 4, 2020, between the Ethiopian Federal Government and the TPLF. Prime Minister Abiy announced a law-enforcement operation and ordered the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) to act against the Tigray region to curb the TPLF's activities within and beyond it. The federal government responded by launching military operations to end the prevailing impunity. The situation escalated into a broader conflict, becoming an international crisis as it involved Amhara regional forces, Eritrean troops, Somali soldiers, and various other foreign military actors (Plaut, 2021). This was followed by airstrikes targeting military installations (Chothia, 2021). The Ethiopian government announced its plans to replace the Tigray regional government with an appointed administration, designating the TPLF as a terrorist organization. The Prime Minister aimed to establish a loyal interim administration in its place (Woldemariam & Gebreluel, 2025). The conflict reflects the deeper ethnic dynamics of Ethiopia's 27-year experiment with ethno-linguistic federalism. This model recognizes diversity and fosters identity-based politics, which increases intergroup tensions. This conflict intensified divisions, with the TPLF forces accused of targeting Amhara communities, killing young people, and destroying rural livelihoods. This led to mobilization in Amhara and Afar, further entrenching the conflict and undermining Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reform agenda (Abbink, 2021).

In short, the conflict saw three major phases: initially in November 2020, mid-way between June and December 2021, and lastly between May and October 2022, which was followed by a ceasefire agreement on November 2, 2022, mediated by the African Union. Reports have shown that both parties have committed severe abuses, causing humanitarian crises, material damage, destruction, and loss of livelihoods (OHCHR-EHRC, 2021). The two-year war formally ended with a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) signed in November 2022 (African Union, 2022). However, the dire effects of the conflict are still felt across the country, and recovery has been slow. Economic challenges have become severe, poverty is rising, and political unrest continues. The psychological damage from the war remains unaddressed, with no accountability or genuine reconciliation for full recovery (Informal

interview, Mekelle, 2025). Social media propaganda continues to instigate more conflicts, such as the one in the Amhara region in April 2023 (Abbink, 2024).

Many groups play a role in Ethiopia's ongoing conflicts, including political leaders who sometimes incite citizens to heighten tensions for political advantage. First, informal groups such as Fano from the Amhara region and the youth group Qeerroo from Oromia have challenged the regional governments and have not been held accountable. Secondly, formal groups such as the TPLF, rebranded as the TDF, and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which opposed Abiy's government, allied with the TDF, Prosperity Party, and Oromo Federalist Party. Third, social media activists have also been very important, as platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been used to spread hate speech and false information with fabricated images and videos. This has escalated violence. Some media outlets align themselves with the government, while regional media support their local authorities. This has not resulted in neutrality; instead, it has contributed to increased divisions within society. Additionally, various regional actors, including Eritrea – historically at odds with Tigray's political leadership – as well as Egypt and Sudan, have played significant roles in supporting Ethiopian opposition groups. These actors have their own interests to protect (Asgele Siyum, 2022; Woldemariam & Gebreluel, 2025), triggering instability in the Horn of Africa. Despite being initially domestic in nature, these conflicts have significant effects on neighboring countries and can disrupt international relations, shaping how national crises unfold. For instance, we can see that Sudan has increased its military activity along the Ethiopian border, as it has withdrawn its troops from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which allowed Al Shabaab to continue its operations (Somaliguadian, 2020).

The Amhara region, containing the second largest ethnic group, was caught up in a new armed conflict and became a key actor due to the dispute over ownership of western Tigray, particularly areas like Wolkait. The TPLF has disputed allegations from Amhara leaders regarding territorial claims in Tigray that were annexed by Tigray following the TPLF's rise to power in 1991. During the conflict in Tigray, Amhara militias fought alongside the federal government to defend their sovereignty and reclaim these territories. However, the peace agreement did not resolve the border disputes, leading to concerns that those lands could be lost again. Tensions worsened when Prime Minister Abiy announced his plans to dismantle regional forces and militias, which the elites in Amhara saw as an attempt to weaken their region.

