

The Integration Threshold

How Renewed TPLF Dialogue Could Convert Northern Ethiopia from Battlefield to Growth Corridor

By IFA Editorial Team, IFA.

Renewed tensions in northern Ethiopia have revived fears that the political settlement created by the November 2022 Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement could collapse into another cycle of confrontation. Yet recent diplomatic activity signals movement in the opposite direction: a possible reopening of political dialogue between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The strongest signal is the renewed involvement of former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the African Union mediator who helped broker the Pretoria Agreement. His recent engagement with TPLF leaders has revived attention on whether Addis Ababa and Mekelle could return to a structured political process. Formal negotiations have not been publicly confirmed, but the incentives for dialogue appear to be strengthening.

What will determine whether this moment produces a durable settlement or another temporary lull is what this brief terms the integration threshold — the point at which the economic stakes of stability outweigh the political returns of confrontation. Below that threshold, peace remains reversible, hostage to the next contested territory or disputed appointment. Above it, renewed conflict becomes self-defeating for all sides because too much of shared value would be put at risk. The task facing Ethiopian policymakers is not simply to restart talks, but to design them so that northern Ethiopia crosses that threshold and stays there.

For its part, the federal government has consistently framed its posture as one of good-faith implementation rather than reluctant concession. Addis Ababa points to its record of upholding troop-withdrawal commitments under Pretoria, continuing to fund reconstruction and service restoration in Tigray, and standing ready to engage the AU's High-Level Panel whenever called upon. Officials describe this approach as proactive rather than reactive: a government negotiating from a position of demonstrated commitment, not one being forced to the table by renewed fighting.

ESCALATION IS RAISING THE COST OF CONFRONTATION

Relations between the federal government and the TPLF have deteriorated during 2026. In January, African Union Commission Chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf called for maximum restraint, urged the parties to avoid actions that could undermine confidence, and reaffirmed the AU's commitment to full implementation of Pretoria.

Tensions intensified further, including fighting reported in western Tigray in early August that federal officials attributed to provocations by TPLF-aligned units — an account TPLF figures have disputed.

Renewed escalation risks reversing Pretoria's central achievement — the prevention of another large-scale war. It also changes the bargaining calculation. For the TPLF, prolonged confrontation carries security, economic and humanitarian costs. For the federal government, another northern war would divert resources from national development, complicate economic recovery, and increase vulnerability while Sudan remains at war.

Both sides therefore face a choice: continue using pressure to shape bargaining positions, or convert that pressure into a structured political process.

OBASANJO AND THE PRETORIA CHANNEL

Obasanjo's renewed engagement matters because Pretoria already provides an African Union-led framework for addressing political and security disputes. The AU has continued to argue that unresolved issues should be managed through dialogue, and has stated that its High-Level Panel remains ready to facilitate confidence-building and cooperation.

Reports following Obasanjo's recent engagement indicate that TPLF leaders outlined issues they want addressed in future talks. These reportedly include easing security and economic restrictions, the return of internally displaced people, contested territorial questions, and the TPLF's political and legal status. They have also reportedly called for a credible and time-bound process.

These are reported negotiating positions, not agreed conditions. Even so, their articulation is important. It suggests the debate may be shifting from whether dialogue should occur toward what should be negotiated and under what framework.

THE REAL PROBLEM IS IMPLEMENTATION

The core challenge is not the absence of an agreement but incomplete implementation of the one already signed. Pretoria produced important gains, including the end of large-scale hostilities, progress on disarmament, restoration of services, and the establishment of an interim regional administration. Yet major political disputes remained unresolved.

Questions over security arrangements, displaced populations, contested areas, political representation, and implementation mechanisms continued to generate mistrust. This created a gap between the agreement on paper and political reality.

Renewed talks should therefore focus on a structured implementation framework. Each unresolved issue should be linked to clear responsibilities, timelines, verification mechanisms, and procedures for managing disputes. The goal should be to prevent political disagreements from accumulating until military pressure again becomes the main form of communication.

THE CASE FOR SKEPTICISM

A more cautious reading deserves a hearing. Mediation efforts around Pretoria have raised expectations before without producing a comprehensive political settlement, and the preconditions reportedly advanced by the TPLF — recognition of its political and legal status, resolution of contested territories, a time-bound process — touch some of the most politically costly issues for the federal government to concede. Fighting in western Tigray in early August is a reminder that both sides retain the capacity, and at times the incentive, to use force rather than dialogue.

These concerns are legitimate, but they describe a design problem rather than a reason to abandon the opening. What has changed since earlier rounds of mediation is the surrounding cost structure: Sudan's war has made regional instability considerably more expensive for both Addis Ababa and Mekelle, and the AU's High-Level Panel gives this process an institutional continuity that earlier informal efforts lacked. Skepticism should therefore shape how negotiations are sequenced and verified, not whether they are pursued. On balance, the federal government's conduct since 2022 — sustained withdrawal compliance, continued service restoration, and consistent engagement with the AU framework — supports a more confident reading of its intentions than the reported preconditions on the other side of the table.

