Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia: Holistic Perspective and Strategic Review

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Abstract

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region has its roots in power, economy, and competing visions for the Ethiopian state. The escalating military confrontation between the government of Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray political leadership brought the country to the brink of another civil war. The battle has numerous facets, including the division of the national cake; the concept of ethnic federalism versus the idea of a unitary state; and the revolutionary democracy versus bourgeois democracy. In the mirror of the case study, this research aims to see the answers to the questions: What are the causes of the conflicts? How and which of the conflict prevention techniques or tactics prove useful for dealing with the root causes of the conflict? Since the Ethiopian crisis has further exacerbated the already dire position of this nation, it has been explicitly determined that there is no military solution to this problem. The military siege caused the exodus of tens of thousands of refugees across international borders. The conflict had spread to other parts of Ethiopia. It was also threatening both the Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea region because the war has formally ended but sparks of conflict still there. The only way out was to put all disputes aside and sit at the negotiating table, and on the part of the United Nations, this situation was an attempt to create more momentum towards the cessation of hostilities, mutual recognition, and dialogue.

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Keywords

Ethiopia, Tigray region, Conflict Prevention, UN, Africa, Red Sea, Regional Security.

Introduction

The Tigray War was fought between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian federal government. Fighting broke out when Tigrayan security forces assaulted the Northern Command headquarters of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), along with several other locations in Tigray, following years of escalating tensions and conflicts between the TPLF and the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Taye, 2018). The Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) launched strikes from the north, which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed hailed as 'law enforcement operations,' as the ENDF launched a response from the south. Following the failure of peace negotiations in late August 2022, the conflict escalated once again. Following a quick mobilisation of forces, it was stated that by October of the same year, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tigray had assembled hundreds of thousands of troops to fight one another (Zelalem, 2022).

This conflict generally is about power, economy, and competing visions for the Ethiopian state. However, essentially, it is about balancing stability and democratization, ethnic loyalties, and national identity. Admittedly, there is the most intense situation and violent manifestation of the conflict, but this is not all about Tigray versus the central government (Walsh, 2015). On 2nd November 2022, Ethiopia and the Tigrayan rebel forces agreed upon a ceasefire of hostilities, which took effect the next day. This development came after several peace and mediation efforts in the preceding years.

Ethiopia is on the verge of another civil war, due to the intensifying military conflict between the Abiy Ahmed administration and the political leadership in Tigray. The dispute is of an explosive character and can escalate exponentially due to the complex ethnic and power dynamics of the Tigray region. It might become a major cause of destabilisation for this 120 million people state. The most recent battlefield images show Ethiopian federal soldiers besieging Mekele, the capital of Tigray. Even a

military victory of the federal government may fail to quiet, not just the Tigray Addis extension, but also the broader ethnic strife and central-periphery tensions in the rest of the country. It is essential to understand that it is also very much about Ethiopia and nine other federal regions. The conflict has many dimensions, including the system of ethnic federalism versus the vision of a unitary state; revolutionary democracy versus liberal democracy; and the division of the national cake. (Lawal, 2025).

Research Questions

- What are the causes of the conflicts?
- Which of the conflict prevention techniques or tactics prove useful for dealing with the root causes of the conflict?

Holistic Perspective

When navigating through the multiplicity of descriptions provided by the Conflict Prevention (CP) research and practice, the idea or picture of CP emerges as a nebulous phenomenon. The terms "CP" and "contextualising conflict prevention," such as "conflict management," "conflict resolution," and "peace building," are interchangeable. In this regard, experts appear to classify a vast list of prevention tactics under the heading "how to prevent"; yet there appears to be a big disagreement about what actually has to be avoided, to stop conflicts from developing or recurring. Regarding the implications of the strategies presented by the advocates of CP, a lesser scale of awareness is observed about the counterproductive results of the respective strategies (Aggestam, 2010).

