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WEBINAR

RIISING RISKS OF CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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PANEL

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FELTMAN: Welcome, everyone, to this virtual panel on the rising risk of conflict in the Horn of Africa. I'm Jeffrey Feltman. I am the John C. Whitehead visiting fellow in international diplomacy and the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. I want to thank everyone who signed on to participate and also, of course, thank our panelists. I'm really delighted for the interest being shown in the strategic area of the world.

This is, as we all know, this part of the world has had some exciting transitions back in Ethiopia in 2018, in Sudan next door in 2019. And these captured the world's imagination. There was a historic reconciliation between Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in 2019, but the promises of these developments have remained sort of unfulfilled. You have continued Egyptian-Ethiopian tensions that are exacerbated over disputes over the Nile, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki were partners in the Tigrayan War that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths from 2020 to 2022. And then, again, next door to the Horn, Sudan's civil war broke out in April 2023, creating the world's largest hunger and displacement crisis with an impact, obviously, on the Horn of Africa and with Eritrea and Ethiopia basically backing opposing sides. Meanwhile, Somalia's push against al-Shabab shows little signs of progress, and across the Red Sea, the Houthis in Yemen add to the instability. Add to all of this what's appear to be dangerously escalating tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Should a military conflict erupt between Ethiopia, and Eritrea, without question, just as in Sudan, outsiders will jump in on opposing sides, exacerbating the conflict, making it worse for the population of the Horn.

We're fortunate to have with us today four experts who can dissect the politics, the security in the region, who understand the leaders, understand the issues. So I'd like to introduce briefly Tsedale Lemma, who is an Ethiopian journalist and political analyst. She was the founder and former editor-in-chief of the Addis Standard, one of Ethiopia's most influential independent news outlets. And she's a frequent speaker on democracy, rule of law, politics, the security dimensions of the Horn of Africa and she frequently briefs diplomats and others on the complex situation inside Ethiopia. Her work has been published in a number of notable international media. Susan Stigant is another Horn of Africa expert. She's the former director of the Africa program at the U.S. Institute for Peace. She did that for 13 years and directed the USIP's Red Sea study group. She has supported efforts to deescalate violence. She's advised on national dialogs and political transitions, worked with women to strengthen their role in decision-making. And previously, she was the National Democratic Institute's director for its, for NDI's South Sudan office. Murithi Mutiga is the Africa director in the International Crisis Group. And he has over two decades working on covering the continent in a number of different roles. And he currently leads teams that are working on conflict resolution and prevention in the Horn of Africa, in the Great Lakes area, in the Sahel and West and East Africa. He previously worked for a number of publications covering Africa. And his research activity includes looking at the Nile Basin, which, of course, is the cause of one of the tensions in the Horn of Africa. And finally, Joshua Meservy is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and he studies great power competition in Africa, as well as African geopolitics and counterterrorism. He's a returned Peace Corps volunteer having served in the Peace Corps in Zambia and also worked for an NGO based in Kenya. He has worked at the U.S. Special, U.S. Army Special Operations Command at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, and as a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, he's frequently been requested by Congress to testify on Africa-related issues, and like the other panelists, is often quoted in international print and visual media.

So let's get started. I want to start with Tsedale Lemma, as I said, who's the founder and former editor-in-chief of the Addis Standard. Tsedale, with your perspective in the region, what happened? Can you explain what happened between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki after their historic reconciliation in 2019, after their partnership in the Tigray War? What happened between them and how worried should we be about the tensions between the two men and the two countries?

LEMMA: Thank you, Ambassador Feltman. I'm honored to be in the company of such stellar experts on the matter. To begin with your question, I think I'd like to correct whether we should

frame what happened between Abiy, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki as a reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It was not. And that is precisely where the problem that we are looking at today begins. The rapprochement that was signed between the two leaders, I must emphasize that it is between the two leaders in Saudi Arabia, was not really a reconciliation. It was a sort of a military pact that the two men have signed against a common enemy of the TPLF, which is the Tigray, the ruling political party in the Tigray regional state in the north of Ethiopia. We really don't know, the Ethiopian people don't know what was the details of what was signed and hence why I am hesitating to call it a reconciliation to end the 20 years, no war, no peace status quo. It was rather a war alliance that as we have seen in the war unfolding, in the war of the two years in the Tigray region. We don't know what were the details in this agreement that the two men signed. The Ethiopian parliament never ratified the agreement. The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have any say on that, on how the prime minister wanted to, although initially he accepted the 2002 border ruling of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, we don't know details of what he meant by accepting the boundary commission's decision. And we don't know how the two started to end that, no war, no peace status. And so that is where the problem begins.