The frustrations experienced by the Amhara communities were exacerbated by the longstanding marginalization inherent in the ethnic federal system. The government failed to provide adequate protection for these communities and other regions, such as Oromia. This failure led to increased protests to voice these grievances; however, they did not yield significant results. The situation escalated further following the assassination of the Prosperity Party leader in Amhara. In response, the government accused the Fano group of orchestrating the killing and plotting to overthrow the government, which only intensified the conflict (Yeromaw, 2024). In contrast, the representatives from Oromia argue that the constitution grants Ethio-

pia's nationalities self-rule and accuse the Amhara of promoting "Amharization" by imposing their language and religion. The Amhara political elites used the Tigray War to reclaim lost land. They took control of these areas and resettled the Amhara population in places where the Tigrayans had been displaced. While this was happening, they stayed silent when Sudan occupied the Al Fashaga territory but moved quickly to take the Tigray lands during the conflict (Jima, 2023).

4. Eritrea's Strategic Exploitation in the Tigray War

Eritrea became involved in the Tigray War by actively participating in the conflict. Its role illustrates how a neighboring country can capitalize on internal disputes to advance its own interests. Eritrea operated with a clear agenda stemming from its challenging history with the Tigray People's Liberation Front. This tension escalated following the Eritrea-Ethiopia war from 1998 to 2000, which left the disputed Badme territory under Ethiopian control, but the TPLF-led government refused to hand it over despite a 2002 arbitration ruling awarding it to Eritrea (Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, 2002). When Abiy Ahmed first became Prime Minister, he began pursuing expected reconciliation with Eritrea. Prime Minister Abiy signed a peace agreement with Eritrea, promising to implement the ruling on the disputed Badme territory, which the TPLF had resisted and continued to control, leaving the issue unresolved (Woldemariam & Gebreluel, 2025).

However, Ethiopia's war with Eritrea demonstrated that its landlocked status made it vulnerable, becoming a central issue in Ethiopia's foreign policy (Love, 2009). This reconciliation, with a once-bitter rival strongly opposed to the Ethiopian government, made Tigrayans uneasy and heightened their sense of government hostility (Vaughan, 2025). Eritrea aimed to destroy the TPLF, as evidenced by the narratives pushed by Eritrea's ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). At the onset of the war, the disputed territory was captured. Eritrea feared the TPLF-controlled Tigray, which posed a serious, indirect threat. Compared to Eritrea, Tigray had several advantages. It had a stronger economy, a slightly larger population, cultural ties, well-developed media networks, links to the Eritrean opposition group, and a growing refugee population fleeing Eritrea (Jeffrey, 2018). The opening of the Eritrea-Tigray border after the 2018 peace deal destabilized Eritrea's tightly controlled political system. This explains why the Eritrean forces attacked the refugee camps early in the Tigray War, forcibly returning many to Eritrea, and closed the border as soon as it was opened (Woldemariam & Gebreluel, 2025). These actions were designed to prevent Tigray from becoming a haven for Eritrean opposition groups. This strategy weakened the TPLF's support and demonstrated that it could operate within Ethiopia's territory without facing any repercussions. It illustrates how a neighboring country can leverage domestic conflicts to manage threats and assert power.

Eritrea aimed to position itself as a dominant power in the Horn of Africa, protect its interests and regional ambitions, and strengthen its position in the region. President Isaias Afwerki has tried to expand Eritrea's influence using aggressive diplomacy,

armed conflict, and regional proxy wars. He also promoted the Tripartite Alliance between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia as an alternative to IGAD (Mutambo, 2020). Prime Minister Abiy's rise and the 2018 peace deal created opportunities for Eritrea. Joining the Tigray War increased Ethiopia's reliance on Eritrean military support. The removal of the TPLF further solidified Eritrea's influence in Ethiopia and the wider region (York, 2023). Eritrea adopted an aggressive, military-first strategy in the conflict. This approach included a large-scale covert counter-agency campaign, widespread and systematic targeting of civilians and infrastructure, and a strong reluctance to accept loss in war. In January 2023, as Eritrean troops withdrew from parts of Tigray, they displayed signs in English reading "Game Over" and in Tigrinya, ከምሲ ኢና (Alex, 2023). It was a strong, chilling message suggesting their mission was accomplished. It could be interpreted as "we showed you what we are capable of" (Melicherová et al., 2024). This not only implied victory but also an assertion over the Tigray population to remind them of the Eritrean government's capacity for violence and domination.

