

Special EDITION

DE-ESCALATING ETHIOPIA–ERITREA TENSIONS

March 2026

By Edmond Pamba

Background

The Horn of Africa confronts the credible prospect of a second Ethiopia–Eritrea war. Since late 2024, both states have mobilised troops, mechanized units and heavy equipment to their shared frontier of over 1,000 kilometres, exchanged formal diplomatic accusations at the United Nations, and embedded the dispute within an expanding web of regional rivalries linking Egypt, Sudan and the Gulf powers. Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of military encroachment into its northern territories and of channelling arms to insurgent groups, including factions of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and Fano militias, to fracture federal authority. Eritrea, in turn, frames Ethiopia’s increasingly assertive quest for Red Sea access as an existentialist threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022, which ended the catastrophic Tigray conflict, remains incompletely implemented, and TPLF leaders have decried what they describe as a federal blockade and the non-fulfilment of key political and security commitments. This brief analyses the layered drivers of the current escalation and advances sharp, actionable recommendations to avert a war that would devastate civilian populations, destabilise the Red Sea corridor, and set back a decade of fragile regional integration.

Genesis of the Current Escalation

I. The Long Shadow of the 1998–2000 Border War

The contemporary crisis is impossible to understand in isolation from deep historical grievances. The 1998–2000 border war, precipitated by disputes over the contested town of Badme in Tigray, killed an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people and left both nations in a militarised cold war for nearly two decades, with closed borders and frozen relations. The Algiers Agreement of December 2000 established a ceasefire and mandated boundary demarcation through the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), which awarded Badme to Eritrea in 2002. Ethiopia’s refusal to implement the ruling in full became the principal source of subsequent Eritrean grievance and strategic insecurity. The 2018 Jeddah

Declaration, signed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki, formally ended the state of war, reopened embassies and border crossings, and earned Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet it rested on personal diplomacy at the highest level rather than institutionalised cooperation frameworks, leaving the underlying structural antagonisms and grievances unaddressed.

II. The Tigray Conflict and its Unfinished Aftermath

When armed conflict erupted in Tigray in November 2020, Eritrea fought alongside Ethiopian federal forces, perceiving the TPLF, which had dominated Ethiopian politics from 1991 to 2018 and was historically hostile to Asmara, as a common existential enemy. The conflict, which claimed an estimated 600,000 lives and displaced

 @HISS2017
 @Horninstitute

 info@horninstitute.org
 www.horninstitute.org

 +254 735 323 896
 +254 735 323 896

 Durham Road, Kileleshwa
P.O. Box 25632 - 00100
Nairobi – Kenya

HORN
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

millions, ended with the African Union–brokered Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) of 2 November 2022. The CoHA committed the TPLF to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), the formation of an inclusive interim administration, and the restoration of federal constitutional order. In return, the federal government committed to facilitating unhindered humanitarian access, withdrawing non-ENDF forces from Tigray, and addressing the status of the Amhara–Tigray ‘contested areas’ of Wolkait and Raya through constitutional processes.

Three years on, implementation remains incomplete on every substantive front. Disarmament of Tigrayan forces has been partial; Eritrean troops, which entered Ethiopian territory during the war, continue to occupy border areas in defiance of the CoHA’s provisions and calls from the United States and United Nations for full withdrawal. The Supreme Court upheld the National Electoral Board’s refusal to register the TPLF as a legitimate political party – a development that has radicalised segments of Tigrayan political society. The contested territorial areas remain unresolved. TPLF officials have publicly alleged that Addis Ababa is limiting access to basic goods to ‘starve

the people of Tigray’, while clashes between Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF) and federal troops and Amhara militias erupted again in western Tigray in January 2026, with the TDF seizing several contested localities.

III. Ethiopia’s Red Sea Ambitions and Eritrean Threat Perception

The most proximate driver of the current bilateral crisis is Ethiopia’s increasingly public pursuit of maritime access. Since 2023, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has reframed Red Sea access as an ‘existential’ strategic priority for a nation of 126 million people that depends on a single corridor through Djibouti for over 95 per cent of its trade, at an estimated logistical cost of USD 1.5 billion annually. In January 2024, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, leasing a 20-kilometre stretch of coastline in exchange for an equity stake in Ethiopian Airlines and de facto recognition of Somaliland’s independence. In October 2024, addressing parliament, Abiy outlined offers of strategic assets, including stakes in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Ethiopian Airlines, as concessionary incentives for neighbouring coastal states.



Jubilant residents in Mekelle, Ethiopia, mark the arrival of Tigrayan fighters on June 29, 2021. (Photo Credit: NYTimes)

For Asmara, these manoeuvres are not merely commercial ventures but direct threats to Eritrea's *raison d'état*. Eritrea's identity as an independent coastal state was forged through thirty years of armed struggle; any Ethiopian foothold on the Red Sea, and particularly any aspiration toward the port of Assab, the closest Eritrean port to the Ethiopian border, now co-opted by Egyptian military agreements, is perceived as the thin end of an existentialist wedge. In February 2025, Eritrea ordered a nationwide military mobilisation. Ethiopia deployed troops toward the Eritrean border that same month. In October 2025, Addis Ababa formally notified the UN Secretary-General that Eritrea was 'actively preparing for war' and collaborating with the TPLF to 'destabilise and fragment' Ethiopia.