And once this war alliance came to an abrupt end with the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in November of 2022, the two starting to have differences over how the war ended because what brought them together was the war itself and how it clearly left a rift between the two men. And Isaias Afwerki did not hide his disappointment in how the Pretoria Agreement was signed. He actually called it an abortion of the mission that he had, which turned out to be an annihilation of the TPLF, a long-term adversary of the Eritrean regime. But he was clearly not happy about it. And a year after that, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in October of 2023, announced his ambition to get a direct access to the Red Sea. So that rift is now becoming very visible. And the way and the manner in which the prime minister framed Ethiopia's ambition to access to the sea, was not as it is widely being reported in many places, is not just access to the port, but Ethiopia's or his ambition to have a military presence in the Red Sea. This is something that we often miss because it's not just a port access that the prime minister outlined, it was also an access to a navy presence there, which has then drawn into different criticisms from Egypt to, to Somalia and Djibouti itself and all the regions in the Horn of Africa. And that has really opened the rift that we were looking at since the signing of the Pretoria Agreement.

So what we are seeing today is an Ethiopian government that is really determined to have access to the Red Sea or to the sea, not just port diversification, but also a presence, a navy presence. And that has turned the rhetoric on the Ethiopian side into a nationalist rhetoric that is framing it now, having this access as a national interest. And this did not really sit well with Eritrea's dictator, Isaias Afwerki, because they understood that it meant Ethiopia is planning to forcibly annex Assab, because this rhetoric are also laced with questioning of Eritrea's sovereignty, not just Ethiopia's need to access the Red Sea, but also a questioning of Ethiopia's, sorry, Eritrea's sovereignty and the casting of a shadow over how Eritrea become an independent state. The rhetoric is wide in the national media, but also outsourced to social media algorithms by the regime supporters who are now really openly questioning whether Eritrea as a state has the right to exist. This coupled with Eritrea's, you know, Isaias Afwerki's disappointment that the Pretoria Agreement did not fulfill his mission of not only annihilating the TPLF, but from the conduct of the war and the different reports that were documented, the atrocities committed by Eritreans, it was far more than, you now, the erasure of the TPLF. It was the erasure of Tigray as a political community and its cultural identity from the reports of the war. And so he's there, a disappointed leader from from Asmara and a very ambitious leader from Ethiopia who had came together with no principled approach to how to end the stalled peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea but how to join armies together to eliminate a common enemy. So this is a relationship that is not based on principles that has come to an abrupt end without satisfying the Eritrean leader and that has also created this ambitious stride by the Ethiopian leader to have access to the Red Sea. This is what happened. So what we're looking at now is two men who are fighting over, who framed their own existence against each other's existence. And this is the unfolding of the current tension between the two countries, as I see it, ambassador.

FELTMAN: Thanks very much. A very good overview and correction of my reconciliation term, which I used in the opening. I've also failed as a moderator because I forgot to tell those participating, those who signed in, that you can submit questions. We will go through, have a conversation among the panelists, and in the last 15 minutes or so, we will take questions. There were some that were submitted in advance I have in front of me. And also viewers can submit questions by emailing events at brookings.edu or via X, which is at BrookingsFP at BrookingsFP using the hashtag horn security 2025.

Susan, after that sobering introduction from Tsedale Lemma, let me turn to you and just ask sort of basic question. You've followed the Horn of Africa for years. You've worked there, you've worked on conflict prevention and resolution in the area. And I'm just wondering, what keeps you up at night? What worries you about the Horn right now? What should all of us be focused on and how likely do you see expanded conflicts?

STIGANT: Thanks, Jeff. I think it's a region that could keep all of us rather, rather sleepless. I think at first, if we look at the degree of human suffering that is taking place in the region, it's just astounding. You talked about Sudan in your opening. Sudan is the world's largest displacement crisis, over 12 million people already displaced. A horrendous hunger crisis, including famine. Horrible displacement within Ethiopia itself, ongoing violence and conflict. South Sudan seems to be turning into an even greater humanitarian risk and compounded by the major cuts to humanitarian assistance and USAID funding. I think we see a region and a region of people who are really suffering and in pain. But I think what worries me even more is that as we as we look at the escalation between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as we look and see the re-emergence of proxies, this game of governments or regimes and political opposition playing off against each other's neighbors is something that was very familiar in the Horn of Africa and East Africa leading into the 1990s. And we've had a decade or so, I think, where a lot of that was settled, maybe not in a sustainable and peaceful resolution, but over the last five years, we've seen this re-emergence where governments are funding and supporting political oppositions in neighboring states to advance their own political interests. And to me, this is worrying because it means that when we talk about a country, we can't just talk about the country and a government. We have to be thinking about where their political security interests and calculations reach in neighboring states. The second part of this that really keeps me up at night is this notion of seeing the clouds of war gathering and having watched this leading into the war in Tigray, leading into war in Sudan, our ability to actually take steps to de-escalate and to shift the conversation away from parties who start to talk like war is inevitable to a framing and a narrative where individual leaders have the capability who have the responsibility to take decisions to actually deescalate. And I worry that we're getting into a situation where people have almost convinced themselves that their only pathway out is through violence. And that creates its own logic and is very difficult to pull back. And I think this is the real challenge in front of all of us who care about the region and the diplomats and the leaders across the region.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Susan. Of course, that phenomenon that you point out, that people start to think that war is inevitable, that violence is the only means to proceed, is often fueled by false narratives in social media and elsewhere, when in fact, perhaps leaders would have an interest in pulling back, but then there becomes a populist movement behind the violence because of social media. Let me turn to Joshua Meservey Joshua, you look at the great power politics inside in Africa. And there's a lot of questions that came in ahead of time that touch on this. And I'm wondering if you can outline for all of us why the U.S. should care. What are our interests in the region? And if the current administration is sort of reviewing U. S. global commitments, what's important for the region we're discussing? And what are some of the other actors up to?