President Isaias viewed Ethiopia as a key ally in the effort to lift UN sanctions, which would help Eritrea break free from international isolation and enhance its influence in the Horn of Africa. He also aimed to strengthen Eritrea's involvement in Ethiopian politics. Additionally, there was a desire for revenge against the TPLF, who had turned against him in 1998 despite his support for them during their fight against the Derg regime. Eritrea sought payback for decades of perceived TPLF wrongs, which were argued to have crippled Eritrea's development and led to problems such as mass emigration and poor investment. This, along with betrayal from past close personal ties, made it possible to settle old scores with the Tigray War (International Crisis Group, 2021b).

In terms of military advantage, Eritrea benefited from the Ethiopia–Eritrea alliance. This offensive weakened the TPLF, which was perceived as a threat. The instability in Ethiopia also gave President Isaias room to push his agenda in regional politics. However, the agenda to eliminate the TPLF was not achieved. The TPLF managed to maintain a larger fighting force. A leaked military document was reportedly circulated as a confidential document among Eritrean military commanders operating in Tigray in April 2021. It stated that the mission in Tigray did not achieve its goals. This acknowledged that the war's objective had not been met and instructed the military leaders to intensify their operations (Gebrewahd, 2023). Eritrea faced U.S. financial sanctions in November 2021, citing human rights abuses during the war (United States Department of State, 2022).

Ethiopia faced diplomatic challenges due to its efforts to conceal Eritrea's involvement in conflicts. This strategy damaged Ethiopia's credibility and attracted pressure from foreign governments and Western partners. The coalition employed tactics that resulted in widespread violence against civilians, leading to numerous reports of human rights violations that called for international condemnation and accountability, particularly from the United States and the European Union, which were significant external actors in this context. Eritrea's involvement highlighted the

geopolitical connections between domestic factors and foreign influences in shaping decision-making within the country.

5. Sudan's Opportunism and Border Politics

Sudan's role in the Ethiopian conflict, particularly regarding the Al-Fashaga disputes and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) negotiations, reflects a pattern of exploitation. The Tigray war has created opportunities for Sudan to gain territory and improve its political standing regarding the Nile. This situation illustrates how one country's instability can be leveraged by its neighbors for their own advantage. As Ethiopia's largest neighbor, Sudan has a complex and sensitive relationship with Ethiopia over their borders. Over the years, Ethiopia and Sudan have been rivals, often using proxy forces to engage in conflict with one another. Tensions escalated in 1995 when Ethiopia accused Sudan of being involved in an assassination attempt on President Hosni Mubarak. The relationship improved after 1998 and remained positive until South Sudan's independence in 2011 and Meles Zenawi's death in 2012. However, their bilateral relations became shaky after the new administrations took over in 2018 and 2019, respectively (Demissie, 2023). Both countries experienced internal conflicts, namely the Tigray conflict and Sudan's political instability, marked by multiple coups. The situation not only impacted domestic affairs but also altered the security landscape of the Horn of Africa. Additionally, there was a perception in Khartoum that Bashir's regime had compromised Sudan's territorial claims in exchange for Ethiopia easing its pressure regarding Sudan's involvement in the Mubarak assassination plot. Furthermore, Sudan shifted its stance on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) from being a mediator to aligning with Egypt's hardline position.

A report from the International Crisis Group provides evidence to suggest that Sudan had been preparing to take over the region before the Tigray War began. The evidence, including satellite imagery, indicated that Sudanese forces were already building roads and military outposts and clearing land to facilitate troop movement in the Al-Fashaga region. This did not initially concern the Ethiopian government, as it thought the troops were part of an understanding to secure the border with Tigray. However, Sudan deployed approximately 6,000 troops in the eastern Al-Fashaga region, evicting most Ethiopian farmers (International Crisis Group, 2021a). In the following weeks, they pushed into the contested region, clashes broke out, and some of the Sudanese soldiers were killed (Al Jazeera, 2020). Then, the Sudanese military leaders declared their intention to take the entire territory. Sudan saw this opportunity as a strategic opening to reclaim the disputed territory and gain leverage in the talks over the GERD. This was a major blow for Ethiopia, as it was already fighting a costly and destabilizing war in Tigray.