IV. Regional Geopolitical Rivalry

The bilateral crisis has become embedded in a volatile regional subsystem. Following the Somaliland MoU, Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia formed what commentators described as an axis of resistance against Ethiopia, with Egypt agreeing to supply arms to Mogadishu and Egypt's President Sisi visiting Asmara in October 2024. Egypt and Eritrea issued a joint statement in March

In January 2024, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, leasing a 20-kilometre stretch of coastline in exchange for an equity stake in Ethiopian Airlines and de facto recognition of Somaliland's independence

2025 asserting that Red Sea security is the exclusive domain of coastal states.¹⁸ Egypt has since concluded agreements to develop Eritrea's Assab port for Egyptian naval use, inserting a rival strategic actor into Ethiopia's most critical maritime choke point at a moment when Cairo's own relations with Addis Ababa remain frozen over the GERD. The International Crisis Group's February 2026 analysis notes that Ethiopia's perception of a hostile encirclement, comprising Egypt, Eritrea, the Sudanese Armed Forces, and dissident TDF commanders, appears to be pulling Addis Ababa deeper into Sudan's war, including through a reported RSF training camp in Benishangul-Gumuz, a development that further antagonises Asmara.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ethiopia to Pursue Peaceful, Incentive-Based Sea Access

Ethiopia's maritime aspiration is legitimate; its fulfilment must be pursued through diplomacy, not coercion. Addis Ababa should establish a dedicated Sea Access Diplomatic Task Force to design a comprehensive, incentive-based framework for negotiating port access arrangements with Eritrea specifically and coastal neighbours more broadly. The framework should be built on the precedent Abiy himself articulated in parliament in October 2024: the offer of strategic economic co-ownership rather than territorial demands.

Concretely, Ethiopia should table a formal offer to Eritrea of: (a) a structured, long-term concessionary arrangement for preferential commercial use of Assab port, under which Eritrea retains full sovereignty; (b) equity participation for Eritrea in the GERD power generation venture, granting Asmara access to low-cost electricity that would transform its chronically energy-deficient economy; and (c) a minority stake in Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's most profitable carrier, replicating the model successfully offered to Somaliland. Such a package converts Ethiopia's strategic assets into instruments of cooperative interdependence rather than symbols of hegemonic ambition. A land-swap arrangement involving mutually agreed border adjustments could also be explored within a comprehensive bilateral treaty framework, though this requires careful sequencing and broad political legitimation within both states. Ethiopia should simultaneously commission a formal economic study, to be shared publicly, quantifying the shared gains that bilateral port cooperation would generate for both economies.

Recommendation 2: Eritrea to Verifiably Withdraw from Alleged Ethiopian Territories

Eritrea's continued military presence in areas of Ethiopian territory it occupied during the Tigray war is illegal under international law, violates the Pretoria Agreement's explicit provisions, and provides Ethiopia with its most credible

casus belli. Credible reports from Ethiopian military sources, corroborated by diplomatic observers, describe Eritrean troops operating as far south as Mekelle, Adigrat and Zalambessa, deep inside Tigray, in some instances in civilian disguise. The AU High-Level Panel and the UN Security Council should demand, as a matter of urgency, a verifiable, time-bound withdrawal of all Eritrean forces to positions behind the internationally recognised boundary, with compliance monitored by a joint AU–IGAD verification mechanism (see Recommendation 5 below).

Eritrea’s legitimate security interests, particularly its fear of encirclement by a larger, more powerful neighbour, must be addressed through the incentive framework outlined in Recommendation 1, and through the permanent bilateral cooperation mechanism proposed in Recommendation 4. Security through interdependence is a more durable guarantee of Eritrean sovereignty than territorial occupation, which provides only tactical leverage at the cost of strategic isolation and the perpetuation of a conflict economy.

Recommendation 3: Ethiopia to Recommit to the Pretoria Agreement and TPLF’s Political Integration

The incomplete implementation of the Pretoria CoHA is not merely an internal Ethiopian matter, it is a direct driver of the Ethiopia–Eritrea crisis, because Asmara’s alleged cultivation of dissident TPLF factions and its continued border presence are predicated on a strategic calculation that instability in Tigray serves as a useful buffer against Ethiopian federal consolidation. A credibly reunified, economically rehabilitated Tigray with a stake in the federal political order removes that calculus entirely.