However, the contemporary international attitude increasingly advocates the policies of a preventive approach. Even though it is still evolving, there is a plethora of literature, examples, and active practices evident in its effectiveness. It is following a similar path to the international humanitarian conventions passed by the UN that emerged more than fifty years ago and are now the norm. However, unlike the human rights laws, which are relatively straightforward to enact, conflict prevention entails its multidimensional complexities and practical challenges. Primarily and most importantly, there is no “one size fits all” approach to conflict prevention. Every potential conflict follows a unique

set of circumstances that can vary by region. The nature of the conflict, whether it is interstate or intrastate, entails the implementation of prevention tailored according to the situation at hand, involving each actor's interests (Brahima, 2003). Prevention, in essence, is a proactive approach. Potential conflicts are discerned only by symptoms when they are manifested by actors being vocal about the situation through media, word of mouth, or non-government organizations, which also define the urgency and scale of the potential.

Boutros-Ghali, the sixth Secretary General of the UN, lists five measures on the course of conflict prevention: confidence building, fact-finding missions, early warning networks, preventive deployment, and demilitarized zones (Neuhold, 2013). These measures, though now being largely seen as mainstream, are constrained by their scope and implementation. The scope of prevention is categorized mainly by three scales: Operational prevention is explicitly directed toward imminent crises and includes measures such as fact-finding and monitoring missions, negotiation, mediation, the creation of channels for dialogue among contending groups, preventive deployments, and confidence-building measures. Structural prevention is more long-term in nature and incorporates measures that facilitate governance, adherence to human rights, and economic, political, and societal stability, as well as civil society building, referring to efforts to address the root cause of the conflict. The third, systematic early warning, seeks to reduce conflict on a global basis with mechanisms not focused on any particular state. The two approaches, termed direct prevention and structural prevention, present numerous contradictory views about prevention, and so also is the case with the approach to discerning the nature of conflicts.

Several problems have been identified with the prediction of conflict, including the difficulty of obtaining accurate information and the predictive values of existing models as conflicts emerge into an imminent outbreak. The lack of a clear theoretical framework to conduct empirical research eventually results in the absence of a major summative understanding of CP. A gap between direct and structural conflict prevention tends to make the former ineffective in part because the latter favours NGO effectiveness and long-term conflict resolution, while the

former follows state conflict prevention's short-term, pragmatic, actor-involved approach. Since most conflicts in today's globe result from strained state-society relations, NGOs have been given top priority while analysing the current function of CP with reference to different types of CP (Rubin & Jones, 2017). In connection with CP, NGOs operate through early warning and structural peacebuilding. Early warning becomes more effective in the context of CP because NGOs hold vital cumulative information and data and can better surmise the situation. But NGOs face the issue of reliability and credibility because the state and NGOs have different imperatives to resolve the conflict, but still, often NGOs and the state carry out their activities in collaboration.

Because prediction is one of the most difficult challenges in the world of social sciences, it appears to be the most problematic scenario when it comes to policy significance with regard to CP. CP fails in anticipating the chain of variables and the ensuing escalation. In the same context, Alexander George insists on 'not trying to accomplish it either' (Adegbonmire, 2016). There are several difficulties with implementation that need to be taken into account. First, determine if the disagreement is intrastate or interstate. In terms of interstate prevention, there have been significant political and institutional hurdles for the more powerful UN member states (particularly veto-wielding nations) in the UN playing a less decisive role in the outcome, as in the case of Kashmir and Iraq; while Afghanistan had to be termed as legitimate self-defence by the UN itself. Not to say that all strategies have not been successful, as in the case of the Israel-Lebanon conflict, where the consistent actions of the Security Council increased the political costs to the parties violating the resolutions. The role of the UN in small or states has generally been much broader and decisive, as can be seen in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The same is observed in the oil-related border issues between Nigeria and Cambodia, where mediation was done, manifesting the prevention of potential conflict. Even though, if not timely discerned, preventive strategies have failed in small or medium-sized states, as can be witnessed in the Ethiopia and Eritrea conflict, which took more than 20 years to resolve (United States Institute of Peace, 2023, n.d.).

In terms of intrastate prevention, the common factor has been governments' intense sensitivities regarding perceived affronts to their sovereignty. It is not only difficult to get consent of a government to play an overtly political role of mediation between governmental and nongovernmental actors, but also the optics of the mediation may appear as treating a group like a political actor that the government may depict as criminally deviant, rather than the government being represented as the legitimate main actor. States, including those that are generally most suspicious about prevention, are willing to host a 'development' presence that works in conjunction with the government. They would be unwilling to host a political presence that might 'put the government on trial'.