MESERVEY: Yeah, thank you, ambassador, for having me on, and to Brookings for hosting this. So why should the U.S. care? Some of these are fairly obvious points, I think, but I'll recite them anyways, and then maybe some are less well-known. But when you look at a map of this region, the strategic position of East Africa, the Horn, is unavoidable. It sits on a global shipping choke point, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This region is right across the, either the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden from places like Yemen, where in your, in your opening remarks, you reference the Houthis,

who have been a real source of, of concern and, and instability recently, but Yemen traditionally has been a very difficult place, and including for the United States. So this region is proximate to Yemen, to Saudi Arabia, a very important global oil producer, close ally of the United States. It has an immense Indian Ocean coastline, well over 3,000 miles of Indian Ocean coastline. Indian Ocean, also a very strategic theater, both the United States, but other countries like India, of course, and China, and et cetera.

And then, specific to the U.S., in this region, our competitors do have a very strong presence. So Djibouti, which is the only viable port right now in the whole region, other than Berbera in Somaliland, but that's vastly underutilized, that is heavily dominated by Chinese state-owned enterprises. Some of the terminals within that port built by Chinese SOEs and are run and managed by them. More broadly, China has built a lot of Djibouti's infrastructure, Djibouti's heavily in debt to the PRC. Then we can move to the East and look at Eritrea. Also has a quite close relationship with China. President Isaias Afwerki is a longtime admirer of Mao Zedong. He is, he was actually trained in China. He visits, including recently to Beijing. And then Chinese companies have controlling stakes in all four of, or the only four, I should say, of developed mines in the country. So, and then we can also talk about Russia's activity there very recently, late last year. A naval port call was conducted by a Russian, several Russian ships and senior Russian naval official visited, including both Asmara and Assab. So and again, we can go down the coastline, Tanzania, Kenya, both very strongly influenced by by China, senior diplomatic visits between these countries and China on. On a regular basis, President Ruto of Kenya was just in Beijing and gave remarks to the effect that Kenya and China are co-architects of the new global order. So again, from an American perspective, there's a lot of presence of actors that are problematic for the U.S., and I didn't even discuss Iran or some of these others.

And then this region, the Red Sea region, has one of, if not the densest concentration of undersea cables in the whole world. These are cables, of course, that carry information, essentially, that we all access via the internet and are critical to the global communications infrastructure. Ethiopia is the diplomatic capital of Africa. It's the seat of the African Union, of course. And this also happens to be the second most populous country in Africa. If you include Sudan in East Africa, then six of the 10 most populous African countries are in this region. So immense populations, several of the fastest growing economic countries are in the region. Again, Ethiopia would be on the top of that list. Host of reasons here why this region is really important. And for me, sort of the bottom line for the Trump administration on this should be, I would think, is that if Ethiopia and Eritrea, let's say, go to war, it will make it virtually impossible for the administration to achieve almost anything in that region. It would be so entirely disruptive that any plans the administration has, diplomatic, commercial, it doesn't matter; it would just make it so much more intensely difficult just because of the ripple effects that such a conflict would have. So that is obviously a reflection of the region's strategic importance to the United States, but it's also strategically important to the world.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Joshua. Joshua, you mentioned, you talked a lot about China in this region. What about, and you also touched on Russia, what about countries that are friendlier to the United States, like Turkey or the Gulf States, what roles are they playing in this region?