A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR ETHIOPIA

For the federal government, renewed negotiation should be seen as an opportunity to consolidate national stability through political settlement. Military containment can reduce immediate threats, but it cannot resolve the political conditions that repeatedly reproduce insecurity.

A durable settlement would allow Ethiopia to shift resources from crisis management toward reconstruction and development. It would also reduce opportunities for internal disputes to become connected to regional rivalries. This matters because northern Ethiopia sits in a sensitive geopolitical space: Eritrea lies to the north, while Sudan's war has weakened governance and increased insecurity to the west.

Ethiopia's strategic objective should therefore be to resolve domestic disagreements through Ethiopian institutions and the existing AU framework, limiting space for external actors to exploit internal divisions.

FROM A SECURITY FRONTIER TO AN INTEGRATION ZONE

Negotiations should serve a larger purpose than merely preventing another war. Northern Ethiopia should gradually be transformed from a security frontier into an integration zone — the practical expression of crossing the integration threshold.

A durable settlement could create conditions for reconstruction, industrial development, infrastructure, and trade to become the new organizing logic of the north. Industrial zones should form part of this strategy. Investment in manufacturing, agro-processing, logistics, energy, and

transport could generate employment while creating economic constituencies with a direct interest in stability.

The strategic principle is simple: the north should become too economically valuable to destabilize. If communities, investors, and neighboring markets increasingly depend on stability, the cost of renewed confrontation rises. Economic integration then becomes more than a development strategy; it becomes part of the security architecture.

AN INTEGRATION ZONE, NOT AN INTERVENTION ZONE

A stable northern Ethiopia would reduce opportunities for outside actors to exploit domestic divisions. The region should not become an arena where Ethiopian political disputes are converted into instruments of regional competition.

This does not mean isolation from neighboring states. Relations should instead be organized around trade, infrastructure, border stability, and mutual economic benefit rather than proxy competition.

The objective should be to make northern Ethiopia an integration zone rather than an intervention zone. Integration creates shared interests in stability; intervention creates incentives to preserve fragmentation.

WHY ERITREA AND SUDAN MATTER

Eritrea has a direct interest in stability in northern Ethiopia because of geography, history, and security. Renewed large-scale conflict in Tigray could create new uncertainty along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. A functioning political settlement could reduce that risk and, over time, create space for border trade, transport links, and economic interaction.

Ethiopian officials have also pointed to Eritrea's own fraught history with the TPLF leadership as a reason for continued vigilance, noting Asmara's documented military involvement in Tigray during the 2020–2022 war. Addis Ababa's stated position is that a durable, Ethiopian-owned settlement closes off any opening for renewed external involvement by resolving the underlying dispute through Ethiopian institutions rather than leaving it exposed to outside actors.

Sudan makes the need for stability even more urgent. Its ongoing war has already produced displacement, weakened institutions, and insecurity across neighboring regions. A renewed conflict in northern Ethiopia could create another instability zone beside Sudan and increase population movements, illicit arms flows, and weak border governance.

Successful implementation of Pretoria should therefore be understood as more than an Ethiopian domestic achievement. It would reduce the risk that northern Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan become part of an interconnected security crisis.

POLICY DIRECTION

First, the federal government and the TPLF should use any renewed dialogue to establish a specific mechanism for implementing unresolved provisions of Pretoria, with clear priorities, responsibilities, and timelines.

Second, peacebuilding should be directly connected to a northern reconstruction and development strategy. Industrial zones, road and rail connectivity, logistics, energy, agriculture, and trade should be treated as instruments of stabilization.

Third, Ethiopia should connect northern development to wider regional markets while preventing domestic disputes from becoming entry points for external geopolitical competition. Engagement with Eritrea and Sudan should emphasize border stability, non-interference, and economic connectivity.

Finally, international partners should support rather than substitute for Ethiopian and African ownership. The AU already has a recognized framework through Pretoria and its High-Level Panel. External partners can assist with verification, finance, and technical support, but the political settlement should remain anchored in Ethiopian responsibility and African-led mediation.

PEACE AS A STRATEGIC ASSET

Obasanjo's renewed involvement does not guarantee negotiations, and negotiations would not automatically produce a durable settlement. But the current diplomatic opening creates an important opportunity.

The immediate objective is to prevent renewed war. The larger objective is to ensure that northern Ethiopia does not repeatedly return to the same cycle of tension, confrontation, mediation, and temporary stabilization.

If Pretoria is fully implemented and reinforced by a credible political process, the north could move toward a different strategic future based on reconstruction, industry, trade, and economic interdependence — crossing the integration threshold rather than drifting back below it. For Ethiopia, this would strengthen national stability and reduce vulnerability to external interference. For Eritrea, it could reduce insecurity along the southern border and expand space for economic engagement. For Sudan, it would prevent another major conflict from emerging alongside its own war.

The success of renewed federal-TPLF dialogue should therefore be measured by whether peace can transform northern Ethiopia from a recurring conflict zone into a stable center of industry, connectivity, and regional integration.

If that transformation succeeds, Pretoria will have achieved something larger than ending one war. It will have carried northern Ethiopia across the integration threshold, turning peace into a strategic asset for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

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