Sudan's timing was strategic, as it exploited Ethiopia's internal destruction. During the first months of the conflict in Tigray, Sudan seized the disputed Al-Fashaga region in December 2020. This occurred after Ethiopian forces were deployed to Tigray to combat the TPLF. This region has fertile farmland that produces valu-

able cash crops. It benefits from rich soils, abundant water, and the three rivers flowing from the Ethiopian highlands, with both countries claiming ownership of the water resources (Jamie, 2022). Many Ethiopians were displaced from their homes, and their properties were looted and burned. These disputes stem from how colonial-era boundaries were demarcated and interpreted, originally drawn by Anglo-Egyptian authorities. Ethiopia recognized Sudan's sovereignty over the region, but Khartoum also allowed Ethiopian farmers to continue cultivating under informal arrangements. Khartoum claims that this was a goodwill gesture to maintain cordial relations with the previous Ethiopian administrations (Sigatu, 2022).

In August 2022, the Ethiopian military shot down a plane from Sudan that was heading to Tigray. Ethiopia alleged that the aircraft was carrying weapons for the TPLF (The Guardian, 2022). Sudan denied these claims and its involvement. However, Ethiopia maintained that the plane was connected to hostile actors who supported the TPLF.

Sudan was also accused of violating previously established agreements, but its military leadership launched offensive operations to bolster domestic legitimacy, claiming that the land in question had been transferred by previous Sudanese governments. Sudan has faced accusations of previously assisting anti-government militias and has reportedly hosted and supported the TPLF, as well as the Benishangul-Gumuz rebels, who targeted construction materials for the GERD, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and Kimant militias. There had also been secret meetings between Sudanese officials and the TPLF, as well as their former intelligence heads. To preserve diplomatic ties, Ethiopia remained publicly silent, especially with Egypt's growing influence on Sudan's foreign policy. Before the Tigray conflict, Ethiopia accused Sudan of facilitating the smuggling of weapons into Oromia and Amhara (Jalu & Adgeh, 2025). Months later, Al-Burhan visited Ethiopia to assure Abiy's government that Sudan was not aiding the TPLF. The visit was reciprocated by Prime Minister Abiy, who visited Khartoum in January 2023 following the Pretoria Agreement, which ended the Tigray conflict (The Africa Report, 2023).

However, GERD continues to complicate relations between the two countries. First, Ethiopia's growing power in the region has been exemplified by its control of the Nile water and energy potential. This has challenged Egypt's traditional hegemony over the Nile. On the other hand, Egypt has also increased its influence on Sudan's politics and views Sudan as an extension of its national interests (Belete, 2024). In this regard, Egypt prefers a weaker, unstable Sudan so it can control the Nile and discourage Sudan from exploiting its resources. Egypt has also strengthened Sudan's position in opposing Ethiopia's plans regarding GERD-related issues. This strategy

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was evident when Sudan signed a military cooperation agreement with Egypt and called for the removal of Ethiopian peacekeepers from Abyei in 2021 (Tanza, 2022).

Ethiopians believe that Egypt frequently supports Sudan and seeks to destabilize it by taking advantage of internal conflicts. Sudan's military is vulnerable to Egyptian manipulation, as many of its officers have been trained and supported by Egypt. This faction aligns with Egypt's agenda, which includes hostility toward the GERD and support for movements that oppose Ethiopia. The ongoing war in Sudan is likely to reshape these relations. A civilian government will prioritize internal recovery, but the military regime will most likely push forward with Al Fashaga and the GERD as bargaining tools and proxy conflicts. Ethiopia has tried to remain neutral despite the border conflicts and after Sudan's civil conflict began. Abiy has tried to resist exploitation and maintain stability, but the future of Al Fashaga remains uncertain (Demissie, 2023).