MESERVEY: Very important. I would argue some of these sort of middle powers or however you want to categorize them have more influence than the United States does. So if we look at Sudan, of course, which probably we'll discuss a bit more later on, the United Arab Emirates, the UAE, is the primary supporter of the RSF, which is fighting the Sudanese armed forces and investing an immense amount of money and materiel into that conflict. But more broadly, the UAE has made huge investments, including significant bailouts of the Ethiopian central bank, for instance, to a tune of billions, with a b, of dollars within the last five, six, seven years all around the region. So very, very strong presence. Turkey, also another major player in Somalia especially. President Erdogan has taken a keen interest in Somalia. He was the very first foreign leader to visit the country when it was experiencing its most recent famine. And Turkey has its largest embassy in the world, is in Mogadishu. I've visited it, it's huge and beautiful. It has a military base in Mogadishu, Turkish companies run the Mogadishu seaport and airport. So very heavily invested,

and, and both on the economic side, but also the security side, we've seen them sending some troops and some more weaponry to try to fight Shabab. They also have big investments in, in, again, Sudan, or excuse me, Ethiopia. And then Saudi Arabia, Qatar, both significant investments throughout the region. So, it's unsurprising given the history and the proximity, the history of relations between this region and the Middle East and the proximity to the Middle East. But yeah, we have to account for these middle powers as well when we're talking about the region.

FELTMAN: And that reminds me of Susan Stigant's Red Sea study group that she hosted at USIP. I was part of an early iteration of that in that the American bureaucracy, foreign policy and security apparatus, tend to stovepipe between Africa and the Middle East. And you've just pointed out, Joshua, in your comments why we have to move beyond that stovepiping when we're looking for ways to prevent or resolve conflict. Murithi, let me turn to you, if I may. Joshua just gave us a very good primer on the outsiders, what the outsiders are doing, whether they're friendly to the United States, like the Gulf countries and Turkey, or whether they are rivals, like China and Russia. But you're based in Nairobi, and you have a long experience watching East Africa and the Horn. Can you give us a regional perspective? How do the regional leaders see the challenges in the Horn. Are they as concerned about the potential for military conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea as I think some of the outside observers are? And also, Joshua touched on this, but if you could bring Somalia into the discussion as well, so we don't neglect one key country in the Horn of Africa. So, over to you, Murithi. And thank you again for joining us.

MUTIGA: Yeah, no, thanks, ambassador. I think this is really timely. So thanks, thanks for bringing us together. For sure, there's a lot of concern. And I'll just say a couple of things. One is that this won't be a neat or quick war if it occurs. It's really important to try and emphasize the need for prevention because there's always the risk of overconfidence on the part of belligerents. I remember when the war in Sudan broke out, the parties told us, oh, we'll win very quickly, we'll achieve a swift victory. Unfortunately, if this occurs, it'll be very costly, it'll be very, very painful, not just for the belligerents but also for the region. So you mentioned Somalia and the interconnections within the region are really concerning. So for example, in recent time, we've heard of some incipient contact between the Houthi in Yemen and al-Shabab in Somalia. It's unclear whether this is a strategic partnership or much more tactical. If the region gets deeper and deeper into conflict, there's always the risk that these non-state actors will continue and intensify their engagement, which would be a major challenge for the whole region.

Picking up from where Josh left, I think that essentially what you have in Sudan is an ugly term, it's an internationalized civil war. And if then Ethiopia and Eritrea come to blows, you mentioned at the start, ambassador, that essentially they, Asmara and Addis, appear to support different sides. But they have not really gone all in, in the way that some had feared at the beginning of the war. The risk now is that you end up connecting these various conflict systems, which obviously already implicate the Sahel. Now Sudan, torn apart by this very brutal and devastating war. And then if you bring in Ethiopia and Eritrea, there's always the risk that you end up having those interconnections. And the third thing I'd mention is that the proxy dimension is very worrisome. And we have seen, for example, elevated tensions between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, to a certain degree, Egypt also banding together with Saudi Arabia, and the risk is that you have intensified proxy conflict. So we have to really, as we think about prevention, we have to see this not as a local quarrel, somewhere in north East Africa, I think we really have to see it as a major threat to international peace and security.

And then I'll mention briefly also Djibouti, because Ethiopia-Djibouti relations are not on a very even keel. We know that if war breaks out, partly it will be fought on land belonging to the Afars who straddle the border between Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. So this could have destabilizing consequences in a time when there's a quiet succession debate unfolding in Djibouti. And then to close, I think the region really just can't afford another crisis, meaning refugee outflows, meaning that you have elevated tensions among the various countries, meaning that weaken what remains of the multilateral frameworks within the region. So I think that really we all have to pay attention to the equation and importance of trying to engage in preventive diplomacy.

FELTMAN: Murithi, I'm haunted by Tsedale Lemma's opening remarks where she talks about how it becomes almost a sense that war is inevitable. But war is not inevitable. One needs to work on prevention. And I was wondering, do you see any efforts by the regional organization, African Union, or the subregional organization, IGAD, in trying to lower some of the tensions that you've described between, what is between Addis and Asmara, between Djibouti and Ethiopia, are there regional or sub-regional efforts try to address these and make sure that war is not inevitable?