The UN's resource ability to follow the preventative path is another aspect of the implementation difficulty. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Interdepartmental Framework for Coordination on Early Warning and Preventive Action (FT) are the major interagency partners in the operational doctrine of the UN for structural or multidimensional prevention. The FT should ideally maintain interagency contacts, but there is little proof of this happening because of the complicated structure of the UN. Being forced to behave in opposition to one another by their governance and financing systems make it difficult and time-consuming to reach consensus among so many participants; hence, the ability of the UN to wield influence through structural prevention tools or use aid as an incentive is limited. The DPA itself, tasked with prevention, has no field presence and relies on UNDP, mainly rendering the relationship strained due to conflicting priorities. With limited presence and information on the ground, discerning potential conflicts promptly is difficult. In addition, the DPA also lacks the capacity to undertake the analysis needed for prevention, not primarily and specifically being formed for this purpose.

The diagnosis of the conflict assumes a greater significance if the goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. To establish CP as practically useful, the CP must be context-specific because it is next to impossible to foretell any straight logical pattern of cause and effect. Moreover, various strategies implemented in earlier conflicts should be analysed in the context of specific conflicts, and conditional generalization

should be discussed, reviewed, and evaluated to derive any reasonable outcomes. In such conditions, the importance of time cannot be overemphasized. The time frame and the timing should also be streamlined in such proposals and discussions because, in the context of the preventive strategies, they have huge significance.

The causes of conflict are then explored, and according to Kelman, disputes should be seen as a process driven by group demands and anxieties rather than being led by logical calculation and national interest (Bercovitch, Clements, & Druckman, 2005). Conflict is exacerbated by poverty and by the political, social, and economic inequality between groups. Political, economic, and social inequality, extreme poverty, economic stagnation, inadequate government services, high unemployment, environmental degradation, and personal (economic) motivations to fight are some of the main causes. Regional conflict formations are a collection of interrelated, frequently protracted wars involving surrounding countries. Complex cross-border political, economic, social, and military linkages define them. Regional conflict formations differ from interstate and intrastate warfare; hence, the international community also needs unique techniques for involvement. While promoting equitable growth, reducing disparities between groups, addressing unemployment, and reducing private incentives to fight through national and international control over illegal commerce are all necessary to lower the possibility of conflicts (Peace and Conflict, 2017).

Strategic Review

The Tigray area, in the north of the nation, accounts for 6% of the total Ethiopian population. Fighting eventually broke out in the first week of November 2020 because the marginally limited political dialogue and the increasing pressures from the federal government and the Tigray regional government contributed to the conflict, indicating broader difficulties in regulating the complex federal politics in Ethiopia (International Crisis Group,2022). The ethnic Tigrayan government was targeted by the PM Abiy, who also ordered the arrest of more than 60 of its officials. The TPLF responded by rejecting Abiy's leadership and declining to join the premier's new Prosperity Party (Devermont, 2020).

When Prime Minister Abiy came to power in 2018, he had finally taken the lid off of Ethiopia. It needed to come off because the old system could no longer contain popular demands for change. Removing that lid meant initiating one of the world's most important political transitions, but it's also most fragile. The ongoing situation now is that the project comes dangerously close to disaster. The potential consequences of a wider war or of chaos in Ethiopia should not actually be underestimated (Bula, 2019). They already constitute a threat not only to the Ethiopian people but also to international peace and security. The military confrontation and certainly the humanitarian situation are grave there, and perhaps there are 40,000 refugees in Sudan. Many more are internally displaced, and before the crisis, Ethiopia was already suffering from the displacement of some 2 million people across the country. At the peak times of this conflict, it had been difficult to find out who was actually to blame for the situation (DW, 2020).

