Peace Delayed: United Nations Mediation, Political will and the Challenges of Peace Settlement in the Ethiopia–Eritrea Conflict

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Abstract

The 1998–2000 Ethiopia and Eritrea war ended with the June 2000 Agreement on cessation of hostilities and the December 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement. Despite the extensive United Nations involvement through preventive diplomacy, Security Council action, peacekeeping using United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), and legal mechanisms such as the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), the completing of the settlement was considerably delayed, producing a prolonged "no war, no peace" condition. Using a qualitative documentary research design based on United Nation (UN) documents, peace agreements, Security Council Resolutions (UNR), and scholarly literature, this study identifies six (6) core factors responsible for the delay include; lack of sustained political will, border delimitation and demarcation disputes, sovereignty and security concerns, mutual distrust and historical grievances, limitations of United Nations mediation and peacekeeping mechanisms, and regional and international political dynamics. The article argues that while international mediation can facilitate cessation of violence and create institutional frameworks for peace, durable settlement depends primarily on state cooperation, political will, and trust. The 2018 rapprochement and its subsequent fragility further reinforce that peace must be institutionalized. The study conclude that ending hostilities is distinctive from building durable peace, and recommends stronger implementation mechanisms, institutionalized confidence-building, and sustained United Nations-African Union partnership.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Eritrea, United Nations, mediation, political will, Algiers Agreement, UNMEE, border conflict, peace settlement, Horn of Africa.

1. Introduction

International conflicts frequently require third-party intervention because direct negotiation between disputing states often fails due to acute security dilemmas, domestic political pressures, and deep-seated psychological barriers. In the architecture of modern global governance, mediation, peacekeeping, and legal arbitration serve as the central tools utilized by the United Nations (UN) to manage interstate conflicts, de-escalate violence, and establish institutional frameworks for reconciliation. However, historical precedent continually demonstrates that the mere existence of these sophisticated international mechanisms does not guarantee successful implementation, behavioural compliance, or the achievement of a durable peace. The gap between formal diplomatic settlement and actual ground-level normalization remains one of the most persistent challenges in international relations.

A poignant manifestation of this challenge is found in the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopia–Eritrea border war of 1998–2000, which erupted from a localized dispute over the town of Badme, rapidly escalated into a conventional interstate war that resulted in massive human and economic costs, including an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 fatalities, massive internal displacement, and severe structural damage to the economies of both developing nations. Recognizing the threat to regional stability, a powerful coalition of international actors—including the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Algeria, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union—intervened to mediate the conflict. These concerted diplomatic efforts culminated in two historic milestones: the June 2000 Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities and the comprehensive December 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement. These accords formally ended active hostilities, established the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) to delimit and demarcate the border, and created a Claims Commission to address wartime grievances. Simultaneously, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was deployed to monitor the ceasefire and manage a Temporary Security Zone along the disputed border.

Despite the robust structural and institutional frameworks, the peace process suffered an agonizing paralysis, and realization stalled for nearly two decades. The border remained physically un-demarcated on the ground, bilateral relations were not normalized, and the geopolitical landscape degenerated into a unpredictable, protracted state of "no war, no peace."The central question this paper addresses is; why was peaceful settlement delayed despite the all-embracing United Nations involvement and the existence of the prescribed, and binding international mechanisms? This investigation is critical for understanding why well-built international legal architectures often fail to translate into stable realities.

The study contends that this long-lasted delay resulted not solely from the institutional or structural inadequacy of the United Nations, but from the complex, toxic interaction of domestic political, international legal, sovereign security, and diplomatic factors. Ultimate causality, however, rests upon a singular, fundamental obstacle been the lack of sustained political will by the state leadership to honour and execute their formal international commitments.

2. Discussion

2.1 **The Role of the United Nations**.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea case perfectly illustrates the structural limitations of international mediation, exposing the deep gap that often exists between achieving a diplomatic settlement and executing sustainable peace building. The role of the United Nations was multifaceted, encompassing early preventive diplomacy by the Secretary-General, healthy Security Council resolutions, including the imposition of arms embargo under Resolution 1298, and the eventual deployment of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) in 2000. Essentially, the United Nations did not own the initial mediation process instead; it acted as a vital supportive pillar for the negotiations led by Algeria and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

While the United Nations successfully provided the institutional design, operational framework, and legal structure for peace, it suffered from a fundamental flaw that lacked autonomous enforcement capacity.