6. Regional Agency and Geopolitical Repositioning

Regional organizations have had a mixed impact on the stabilization of the Horn of Africa in recent decades. During the Tigray conflict, they failed to act effectively, which allowed neighboring countries to exploit Ethiopia's challenges without fear of repercussions. African solutions to African problems," a phrase coined by the Ghanaian economist George Ayittey (1998), is a term frequently used by political leaders and regional organizations like the AU and IGAD. The concept is rooted in the AU's aim to promote self-reliance and to find an African-led way to solve local challenges. Despite the repeated slogan, many believe that the AU and IGAD were too slow to stop the war. Once the war broke out in Tigray, it pushed the AU back to the non-interference policy framed in pan-Africanist rhetoric. This meant that the AU's peace and security system should not be involved in Ethiopia's internal crisis, including events in Tigray (Back, 2024). The African Union avoided direct involvement and failed to stop the conflict. This demonstrates that the priorities of regional and powerful global actors outweigh concerns for human rights and security, despite Article 4(h) of the AU's Constitutive Act, mandating action in cases involving war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity (African Union, 2000).

The AU has increasingly committed to humanitarian principles within the Responsibility to Protect framework. Despite the African Union Constitution's aim to promote self-reliance and solve African challenges, it gave full political backing to Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias against Tigray. According to the Chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, the Ethiopian government's actions in Tigray were legitimate law enforcement measures. He also urged the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) not to include Tigray on its agenda or adopt any strong measures to stop the atrocities occurring in the region. Following its previous role in imposing sanctions on Eritrea for destabilization in 2009, the situation has now reversed, giving Eritrea the opportunity to destabilize the region once again. Such support from the AU, headquartered in Addis Ababa, only deepened the political crisis and exacerbated regional political tensions. Ethiopia's influence

as the AU host may have contributed to this inaction. This demonstrates Ethiopia's active strategy of using its position to protect itself from scrutiny and shape how the AU responds to match its interests. However, when the host country undermines the AU's principles, the organization appears weak and irrelevant. Although the AU had tried to mediate earlier in November 2020, with AU Chair Cyril Ramaphosa appointing three former presidents as envoys, the Ethiopian government rejected the mission, saying there was no crisis in Tigray.

In response to the pressure to act, the AU appointed former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as its High Representative for the Horn of Africa, with a special focus on Ethiopia (African Union, 2021). However, his appointment made it difficult for him to regain the trust of Tigrayans, who saw him as supporting the federal government. Former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and South African diplomat Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka were subsequently brought in as co-mediators in facilitating the participation of the Tigray People's Liberation Front in African Union-led talks, despite significant reservations. Their efforts were instrumental in securing the agreement. The negotiations took place in Pretoria, South Africa, in November 2022, resulting in the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA). IGAD also participated in the mediation process and committed to monitoring the agreement's implementation. In March 2022, IGAD shifted to a more proactive role, welcoming the humanitarian ceasefire and the reciprocal halt of hostilities amid growing evidence of atrocities and risks to regional security (Back, 2024).

A coordinated regional approach that accounts for the interlinkage of the Horn of Africa's conflicts has been emphasized; however, IGAD still struggles with internal political divisions that limit its effectiveness. Analysts such as Walter Knausenberger suggested in an interview that the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) appeared to be more dynamic and in a better position to foster cooperation than IGAD (Burgess, 2009). The limitations faced by IGAD have significantly undermined its role as a peace broker, particularly amid disputes among its member states. These states are currently engaged in active conflicts with one another. Issues such as the Tigray War, bilateral disputes over areas like Al-Fashaga, and geopolitical tensions stemming from the GERD highlight the necessity for stronger trust and cooperation among IGAD members. Without this unity, IGAD's effectiveness is compromised. During the conflict, IGAD was expected to respond quickly, given the potential regional implications of the cross-border tensions. However, throughout the first year of the war, IGAD maintained a neutral stance and was hesitant to take decisive action. Its initial statements lacked strong condemnations of the violence. Additionally, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed rejected IGAD's offer to mediate, accusing the organization of favoritism.

More than three years after the Pretoria Agreement, its implementation remains incomplete as the TDF have not fully demobilized, and much of Western Tigray remains under Amhara administration amid the unresolved Welkait dispute. Tensions escalated in late January 2026 after clashes broke out between the ENDF and Tigrayan forces near Tselemti and the Amhara border, followed by a drone strike.