One of the initial causes of the current conflict, the military crisis, was the decision to postpone the elections in Tigray due to COVID, which the Tigray leadership rejected. Instead, they held their own elections in September against Abiy's wishes and were soundly re-elected even though there were supposed to be no elections. The truth is that both parties are accountable for the current state of things, since during the past two years, both the Prime Minister and the TPLF have been trying to push each other into a corner (Vertin, 2020). This conflict is about the TPLF's 27-year reign. Essentially, the Tigray leadership was often inflexible in their negotiating positions, reluctant to let go of the power and economic influence that it had long been enjoying. There remains a lot of anger towards the TPLF among Ethiopians, with many precedents of their attitudes to governance, such as the anxieties of observers about the limits of political speech, curtailment of civic space, and the strife about political dissent.

Moreover, there has been a lot of anger manifest somewhat dangerously in recent weeks, but the conflict is also about Prime Minister Abiy's desire to turn the page on them, the TPLF, and about how he has done that. Now, for his advocates, his reign has meant upending the highly controlled state in Ethiopia (Al Jazeera, 2020). It meant promising

sweeping reforms, including greater freedom and economic liberalization, but for his detractors, it meant Abiy advancing a vision of the state with far too little consultation among Ethiopia's broad and diverse society. To some extent, in their view, in excess of the transitional mandate that they believe he was entitled to. Furthermore, it means for them that Abiy's government is mimicking the kind of repression, the kind of tactics that he had promised to usher out (Maru, 2020).

The current state of affairs in Tigray is not an accident; rather, it has been developing for some time and cannot be disregarded. Because it's critical to place what's happening between the federal government and Tigray, the word "national" clarifies the precise reality on the ground (Evennett, 2022). It can be useful to evaluate the situation within a larger national context because it is symptomatic of a larger crisis and debate over legitimacy. It also ought to be evaluated who is adhering to and defending Ethiopia's constitutional order and those who want to challenge that, as well as the constitutional order as it was created, two and a half decades ago, and whether that is relevant or not (Chothia, 2020). Between 2018 and 2021, Ethiopia's GDP experienced a rapid slowdown as the cumulative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Tigray conflict undermined previous growth. The growth rate, which was nearly 9 percent in 2018/19, fell to approximately 6 percent in 2019/20, and further dropped to around 2 percent in 2020/21. While the pandemic disrupted trade and investment, the war in Tigray complicated the situation further, resulting in millions of people being displaced, infrastructure damage, and a diversion of state resources to military spending. These combined shocks shifted Ethiopia from being one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa to experiencing significant economic pressures (Geda, 2021).

The African Union has often talked about African solutions for African problems. As they did for this issue, the President of South Africa, Ramaphosa, was the AU Chair. On 20th November 2020, he met with Ethiopian President Sahle Waksaldi, who was visiting South Africa as Prime Minister Abiy's special envoy. President Ramaphosa announced the initiative with three mediators, three former African presidents: President Chissano, President Johnson Sirleaf, and President Mobutu. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Gutierrez, immediately backed

this mediation. Abdullah bin Zayed, the UAE Foreign Minister, two days later, also backed the Ramaphosa initiative and called for dialogue. There were efforts in early international mediation in 2020 with the aid of the United Nations, and the efforts were eventually broadened to the full scope of diplomatic work by the African Union, which eventually culminated in the Pretoria Agreement in 2022 and international assistance in dialogue, humanitarian access, and stabilization of the situation in the northern part of Ethiopia (African Union, 2022).

The EU High Representative, Joseph Brel, appointed Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Havastu, who had extensive experience and contacts in the Horn, as a special envoy. The special envoy sought to support Ramaphosa's initiative. The US National Security Council also signalled its support. As a result, the international community rallied behind the African Union initiative, which would facilitate mediation and lead to a national dialogue process.