Peacekeeping operations are structurally dependent on the continuous consent and cooperation of the host states. As political will eroded, United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was subjected to severe operational constraints, including fuel restrictions, movement blockades, and diplomatic hostility, particularly from the Eritrean side. By 2008, these debilitating restrictions forced the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to formally terminate United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea's mandate. This precipitating withdrawal left the disputed border entirely unmonitored and underscored a severe reality in international relations—peacekeeping mechanisms are fundamentally crippled when sovereign states choose to withhold their cooperation.

2.2 **Theoretical Lens:**
This conflict provides a convincing research facility for examining the tenets of International Relations Theory of Idealism and more importantly, its practical limits. Framed through an Idealist lens of key proponents of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and others; the peace process was built on the conviction that lasting peace can be achieved through international law, multilateral institutions, and structured diplomacy possess the power to tame the anarchic nature of interstate conflict that regulates interactions amongst states (Nte 2019 & Thrope 2019).

3. Methodology
This study adopts qualitative approach that allows detailed analysis of documents, treaties, United Nations resolutions, peacekeeping reports, and scholarly literature to highlight mediation strategies, challenges, causes and outcomes. Creswell and Poth (2018) support this choice, noting that qualitative research examines complex social phenomena in real-life contexts, enabling comprehensive understanding of actors' intentions and principles.

4. Discussion
4.1. The "No War, No Peace" Occurrence
The drafting of the Algiers Agreement, the creation of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), and the deployment of United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) were classic institutionalised responses, designed to substitute military confrontation with legal arbitration and rational dialogue. However, the subsequent twenty (20) years deadlock exposes the precise point whereby success of international effective mediation was delayed due to constrained as a result of lack of political will by both government parties. International institutions can draft meticulous legal solutions, map out objective borders, and provide neutral forums for dialogue, and cannot unnaturally manufacture political will.

When sovereign states perceive that international legal rulings impose unacceptable "sovereignty costs" such as Ethiopia's reluctance to concede the symbolically vital town of Badme despite the Eritrea and Ethiopia Boundary Commission's (EEBC) binding ruling, they revert to self-help and non-compliance. The institutionalised framework proved incapable of

persuasive trust, enforcing compliance, or mitigating the core security dilemmas that drove both regimes.

The failure of transition from a signed treaty to ground-level reality resulted in a protracted geopolitical stalemate known as the "no war, no peace" phenomenon. In peace and conflict studies, this state represents the achievement of negative peace defined simply as the absence of active, large-scale military violence combined with a total failure to achieve positive peace, which requires the restoration of trust, diplomatic normalization, cross-border trade, and societal reconciliation.

This stalemate was triggered by a profound disconnect between law and politics. The Eritrea and Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) successfully delivered its final and binding legal delimitation of the border on paper in 2002. However, because both states lacked the shared political will to cooperate, this legal ruling never translated into physical demarcation on the ground. Instead, the border remained a heavily militarized, unmoving boundary. Deeply entrenched sovereignty concerns, structural security predicaments, and historical grievances allowed mutual mistrust to fester. The absence of war did not mean peace; rather, it functioned as an expensive, exhausting cold war that drained the economic resources of both nations and left regional stability in perpetual jeopardy.

4.2 The 2018 Rapprochement and Its Fragility. The sudden and historic end to this two-decade deadlock arrived in 2018, driven not by an international institutional breakthrough, but by a domestic political shift. A change in Ethiopian leadership brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power, who unexpectedly announced that Ethiopia would fully accept and implement the 2002 EEBC decision. This paved the way for a rapid rapprochement, marked by the reopening of borders, the restoration of direct flights, and the re-establishment of formal diplomatic ties between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Despite the initial global euphoria, contemporary political analysts and scholars quickly noted that this peace architecture was profoundly fragile. The 2018 rapprochement was highly personalized and insufficiently institutionalized.

Rather than being rooted in transparent treaties, parliamentary approvals, or inclusive state-to-state frameworks, the peace was driven almost entirely by confidential, elite-level agreements between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. The subsequent deterioration of regional stability—most notably crystallized during the Tigray war, where mutual strategic interests temporarily aligned the two leaderships against a common domestic opponent, followed by renewed geopolitical tensions over Red Sea access firmly validates this critique. Elite driven, personalized peace setups that bypass deep-rooted institutionalization and popular participation remain highly vulnerable to changing political winds and shifting strategic interests.