MUTIGA: Yes, so I think it's the worst kept secret, unfortunately, that the African Union is really limping. You know, it was very striking looking at the mediation by the Qataris initially and also the Americans that the very first statement the African Union chairperson made was to welcome the Qatari intervention in the Great Lakes. The African Union, I obviously have some sympathy because it's true that member states have not really donated sovereignty to the organization. It's also true that they struggle when major member states are invoked, but that is not really an excuse for the inaction. You have to, when you look at the constitutive act of the African Union, peace and security ranks number one among its objects. And I don't think it's doing enough. I know that there are constraints, but it could, for example, appoint an envoy to shuttle between the various parties. I think it could engage in much more entrepreneurial, quiet diplomacy. I don't really see IGAD being very successful on this file for many reasons, partly because Ethiopia is such an important member state of IGAD, partly also because trust runs very low among member states. But unfortunately, it's true that the African Union really hasn't, doesn't seem to be fit for purpose. It doesn't seem to rise to the occasion. But despite all the constraints, despite the fact that the chairperson comes from Djibouti, which makes it quite complicated, I think at this stage, it would make sense to appoint a set of envoys or some other eminent Africans to try and pass messages between the two countries. I totally hear what Tsedale said, which is to the extent that unfortunately, we live in a world where violence is often a first resort, where, you know, war sometimes is not a bar to power consolidation, but you know the risks are really enormous. So I agree with you, ambassador, that it can be prevented, it should be prevented and regional powers need to do much more.

FELTMAN: Thanks. Tsedale, let me go back to you since we've been referring to your opening comments. I mean, you mentioned that Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea, each sees the other now as almost an existential threat. So if the risks of war are real and the logic is each sees the other as an existential threat, where are the off-ramps? I mean, what can people do to try to persuade them to avoid war at all costs? I'm wondering who has the leverage, what is it? And we had a question that came in in advance from someone who signed up for this about, is mediation even possible at this point? If this is the attitude, what would mediation look like to try and create an off-ramp from the escalating tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea?

LEMMA: Thank you, ambassador. If a war is a real possibility, which I think we all, even if we're not publicly admitting it, but we're nervously watching that space, what can be done to prevent it? I think if we are serious about preventing a renewed war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which is going to suck not only the rest of the Horn of African countries, but Tigray, a region that is yet to recover from the devastation of the two-year war, the focus then must be from managing the symptoms to addressing the source. That source lies, as I said in my response to your first question, the source lies in what exactly were agreed between Isaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. We need to look, you know, past the Tigray. The current trajectory that we are looking at is the rhetoric that is wrapping the cause and the root cause as such of the war, the possibility of war breaking up, parking it in Mekele, in Tigray. I think we need to look at Addis Ababa and Asmara. And most importantly, we have to really ask for the declassification of the agreement that was signed between the two men. The way in which Ethiopia is framing its access to the Red Sea or its access to sea is in such a way that it is a natural way for Ethiopia to claim access to the sea and some diplomatic sources say that there was initially an agreement between President Isaias and Abiy Ahmed for Ethiopia to get access to to the Red Sea through Assab and Massawa ports. And there were some activities that were with the finance of the UAE to rebuild the Assab port to give access to Ethiopia, to give Ethiopia access to the Red Sea. But we don't know if

this was an agreement codified between the two leaders when they signed this agreement in Saudi Arabia.

Besides that, I think we need to also look into the governing style of the two men, which is that, you know, Prime Minister Abiy has this increasing tendency of authoritarian centralization. You know, persecution of dissenting, even a meaningful conversation right now, and this total erasure of Tigray from the space as if it is not going to be the main player or sucked into a renewed conflict between the two has to be looked very, very carefully. And Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki's tendency of, you know, causing gap to some dissenting voices in the Tigray region with the same approach that he did approach the prime minister in 2018, which is transactionalism and a tactical alliance that has to be looked into as well. I think the international community must also look beyond criminalizing whatever is happening now or the rumored normalization between a fraction of the TPLF and the Asmara region and look into how can that be normalized with the inclusion of Addis Ababa in the center. Because you cannot continue keeping the two borders, which Tigray and Eritrea, which are sharing the largest borders, at this sort of like a taboo relationship and giving way to an unprincipled relationship between, between Tigrayan military factions and Isaias Afwerki, which is clearly interested in getting rid of Abiy. And that is then feeding into the rhetoric in Addis Ababa that the relationship between the two is what is causing the preparation for war between Addis and Asmara. We must look into that. And we have to hold into account the relation between Abiy, Prime Minister Abiy and Isaias Afwerki to return back into normalcy. And for that to happen, we must look back to 2018, as I said.