The situation currently, as of July 2026, is still volatile, and there are warnings from the International Crisis Group that renewed fighting could draw Eritrea and allies, potentially escalating the bilateral crisis into a proxy conflict in the Horn (Boswell & Knopf, 2026). As of mid 2026, no new large-scale conflict has broken out; however, the unresolved issues this paper has analyzed, together with the neighboring states' continued stake in Ethiopia's balance of power, remain active rather than resolved by the 2022 agreement.

7. IGAD's Regional Institutional Capacity

IGAD traces its origin to 1986, when it was established to address recurrent droughts and famine by fighting environmental degradation, desertification, and deforestation. It was formally established in Djibouti following the UN General Assembly Resolution 35/90 in December 1980 and the UN-endorsed Resolution 38/216 on 20 December 1983. IGAD had six founding members: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda, and was later joined by Eritrea in 1993 after its independence and by South Sudan in 2011 after it seceded from Sudan. Eritrea withdrew its membership in 2007 to protest Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia and officially rejoined in 2023 after a long isolation period. IGAD has evolved and expanded its mandate and was formally relaunched in 1996 in Djibouti. The revitalized mandate included a central security framework, including conflict prevention, management and resolution, economic integration, food security, and environmental protection and it also serves as an implementation organ for the AU and UN projects (Bereketeab, 2019).

IGAD has been a primary mediator in several major conflicts in the region, including facilitating the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 in Sudan. It also sponsored reconciliation conferences leading to the 2004 transitional federal government in Somalia. As mentioned above, IGAD participated in the mediation process in the Tigray conflict and is committed to monitoring the implementation of the Pretoria agreement. However, IGAD had limited effectiveness during the first year of the Tigray conflict for several reasons, such as critics arguing that Ethiopia had historically dominated IGAD, using it for national interests and holding the chairmanship for long periods, violating the rotating statutes. The member states also have been in active conflicts with one another; the internal divisions eventually undermine collective action. The heavy reliance on external funding from the US, UK, and EU makes the organization susceptible to foreign policy dictates rather than local needs. These institutional weaknesses have economic consequences, as IGAD lags behind other African integrative blocs; its member states have overwhelmingly borrowed from external financiers bilaterally rather than through the IGAD-level mechanism, such as 222 Chinese loans totalling USD 36.3 billion to IGAD member states between 2000 and 2020, led by Ethiopia, with no IGAD-coordinated financing mechanism in place (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2025).

Beyond IGAD, other important regional frameworks influence and play critical roles in regional security, which often overlap, such as the Africa Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and which delegate regional security to blocs like IGAD (Ani,

2016). The Tripartite Alliance, an agreement between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, was viewed as a secretive alternative and competitor to IGAD. Emerging in 2018, the agreement represents a shift toward more exclusive leader-driven diplomacy, following the rapprochement between the presidents of Ethiopia and Eritrea and forming an alliance for comprehensive cooperation (Záhořík & Ylönen, 2025). COMESA is a massive trade bloc encompassing most of the Horn states, and some analysts suggest it might be more dynamic for certain types of cooperation than IGAD; it also remains a core building block of the African Economic Community (AEC) (El-Affendi, 2009). The Red Sea Forum, which is an emergent regional mechanism for states bordering the Red Sea, reflects a growing need for a specific forum to handle militarization and port competition involving the Gulf states and global powers in the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden corridor (Záhořík & Ylönen, 2025). The EAC has been highlighted as a more institutionalized rule-based alternative for IGAD. Unlike the IGAD secretariat, its model is EU-inspired, featuring supranational institutions such as the East African Court of Justice (EACJ), and has established economic integration aiming for a monetary union and political federation. EAC has expanded significantly, admitting DRC in 2022, creating overlapping memberships as states like Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan belong to EAC and IGAD, often leading to divergent priorities. Various negotiation frameworks have been organized under the Nile cooperation to tackle water scarcity and management risks, but they often struggle against narrow national interests (Daher, 2022). These frameworks matter because they can be both a source of stability and instability, as they overlap. While they provide protected forums for dialogue which may be impossible domestically, they can trigger conflict when benefits are unevenly distributed or manipulated to serve the narrow national interest of the most powerful states in the region (Bereke-teab, 2019; El-Affendi, 2009). The overlap with these regional frameworks illustrates the fragmentation and multimembership character of regional organizations in the Horn, where states are active across several institutions rather than investing in one exclusively.