5. Findings

The qualitative documentary analysis of United Nations documents, peace agreements, Security Council resolutions, and historical scholarly data reveals that the stalemate was not the product of a single diplomatic failure. Instead, the study identifies six interlocking factors

that actively subverted the peace process and delayed a comprehensive settlement for nearly two decades:

5.1 Lack of Sustained Political Will and Commitment: There was a profound divergence between a state's willingness to halt active combat and its willingness to execute peace terms. While the leadership of both nations signed the 2000 Algiers Agreements to stop an economically devastating and humanly costly war, they vigorously resisted provisions that threatened their domestic political survival. This reality demonstrates that in complex interstate conflicts, signing an agreement does not equate to implementation.

5.2 Border Delimitation and Demarcation Disputes: A major roadblock was the disconnection between international legal rulings and territorial enforcement. The Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) delivered its final and binding legal delimitation of the border in 2002. However, because the physical demarcation on the ground required mutual coordination and bilateral compliance, the process stalled completely when Ethiopia rejected the allocation of key territories, such as Badme, without prior political conditions. Sovereignty and Security Concerns: The disputed border territories were not merely pieces of land; they were deeply tied to national identity, state legitimacy, and regime survival. For both the Ethiopian and Eritrean leadership, conceding territory was viewed as political suicide that would alienate domestic constituencies and expose weakness to internal rivals. This made any form of territorial compromise unacceptably costly.

5.3 Mutual Distrust and Historical Grievances: The war left a legacy of bitter psychological animosity that locked both nations into a classic security dilemma. In this environment, every defensive military posture or domestic policy enacted by one state was automatically interpreted by the other as an act of impending aggression. This total absence of trust systematically derailed every international attempt at establishing localized confidence-building measures.

5.4 Limitations of United Nations Mediation and Peacekeeping: The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was structurally crippled by its reliance on host-state consent. The United Nations provided a robust monitoring presence, but it possessed no autonomous enforcement mandate to compel compliance when the political climate turned hostile. When Eritrea gradually choked off UNMEE's logistics and access routes, the mission collapsed and was terminated in 2008, proving that peacekeeping operations cannot serve as a substitute for political will.

5.5 Regional and International Political Dynamics: The bilateral dispute did not occur in a vacuum; it became deeply embedded in the broader, volatile geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. Both states engaged in proxy warfare across the region, most notably in Somalia, which externalized their domestic rivalry. Furthermore, the post-2018 diplomatic realignment was dictated by fluid, elite-level strategic calculations rather than stable institutional frameworks, leaving the region highly vulnerable to shifting alliances.

6. Analytical Synthesis

These six factors did not operate in isolation rather they functioned as a cyclical, self-reinforcing loop of conflict. The unresolved border dispute constantly heightened sovereign security fears, which naturally deepened mutual historical mistrust. As mistrust festered, the political will of both regimes to cooperate eroded entirely. This lack of political will directly weaken the operational capacity of the United Nations, rendering United Nations Missions in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) ineffective and ultimately leading to its collapse. Each failure fed back into the loop, solidifying the "no war, no peace" stalemate and ensuring that peace remained delayed for nearly twenty years.

7. Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings of the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict, this study proposes ten strategic recommendations to enhance the efficacy of future United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) mediation, peacekeeping, and peace building frameworks across the African continent:

i). Strengthen Implementation Mechanisms: Future peace treaties must transcend the performance stage of signing ceremonies. Mediators must embed rigorous, legally binding implementation protocols directly into the text of the agreements. These frameworks must feature explicitly define timelines, definite institutional responsibilities, robust independent monitoring provisions, and clear, pre-negotiated consequences for non-compliance that extend far beyond the initial cessation of hostilities.

ii). Assess Political Commitment Pre-Agreement: International mediators must conduct exhaustive, realistic assessments of each conflict party's internal political commitment before concluding a settlement. Diplomatic actors should evaluate whether rival leaderships possess the genuine domestic leverage and willingness to absorb the necessary internal political sacrifices, territorial concessions, or "sovereignty costs" required to transition from a signed piece of paper to real-world execution.

iii). Institutionalize Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs): To break the cycle of security dilemmas, mediation architectures must establish and institutionalize resilient, structured military and diplomatic communication channels. These hotlines, joint border committees, and low-level bureaucratic forums must be structurally insulated so that they remain fully operational even during periods of high political tension, thereby preventing catastrophic miscalculations rooted in mutual distrust.

vi). Combine Legal Arbitration with Political Processes: The Algiers experience proves that cold legalism alone cannot solve complex, identity-driven territorial disputes. When international bodies like the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) deliver final legal rulings, these decisions must be immediately paired with sustained, high-level political dialogue. Legal delimitation must be accompanied by ongoing political negotiation to facilitate peaceful, collaborative physical demarcation on the ground.