And if it's also to be prevented now, this dangerous alliance that Addis is using to ramp up its rhetoric and to rile up a base for war preparation must be really looked into very carefully. You know, why is Tigray, a faction of the Tigrayan military elite looking into, or you know into these dangerous alliances with Asmara? Or why is Asmara looking into these kind of transactional relations with the military leaders leaders in Addis, and that would take us to look into what has happened in the war in the Tigray region and how the political infrastructure in the Tigray regime collapsed, and how transactional political arrangements have become the hot currency, so to say, that was introduced into the body policy of not only of Ethiopia, but throughout the Horn of Africa, as Susan said. So without looking into those elements, it's very, very difficult to avoid a relapse into conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and it is very difficult to avoid Tigray being sucked into this war. Not only Tigray, but the proxies that Susan has explained, you know, Sudan will not be looking idly by, Egypt will not look idly by. They have already taken sides into that. And it is the silence of the international community, but also the instruments within the African Union, and the Peace and Security Commission of the African Union. The silence, the deafening silence from IGAD, the original instruments. There are diplomatic groups to be deployed, there are instruments to be leveraged, but there has to be looked into the cause of it rather than the symptom of it. I think if we're not doing that we're now going to be preventing the relapse into conflict between these two countries.

FELTMAN: Just a quick follow-up, what is the leverage that one has? You mentioned that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia has an increasingly centralized approach to authority. Well, I would say that Isaias Afwerki has mastered the centralized approach. And what's the leverage that one has on Eritrea to pull back? I think for many of us, Eritrea remains a big question mark, given its very unique political economic system of where the leverage is.

LEMMA: I don't think there's much leverage that one can place in the doorsteps of Isaias Afwerki. He has survived sanctions for decades and he doesn't have that pressure of having a population of 120 or 130 million. And he has mastered interference in many conflicts in the Horn of Africa in the past. And evaded even international sanctions, there is not much leverage to be played that the international community can put. I think when it comes to leveraging that, also Saudi Arabia could be one very important aspect and also Egypt, that Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia have been forming some sort of alliances ostensibly against Ethiopia. So there are proxy leverages to be made there, if not direct leverages. And I think of the middle powers, you know, Turkey and the UAE, which have been in one way or another participated in the war by supporting the, you know Prime

Minister Abiy's regime, can also be engaged diplomatically to have influence over Isaias Afwerki. But there is not much to be done when it comes to leveraging Isaias Afwerki, but there's so much to be done when it comes to leveraging Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, rather, you know, with a diplomatic pressure to be applied. I think the presence of the African Union on the doorsteps of the prime ministers of Ethiopia there, it could be one of the instruments that could be pulled. But the African Union is not only silent in this, but they were also, have taken sides during the war. And I don't know how much of a diplomatic instrument the African Union is left to be, in terms of leveraging Isaias Afwerki when it comes to that. So not much to be done, unfortunately, but with Abiy, there is a lot of leveraging to be put.

FELTMAN: Thanks. Susan, back to you, if I may. Could you talk about the other parts of Ethiopia? Brief us a bit on what's happening in Oromia, in Amhara. And what does this say about the integrity of the state? Does it, do conflicts there, do they affect the likelihood of an external war with Eritrea? Does it provide openings for, let's say the bad actors like al-Shabab or others to have inroads inside, inside Ethiopia? So share with us your perspective on the landscape of, of Ethiopia beyond Tigray.

STIGANT: Yes. I mean, when we talked initially about the reconciliation or the deal that was made between Ethiopia and Eritrea, this came on the heels of a political transition in Ethiopia that was incredibly significant when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power and subsequently ran and was elected in national level elections. And I think while there have been a number of important changes since he's come to power, there have been a number, there are many, many political questions that are left unanswered. And many of those political questions continue to be litigated through the use of violence. So in Oromia, there has been a longstanding violent conflict between the federal government and various Oromo entities and organizations. And that fight has had ebbs and flows, and I think particularly faced a very difficult moment following the end of the Tigray war, when I think the government took away the message that the war had worked for them in Tigray, which led to a much stronger approach and heavy-handed approach in Oromia. So that's one that remains quite unsure. And I think many people wonder where will the Oromo Liberation Army, for example, or other Oromo opposition entities, where would they fall if a war started between Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly one that pulled Tigrayans. The other major escalation and really horrendous violence is in the Amhara region in Ethiopia where there is this contested question about what is the role of Amhara in the broader political project of Ethiopia itself? How does it fit? And this has led to a massive mobilization, terrible violence, and to the extent where the federal government, I think, is really unable to access and to hold space, deliver basic services, or even try to do so. And there's been quite a bit of research looking at the ways that Asmara is fanning and building relationship with the Fano, armed Amhara groups. So this question about what happens between Ethiopia and Eritrea, I think, incredibly important, but the overall settlement of what does the Ethiopian state look like going forward, I think, as you hinted to in your question, this is really still under negotiation. And in my mind, the question is, is there a moment where Ethiopia's leaders will decide that they can do this through dialogue, through negotiation, and where violence is essentially taken off the table as a legitimate means to contest political power? And it's not there yet.

