The Horn of Africa and Renewed Tensions Between Ethiopia and Eritrea: One Conflict Too Many?

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Brussels, 5 October 2026. The statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union is clear: escalating violence in Ethiopia and rising tensions with Eritrea could trigger an even broader regional conflict. A month later, the warning has taken on greater urgency. Since then, diplomatic ties have indeed been severed, and rival accusations have already reached the UN Security Council.

It is precisely those ongoing developments that this article will seek to analyse. By examining the emerging tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the other conflicts already unfolding across the region and the strategic interests at stake to ask: could this be one conflict too many for the Horn of Africa?

From rapprochement to rupture

Explaining the history between Ethiopia and Eritrea would require far more than a single article to recount. The focus here is on the most significant developments, which have brought the two neighbours from rapprochement to renewed confrontation.

In 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement after two decades of hostility following their 1998-2000 border war. The rapprochement went far enough for Eritrean troops to fight alongside Ethiopia's federal forces during the 2020-2022 Tigray war. Yet that cooperation did not lay the foundations for lasting peace. As the 2022 Pretoria's agreement has come under strain, and fighting has returned to Tigray. Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access has become another source of tension. For landlocked Ethiopia, reliable access to a port is a priority. For Eritrea, its neighbour's ambition raises concerns over control of its sovereignty over the coastline.

By October, the deterioration in relations had taken a diplomatic turn: Ethiopia had ordered the closure of its embassy in Asmara and expelled ten Eritrean diplomats. Addis Ababa alleged Eritrean incursions and support for armed groups. Asmara rejected those allegations, accusing Ethiopia in turn of preparing aggression to secure access to the sea.

A region already unstable

A war between Ethiopia and Eritrea would add another front to an already unstable region.

To the west, Sudan's civil war has pitted the national army against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces since April 2023. It has displaced millions devastated essential services and driven civilians across borders, placing further pressure on neighbouring countries.

To the east, Somalia continues to confront Al-Shabaab's insurgency, while drought and prolonged conflict deepen humanitarian needs. The closure of the UN political mission in October 2026 marks a further transition for a country whose security remains fragile.

Beyond these conflicts, disputes over sovereignty and shared resources create further fault lines. Ethiopia's 2024 agreement with Somaliland over sea access strained relations with Mogadishu prompting Turkish-led mediation. Meanwhile, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam remains a source of disagreement with Egypt and Sudan over Nile waters. Together, these disputes add to the region's vulnerability to further instability.

Furthermore, the Horn's vulnerability cannot be understood without considering its position along the Red Sea. Eritrea faces Yemen across a vital trade corridor linking the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal through Bab el-Mandeb. With Houthi attacks already threatening commercial shipping, another conflict along its African shores could further destabilize a route urgently in need of security and stability.

Keeping the dispute from becoming a war

Regional experts warn that a single spark could turn the confrontation between Ethiopia and Eritrea into a wider conflict, drawing in neighbours already facing crises of their own.

The immediate priorities are therefore to prevent further escalation, uphold mutual respect for sovereignty and restore diplomatic ties. International partners could press both governments towards de-esclation, while African Union-led mediation could revive talks between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, whose position in the tensions between Addis Ababa and Asmara makes it central to the crisis.

Diplomacy must prevail.

The Horn's strategic position makes, indeed, its stability a concern far beyond the region. For the European Union, Operation ASPIDES, reflects for example the importance of protecting commercial shipping along the Red Sea. China's military support base and infrastructure investments in Djibouti likewise demonstrate its strategic interests in this maritime corridor. Although their priorities differ, both have an interest in maintaining secure trade routes and preventing further regional instability. These overlapping interests should encourage international partners to support diplomatic efforts and use their influence to prevent escalation. After the devastation of the Tigray war, another conflict would displace even more civilians, deepen regional instability and threaten Red Sea security.

Dialogue and diplomacy should therefore remain central addressing Ethiopia's need for reliable port access while respecting Eritrea's sovereignty. They are essential to prevent a war that would be one too many for a region in urgent need of lasting peace.