v). Align Peacekeeping Mandates with Political Realities: The United Nations Security Council must stop deploying or maintaining traditional peacekeeping operations in

environments where host-state cooperation is entirely absent or rapidly eroding. Peacekeeping missions should not be used as a permanent, expensive band-aid to freeze a conflict. Instead, their mandates must be dynamically aligned with shifting political realities on the ground, holding host states strictly accountable for maintaining operational consent.

vi). Strengthen the UN-AU Strategic Partnership: In alignment with Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, the strategic partnership between the United Nations and the African Union must be deepened. Regional and sub-regional organizations should assume the primary leadership role in African conflict management due to their unique cultural insights, geographical proximity, and local political legitimacy. The United Nations should provide robust financial, technical, and logistical backing to ensure these African-led initiatives are sustainable.

vii). Local Borderland Communities: Sustainable peace building cannot be exclusively top-down or elite-driven. The populations living directly along contested borderlands must be actively included in the peace process. Incorporating local community leaders, elders, cross-border traders, and civil society into localized peace building committees ensures grassroots ownership, alleviates immediate human anxieties, and turns a disputed border into a zone of shared economic cooperation rather than military confrontation.

viii). Institutionalize Peace design Beyond Elite Leaders: To prevent fragile breakthroughs from collapsing, peace processes must be structurally institutionalized rather than tied to personalized diplomacy. As demonstrated by the vulnerability of the 2018 rapprochement, elite-driven pacts are highly volatile. Agreements must be formally embedded within broader state institutions, ratified by national parliaments, codified into domestic laws, and integrated into institutional foreign policy frameworks that survive changes in individual leadership.

ix). Prioritize Proactive Preventive Diplomacy: The international community must shift its resources from reactive crisis management to proactive preventive diplomacy. Early, aggressive diplomatic interventions such as rapid-response mediation panels, early warning monitoring systems, and targeted preventive diplomacy by the UN Secretary-General and African Union Chairperson before a localized border skirmish escalates into full-scale interstate warfare drastically reduce the long-term human, economic, and political costs of conflict resolution.

x). Address Holistic Substantive Grievances: Mediation frameworks must completely move away from minimalist approaches that only focus on securing a ceasefire. To build a positive and lasting peace, international mediators must systematically confront the holistic, underlying drivers of the conflict. This requires addressing the deep-seated political, macroeconomic, structural security, and historical identity grievances that originally triggered the war, ensuring that the root causes of the structural violence are fully resolved.

8. Conclusion

The protracted conflict and diplomatic gridlock between Ethiopia and Eritrea serve as a stark, definitive demonstration that while international mediation can successfully silence guns and construct elegant legal blueprints for peace, it possesses no innate capacity to engineer a durable, self-sustaining settlement. The joint diplomatic intervention of the United Nations,

the Organization of African Unity, and the Government of Algeria achieved a monumental victory in June and December 2000 by successfully terminating an incredibly destructive interstate war. Yet, the ensuing eighteen-year stalemate vividly illustrates that a cessation of hostilities is not the equivalent of a peaceful resolution.

Without the presence of sustained domestic political will, the resolution of deep-seated sovereignty anxieties, the dismantling of historical mistrust, and the provision of robust enforcement mandates for international bodies, the architecture of peace is easily paralyzed, leaving states stranded in an exhausting condition of "no war, no peace."The historic breakthrough of 2018 provided empirical proof that a decisive shift in domestic political leadership can dismantle decades of diplomatic inertia in an instant. However, the rapid subsequent deterioration of regional stability in the Horn of Africa serves as an equally powerful warning: peace that relies exclusively on the personal chemistry of political elites is structurally fragile and inherently volatile. For a breakthrough to endure, it must be deeply institutionalized within state frameworks, made inclusive through grassroots and civil society participation, and continuously nurtured by local, regional, and international stakeholders. The ultimate takeaway of the Ethiopia–Eritrea experience is that a signed peace agreement is never the end of mediation, but merely the vulnerable beginning of peace building.

The transition from a formal treaty to a normalized reality requires a complex, synchronized formula. When any single variable in this equation is withheld or missing, international mechanisms are rendered ineffective. Without an unwavering, institutionalized commitment from the sovereign states involved, even the most comprehensive international agreements will remain confined to paper, and the promise of genuine peace will remain indefinitely delayed.

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