FELTMAN: Thanks. I'm going to switch panelists to some of the questions that have come in online either before or during this session. And Joshua, let me start with you. There are several questions about the U.S. role. One of the question that came in in advance described the U.S. engagement in Africa as episodic and was questioning whether there's a coherent framework to try to empower local actors when, when the U.S. is absent. And we've seen, of course, reports that Massad Boulos, who's the administration's special advisor in Africa, has been active. We saw in terms of the DRC-Rwanda agreement that was signed in Washington recently by the foreign ministers. And I'm wondering, what would you advise the Trump administration to do in terms of the issues that we've been discussing this morning?

MESERVEY: Yeah, well, I think on Addis Asmara attention specifically. So first of all, as we've been discussing, it's very likely that that both Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki see this as an

existential struggle. If those are the stakes, it is going to be extraordinarily difficult for an outside actor to talk either of them off the ledge, so to speak. I think those were the stakes during the Tigray war, when the TPLF saw Addis as an existential threat and vice versa, and it meant that all diplomatic initiatives were essentially dead on arrival. But notwithstanding that caveat, I think a key thing is somewhat simple, which would be the United States should communicate very clearly to both sides that it is watching what is happening here and that it strongly disapproves of it and that they should not try to head into a war.

Then I think the U.S. should approach the other countries. We talked about the outside actors that already have influence in both these countries and would almost certainly involve themselves in any sort of war. The U.S. should go to all of them with the same message: we need to band together and send a unified message that such a conflict is unacceptable, we are noticing what is going on and get a real firm commitment from every one of those countries to send that message to each of their partners, whether it be Asmara or Addis and communicate that. Then I do think the U.S. has to think about what role it can play to address the legitimate security concerns that both sides have. This is almost a classic security dilemma. Eritrea believes that it may well be invaded by Ethiopia. Ethiopia has its grievances about Eritrean forces that are inside of Ethiopia, in Tigray specifically, beyond the bounds of the territory that was granted to Eritrea by the border commission. So maybe one way is for the U.S. to encourage Ethiopia to revive this MOU that it had with Somaliland that granted, it was a deal granting access to Berbera, including a naval base. Now, perhaps that wouldn't satisfy all of the prime minister's ambitions. We don't know how extensive those are. It may well be that he wants to revive, you know, an Ethiopian empire and thinks that Asmara, or Assab is indispensable to that project. But, you know, Berbera could be a genuine alternative and perhaps the least disruptive way to go about relieving some of the tensions that have arisen because of Prime Minister Abiy's rhetoric around getting access to the sea. And then I think you know, try to get a firm commitment from the Ethiopians to fully implement the border commission. And then, I don't know how you do this, but the U.S. would have to think again in concert with local partners, regional partners, multilateral organizations, how do you address Eritrean meddling in places like Amhara, Afar, Tigray, where they have, in the case of Amhara and Tigray, well, in case of all three, they've almost certainly armed and trained and probably sent some other types of support to armed forces within those regions. So very, very difficult, but it has to be part of the problem. It is a key Ethiopian grievance.

And then, you know, very briefly, maybe, on Sudan. It's, there are some similarities here where you have outside actors playing a very negative role. And I think the U.S. probably uniquely is positioned to go to all of those actors and say, look, this has to stop and it's serving no one and hurting everybody. Key to this would be the UAE. It needs some sort of face-saving off-ramp from its support for the RSF, because it's so heavily invested, I don't think it can sustain the reputational damage right now of just walking away empty-handed from the RSF. But it's important to understand that Burhan and Hemedti are the primary and decisive causes of the violence in Sudan. So even addressing the external factors won't address the key problems within Sudan that led to the violence. And fundamentally, that's up to the Sudanese people to address. That's beyond any foreigners' remit or abilities. But, you know, drying up that outside support might sober the combatants into realizing they cannot win this on the battlefield, they must go and negotiate. And you know I've said since really since the beginning of this conflict that it's a choice of two very bad options in Sudan, but I think the Sudanese Armed Forces is probably the least bad option. It is at least an institution. And so the United States should consider sort of trying to rally international diplomatic support to recognize that the SAF is a legitimate institution. In exchange for that, Burhan would have to make real concessions, start the process of de-Islamization of his movements, cut ties with Iran, no Russian port in Port Sudan, crack down on the illicit gold trade. These are big asks, but in exchange for his survival, maybe he would be willing.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Joshua. Murithi, we have a question that came in during the panel about Somaliland. Josh mentioned the Port of Berbera and the MOU that seems to be shelved for the moment between Ethiopia and Somaliland. But the question is, what are the projected risks, outcomes, and effects on regional stability, should the U.S. choose to recognize Somaliland?