The federal government should, as a matter of priority: (a) lift any siege conditions on Tigray and ensure unimpeded humanitarian access, as mandated under Article 9 of the CoHA; (b) re-engage the TPLF in comprehensive dialogue on the unresolved contested areas, convened under AU facilitation, within a clear timeline; (c) advance the DDR



On November 2, 2022, Ethiopia’s federal authorities and Tigray regional leaders reached an agreement to bring an end to two years of devastating conflict. (Photo Credit: Mail & Guardian)

process with credible international monitoring, conditional on parallel Eritrean withdrawal from Ethiopian territory; (d) undertake legislative review of the TPLF's political registration status, enabling the party to contest the next national elections as a component of Tigray's political normalisation; and (e) accelerate transitional justice processes to provide accountability for atrocities committed during the war, a step essential for durable reconciliation between communities.

Recommendation 4: Revitalise a Permanent Ethiopia–Eritrea Cooperation Mechanism

The 2018 Jeddah Declaration demonstrated that the political will for normalisation exists. Its failure to generate durable institutional architecture, leaving cooperation entirely hostage to personal leadership relationships, is precisely what allowed the current collapse. The two governments should, ideally with AU and IGAD facilitation, negotiate a Permanent Bilateral Cooperation Treaty that supersedes and operationalises the 2018 Declaration with binding, institutionalised mechanisms. The treaty should establish: a joint High-Level Ministerial Commission meeting biannually; a Security and Intelligence Coordination Cell with real-time information sharing on cross-border armed groups; a Joint Economic Development Zone in the Assab–Afar border corridor that generates shared commercial incentives for peace; and a standing bilateral dispute resolution panel, preventing any future grievance from escalating to the level of military confrontation. Critically, Eritrea's non-membership of IGAD, which Asmara withdrew from in 2007, in part due to perceived bias toward Ethiopia, must be addressed. A confidence-building dialogue between the IGAD Secretariat and Asmara, potentially with AU or Gulf state facilitation, to explore Eritrea's terms for re-engagement would significantly expand the multilateral space available for conflict prevention in the Horn.

Recommendation 5: IGAD or AU to Deploy a Border Peace Monitoring Force

Given the current level of military mobilisation, the absence of any credible third-party presence on the Ethiopia–Eritrea border represents an acute structural risk. A single incident, a border patrol clash, an IED detonation, or a militia attack attributed to either side, could ignite a conflict that neither government may be able to stop once it begins. The AU Peace and Security Council and IGAD should jointly authorise the deployment of a limited-size, lightly armed Border Peace Monitoring Mission (BPMM), comprising between 300 and 500 military observers, to be stationed at key flashpoints along the shared frontier with a clear mandate to: monitor and report on troop movements and cross-border incidents in real time; provide an early warning tripwire that raises the political cost of any unilateral escalatory action; and facilitate de-escalation communications between the two military commands.

The 1991 precedent of the UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which successfully monitored the ceasefire following the first border war with approximately 4,200 personnel, demonstrates that international monitoring can stabilise even deeply adversarial relationships. A more modest, regionally owned successor mission is both feasible and urgently needed. Given Eritrea's known scepticism of IGAD, the deployment architecture should be designed collaboratively and may need to be convened under AU rather than IGAD authority, with a neutral African lead state, South Africa, Kenya or Rwanda, commanding the mission to ensure perceived impartiality.



The AU Peace and Security Council and IGAD should jointly authorise the deployment of a limited-size, lightly armed Border Peace Monitoring Mission (BPMM), comprising between 300 and 500 military observers, to be stationed at key flashpoints along the shared frontier

Conclusion

War between Ethiopia and Eritrea is not inevitable. But the structural conditions — mobilised armies, hardened diplomatic positions, proxy entanglements, and an expanding regional architecture of competing alliances — mean that miscalculation is a realistic, near-term danger. The recommendations advanced here are designed as an integrated package: diplomatic incentives address the root causes of Eritrean threat perception; verified territorial withdrawal removes Ethiopia's most legitimate grievance; recommitment to the Pretoria Agreement eliminates the proxy dynamic that Eritrea has exploited; a permanent bilateral mechanism replaces personalised diplomacy with institutional durability; and an international monitoring presence reduces the risk of accidental escalation while these processes unfold.

The Horn of Africa has already endured the Tigray war — one of the deadliest conflicts of the twenty-first century. The region, its neighbours, and the international community cannot afford a sequel. The decisions taken in the coming weeks and months will determine whether the 2018 peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea can be reclaimed and institutionalised, or whether the Horn descends once again into a war from which recovery will take a generation.

About the Writer

Edmond Pamba

Edmond Pamba is the Ag. Associate Director, Research, Innovation and Development at the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from Maseno University and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in International Relations at Mount Kenya University. His research focuses on the intersections of security, governance, geopolitics, violent extremism, terrorism, conflict, and peace in the Horn of Africa. Edmond has authored and co-authored numerous book chapters, conference papers, and journal articles, contributing to critical discussions on peace and security in the region. His recent publications include two book chapters in *The Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa* and a chapter in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Kenya*.

John can be reached at edmondjohn01@gmail.com