The role of the African Union in ending the war varies greatly among scholars. Some scholars believe that the actions of the AU reflect the influence of powerful states. Others argue that these actions reflect state power, capable of shaping political agendas, establishing norms, and creating rules. Additionally, some view the AU as reliant on external donor funding, making it susceptible to political influence. This dependence explains the AU's reluctance to challenge Ethiopia over Tigray (Aidi, 2021). The handling of the broader Tigray crisis raises questions about whether the AU can uphold its principles, especially when faced with political pressure from a powerful state. In many cases, regional organizations in Africa follow the interests of their most powerful members. They are not neutral in their search for solutions. These circumstances raise questions about whether geopolitical competition will drive relations or whether regionalism can solve internal crises.

8. Conclusion

The discussion above makes it clear that, to resolve the Horn of Africa's interconnected conflicts, reforms are needed. This aligns with the concept of a regional security complex. These cases demonstrate that African countries actively use their neighbors' weaknesses to push their agendas. In this situation, Eritrea used the Tigray War as an opportunity to retaliate against the TPLF and to expand its diplomatic influence. Similarly, Sudan employed the conflict as a distraction to advance its border claims and water rights regarding the Nile. The limited action taken by regional bodies encouraged these neighboring countries to pursue their interests. This illustrates how these strategies are common in regional politics. Organizations such as IGAD and the AU need to maintain genuine independence from both their member states and external powers to serve as neutral mediators. Given the significant foreign presence in the region, the prospects for lasting peace are under threat. Unfortunately, regional organizations and governments have done little to address this issue, and they must take appropriate action. Stronger institutions are needed to protect their rights, interests, and sovereignty. However, political instability and weak institutions in the Horn of Africa have left states in poor positions to negotiate with foreign powers.

This paper also challenges African agency by focusing on Africa's neighbors rather than global powers. African agency is used here to mean the capacity of African states and regional organizations to set terms and be active players independently shaping their political, security, and economic destinies rather than having those terms set by external powers (Beswick & Hammerstad, 2013). Focusing on interstate rivalries causes a problem as countries attack each other, limiting actions to create stronger regional institutions. It is important to recognize that regional security is shared and that African states should embrace this by reducing political tensions at home and encouraging political inclusion and reconciliation of domestic issues. Domestic issues weaken a country's ability to protect its interests. Governments also need to build strong institutions that can balance the protection of their citizens and governance, especially in the face of increased militarization in the region. To prevent conflict from foreign interference in domestic affairs, it is important to control the flow of weapons from bases to protect sovereignty. The states in the Horn of Africa also need to work together to promote trade, political cooperation, and security mechanisms to counter this. Engagement with member states will help them obtain and share more information, avoid unnecessary rivalry, and develop joint strategies to address such risks. However, the cooperation mechanism and practical implementation sound unrealistic and face several contradictions such that regional integration is a source of conflict rather than a source of stability, as intense economic integration can trigger conflict if mechanisms to address the unequal distribution of benefits are lacking; additionally, too much regional interaction in a wrong structural setting can generate more conflict than cooperation (El-Affendi, 2009). The region is also operating in a regional security complex where instability is used as a bargaining chip, and the use of force has been normalized to achieve

political goals frequently institutionalized to divert attention from internal issues: instead of cooperating, the states continually back each other's adversaries and host insurgent groups to weaken their neighbors. While the aspiration for cooperation exists in policy documents such as Agenda 2063, it remains largely a dream due to the mistrust-predator nature of regional geopolitics that subordinates regional interests to the survival of individual regimes (Mngomezulu, 2019). However, to achieve a functional level of cooperation on trade, political and security cooperation in the Horn of Africa, it is imperative to move beyond idealistic slogans and focus on reforms that address the deep mistrust between states. A primary recommendation is to shift substantial power to a functional level, strengthening the technocratic authority of the secretariat and building strong institutions capable of protecting regional sovereignty and interests when negotiating with foreign powers (Bereketeab, 2019). To counter the fragmented approach, the region must act as a unified block, instead of borrowing externally; the IGAD secretariat could set up a regional development bank that will allow countries to negotiate market access collectively and encourage members to act in their common interests (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2025). ✨

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