Prime Minister Abiy remained rather cold to this initiative and rebuffed the mediation process, which was strongly backed by the international community (The World Bank, 2022). On the contrary, the three members of the African group who sit in the Security Council now, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia, along with Panama, call themselves the A3 plus one (a small block inside the Security Council) called for a Security Council briefing on the situation in Ethiopia with an emphasis on the Burundian Chairperson Ndayishimiye's initiative; the A3 plus one withdrew that announcement (Security Council Report, 2025). It suggests that the request for a Security Council briefing was designed to exert a little leverage and pressure. Did Prime Minister Abiy really want the Security Council to discuss what happened in Ethiopia, or could he not look more favourably on the type of African mediation proposed by President Ramaphosa? There is another twist to this, which is that after A3 Plus One withdrew its request for a briefing, the European members of the Security Council resubmitted it. International and regional initiation of peace through mediation was meant to help the parties involved in the conflict talk to avoid further deterioration of the situation; these diplomatic mandates would lead to the establishment of the African Union-led peace process that led to the Pretoria Agreement and subsequent

stabilization, humanitarian access, and political normalization efforts in northern Ethiopia (Crisis Group, 2023).

There was no military solution to the crisis. Because it had already created a serious situation in the country. There were reports of widespread atrocities on both sides. Military sieges and tens of thousands of refugees were flowing across international borders. The conflict spread to other parts of Ethiopia. It put the Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea region at risk as a whole. The only way out of this is a negotiated settlement with both sides, inevitably making some painful concessions. This will bring peace to the region and the country.

Conclusion

There has been a continuous need to tighten the inclusive and consensual political practices within Ethiopia. The relationship strains that developed between the federal government and the Tigray regional administration throughout the Tigray conflict represented a larger concern with managing political dissent and inter-federal territorial relationships, and how long-lasting dialogue, institutional reconciliation strategies, and the efficient execution of the 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement can assist in the long term political stability (African Union, 2022). The Ethiopian stakeholders and the international mediators should have a starting point, which could be built upon and modified in case of the need to change. One of the cornerstones is the continuity of the end of hostilities through the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement in 2022, and ongoing access to humanitarian efforts and politically focused reconstruction and long-term stabilization in the northern part of Ethiopia, including the Tigray regional capital of Mekelle. Second, the fact that institutional engagement between the federal authorities and the Tigray regional administration has been gradually restored after the 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement has demonstrated the significance of mutual political recognition and confidence-building measures. Some steps can be implemented, like reinstatement of federal government budget provisions, relocation efforts, and management normalization, which can put the desired long-term stability in place with all such actions. Third, a long-term and comprehensive political conversation is also important to enhance national

reconciliation by uniting federal and regional entities and the broader Ethiopian thriving world to deliberate on governance reform, electoral procedures, and constitutional issues in a compatible and nationally embracing model. The political formula, political process with international backing, led by the African Union, can play a vital role in preventing the conflict. The UN has tools, if the UN chooses to use them. The Secretary General, on his own, could create a fact-finding mission. It happened after the 2023 Gaza war, where the Secretary General, using his own authorities, created a fact-finding mission. These sorts of things can not only help reveal what's actually going on but also put pressure on the parties to move toward talks rather than more escalation. The UN agenda in this grave situation can try to promote more momentum toward the cessation of hostilities, mutual recognition, and dialogue (OCHA, 2024).

Moreover, the Ethiopian government should grant the humanitarian organisations rapid access to the affected region. Eritrean soldiers ought to depart Ethiopian territory because their instability challenges regional and global standards. Ethiopian authorities should keep track of and safeguard Eritrean refugees there. To combat disinformation, the Ethiopian government should stop the communications blockade and encourage a reliable, impartial investigation into claims of crimes. The Ethiopian government should also pursue a broadly inclusive debate with all of the nation's numerous restive constituencies about the best course of action for the political factors that led to this crisis. Seeking broad agreement on minorities' rights, access to resources and power, and the principles regulating the political contestation is crucial, given that national elections are scheduled for June. Such a debate must be restricted to allies of the current Addis Ababa administration if it is to be credible and fruitful. Conflict Prevention is an old concept that, in itself, is problematic. Prevention so rarely works when it comes to trying to prevent internal tensions from turning into conflict. Thus, it cannot be viewed as a tool for promoting some international agenda of cultivating a culture of conflict prevention. A better collaboration among States, NGOs, IPOs, and a workable, transitional mutual framework would be more helpful to improve the competence for conflict prevention. A network of different elements needs to be established, especially within the private sector, so

that there is more access to areas of potential conflict for delivering timely aid and resolution.

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