MUTIGA: Yeah, it's a great question, ambassador. Just to say that, obviously, you totally understand Somaliland's aspirations. I think that a couple of things. One is, if recognition was to come, what would the process be? I think it needs to be much more careful. It needs to be preceded by some reconciliation between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. If it's just precipitate, I think it would be destabilizing. It would be a gift, potentially, to militants in Somalia who would complain that the country is being splintered. I think the second thing is that it would be dangerous to make it a provisional that Somaliland soil needs to be used, especially for operations against the Houthis in Yemen. I think that would be destabilizing for Somaliland, but it's one of those where, you know, I think that really Mogadishu needs to do more to appreciate that its failure to engage with Somaliland has essentially been a gift for those that favor a breakaway. And just very, very quickly to follow up on what Josh just said, I think within the region, somebody asked me the other day how many countries will there be in the Horn of Africa in 10, 15 years, which is a very profound question because there are not many other parts of the world, where you see countries splintering. And I think that the important thing is to have an honest conversation. For example, on Ethiopia, Eritrea, the inherent instability is that both sides haven't accepted each other's status quo. When you listen to Isaias during his independence, he talks almost exclusively about Ethiopia. When you listened to the Ethiopian social media conversations now, they talk about the legitimacy of Eritrea breaking away, that it was a transitional government that did it, that was a TPLF-EPLF agreement. It's fundamentally unstable, and part of that really is to have honest conversations, for example, to agree to some sort of commercial access for Ethiopia, either in Somaliland or in Assab. But absent these conversations, I think you'll see a tendency towards splintering and disorder.

FELTMAN: Thanks, and we're running out of time, so Tsedale, I'm going to turn to you for the very last question before we close. Again from the audience. We heard Susan talk about the other conflicts inside Ethiopia, and one of the questions that we received was, given all the problems in Ethiopia, given the splits in the TPLF, could Abiy just be bluffing in talking about all this access to the sea issue? You're on mute, Tsedale. You're still on mute.

LEMMA: Sorry about that. No, I don't think he's bluffing. Of course, we do not have any publicly available document on how Ethiopia wishes to have an independent access to the sea, be that through the Red Sea or any other outlet. We do not have that yet. But the rhetoric from the inside, from the state-funded media and from the policy conversations that are happening, he's not bluffing. And I think essentially the question is not disputed per se by a large majority of Ethiopians. It is the how that nobody knows about. And that is now the lack of strategic direction towards that and the lack a blueprint of foreign policy that, you know, outlines how Ethiopia diplomatically and peacefully, as the prime minister keeps on saying, secures access to the sea is not there yet. And we, I think that that's one of the areas where international diplomacy should focus on. You know, yes, we recognize your need, I think the French ambassador was talking the same thing. I think the U.S. ambassador said similar thing a few weeks ago. That the need for Ethiopia to have an independent access to a sea for a commercial purpose of accessing a port is recognized internationally. And Ethiopians are also widely accepting that. But nobody knows how that is going to happen. And nobody knows whether that's going to happen through a total annexation of the sovereign territories of Eritrea or by recognition of Somaliland. And we have missed the train against the opportunity, maybe they might reconsider it in retrospect of recognizing Somaliland to have, to conclude the deal that was included in the memorandum of understanding, which again is not qualified, has not been sent to the national parliament. There has not be any policy discussion about it. So that is not also happening. So this entire conversation about Ethiopia's need to have a direct access, much less for its navy presence is not really being outlined in any policy document, neither from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or any affiliated think tank organizations that are working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And so, but regardless of that, it doesn't look like Abiy is calling a bluff on that one. And so we definitely have to brace for what is going to come after, whether it is going to give any policy paper on how exactly it wants to achieve its, Abiy's aspiration to have an navy presence and access to a port, an independent access to port.

FELTMAN: Thank you. There were a lot of other good questions. A lot of them touched on the issues that people have, that the panelists have raised today. I very, very much appreciate the online audience, the people who tuned in for this important discussion. It's clear that there's a lot thinking being done on how to make sure that war is not inevitable in the Horn of Africa, expanded conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. I am really, really pleased that the four panelists were able to join us today and share very deep expertise and knowledge in the Horn of Africa. So thank you all very much for being part of this discussion, part of the conversation, and I look forward to similar discussions later, and let's really all concentrate on making sure that there isn't another war in the horn of Africa, so thank you to everybody. So thank you everybody.