

Research Article

The Horn's Strategic Gamble: How Ethiopia, Eritrea, and External Actors Engage in Finite and Infinite Games

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Abstract

This essay uses the Finite and Infinite Game Theory of James P. Carse to examine how state and non-state actors might use the conflict to further rival agendas in the face of escalating war speculations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, fueled by Ethiopia's disputed Red Sea ambitions and Eritrea's militarized game of chicken. The study uses secondary data and qualitative methodology to show a self-evident difference: Eritrea and external powers like Egypt use infinite strategies (control of resources, sustaining instability) to turn potential war into intricate crisis, while government and rebel groups in Ethiopia adopt finite strategies (control of land, regime transformation). Finite objectives are in the driving seat for Ethiopia. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's efforts to reach the Red Sea and carry out military assaults on rebels demonstrate his desire to win convincingly. Similarly, the disunited Tigray groups (TPLF), Amhara Fano rebellion, and Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) each have finite objectives: overthrow Abiy or reoccupy territory. But Eritrea's bottomless playbook is underestimated by these actors: With its capacity to sustain war, President Isaias Afwerki's government may leverage Ethiopia's domestic fragmentation by backing Fano groups, OLA, or Tigray dissenters, thereby spreading more chaos and undermining Addis Ababa's regional authority. Outside actors solidify infinite games further: the Gulf and Somalia governments can leverage the crisis to reconfigure Red Sea alliances, and Egypt's support for Abiy's anti-factions aims at irreversibly halting Ethiopia's aspirations on the Nile River (GERD) instead of winning a war. Stakes are at their highest level. While Egypt and Eritrea, which are infinite players, gain through constant uncertainty, finite-focused Ethiopia stands to risk strategic exhaustion. This exposes the Horn to the danger of mass displacement, humanitarian crises, and Ethiopia's Balkanization. Rebalancing strategies, the study indicates that Ethiopia must meet grievances along ethnic lines through inclusive governance (minimizing infinite vulnerabilities), and international actors should prefer mediation to fragment exploitative compacts. The Horn is on the brink of a future in which war is a commodified and catalyzing instrument if finite and infinite paradigms are not subjected to synthesis.

Keywords

Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict, Finite and Infinite Game Theory, Horn of Africa Geopolitics, Proxy Warfare, Red Sea Access

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1. Introduction

Ethnic strife, historical grudges, and geopolitical rivalries have been a part of the Horn of Africa's landscape, forever poised on the precipice of catastrophe. Central to this turmoil is Ethiopia, an established hegemon and the second most populous country on the continent.

The escalating hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, based on a protracted border war, ideological differences, and competing aspirations for regional supremacy—have again surfaced with a disturbing fervor. The Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998-2000, which the Algiers Peace Agreement technically ended, has left the two nations in a perpetual state of "no war, no peace," which was temporarily alleviated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's diplomatic efforts in 2018 [1]. But this period of eased tensions unraveled in the wake of the Pretoria Accords, compounded by happenings in 2023 [2]. Ethiopia's renewed desire for Red Sea access, expressed in a contentious memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, involved regional players in a multilateral network of affinities and rivalries [3].

The Tigray War (2020–2022) serves as an example of the region's cyclical nature of war, as the federal Ethiopian government allied itself with Eritrea in putting down the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) [4]. Even though Pretoria Agreement put an official end to hostilities, Tigray is a disputed area with TPLF forces now being splintered and embroiled in rancorous power struggle amongst themselves [5]. Outside actors like Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia are eager to take advantage of Ethiopia's state-at-war status, which has been precipitated by these cracks as well as insurgencies in Amhara and Oromia. Therefore, there is a risk of a fresh war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, but it is not a one-dimensional bilateral war but a complex crisis that intersects with resource competition, ethnic nationalism, and international strategic interests.

This paper analyzes the strategic minds of the principal actors in the Horn by looking at them through the lens of James P. Carse's Finite and Infinite Game Theory [6]. Carse's theory contrasts finite games, which are organized conflicts with determined players, rules, and termini (like capturing territory), with infinite games, which aim to prolong the struggle itself, not to win the struggle, typically by breaking the will of an opponent by being flexible and having endurance [7].

2. Finite and Infinite Game Theory: A Framework of Analysis

James P. Carse's work *Finite and Infinite Games* provides a framework of analysis to understand strategic interaction in business, philosophy, and war. In essence, the theory identifies two models of engagement: infinite games, played to stay in the game, and finite games, played to win the game. Alt-

hough these ideas were presented as metaphors for human action in Carse's 1986 first book, their application in geopolitics, especially in war-torn regions like the Horn of Africa, reveals profound insight into the objectives, tactics, and long-term effects of state and non-state actors.

2.1. Finite Games: The Illusion of Definitive Victory

Finite games are defined by clearly established parameters: familiar players, well-established rules, and an unchanging objective that ends in a conclusive finish. These contests are zero-sum; success for one party results in failure for another [8]. In war, finite strategies become conventional military action aimed at the acquisition of territory, change of regime, or annihilation of an adversary's forces [7]. Historical precedent is abundant, from the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, an effort to topple Saddam Hussein and eliminate his regime, to Ethiopia's 2020-2022 operation in Tigray that sought to eliminate the TPLF as a political and military force. The temptation of finite games is their apparent simplicity. Leaders are drawn to the promise of closure, a clear "end state" that justifies the costs of war [9].

But this approach is riddled with perils. Finite actors overestimate the power of their adversaries, overestimate their power to dominate post-war dynamics, and underestimate the power of external forces [10]. The United States' experience in Vietnam is illustrative: despite overwhelming military superiority, Washington did not account for North Vietnam's limitless resolve to endure longer than its adversary, ultimately exiting after expending its political capital and assets [11].

2.2. Infinite Games: The Art of Perpetual Conflict

Infinite games, by contrast, have no terminating point. One does not try to win them but to prolong them, adjusting rules and strategy to survive and continue play. Infinite players prioritize endurance over escalation, adaptability over rigidity, and psychic fatigue over military victory [12]. Non-state actors like the Taliban or the Somali militant movement Al-Shabaab are the ultimate practitioners of this approach, employing asymmetric war, guerrilla war, and ideological mobilization to outlast conventionally more powerful opponents. Infinite strategies thrive where power is dispersed, coalitions are loose, and grievances are deep [7]. Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki, for instance, is a virtuoso of the infinite game.

His regime has survived regional isolation, international sanctions, and survival threats since Eritrea gained independence in 1993 by creating a chronic state of militarization, demonizing outside enemies (first Ethiopia, then the West) as existential threats to justify authoritarianism [8, 13].

To an infinite player like Isaias, conflict is not a problem to be solved but a circumstance to be navigated, a way of reasserting domestic power and demobilizing challengers [14].

3. Strategic and Interest Analysis of Key Actors in the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict: A Finite vs Infinite Game Perspective

If war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, [15-17] the conflict would be shaped by actors with divergent strategies for finite ends, occupation of land, survival/toppling of the government, or access to resources, and infinite ends aimed at perpetuating instability to gain long-term leverage [18]. Referring to James P. Carse's (1986) Finite and Infinite Game Theory, this analysis deconstructs the interests, moves, and implications of internal and external actors, showing how their engagement increases instability in the Horn of Africa generally and in Ethiopia in particular.

3.1. Tigray Factions: Divided Elites and Strategic Alliances

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which once ruled Ethiopia, currently is plagued by internal divisions.

Since August 2025, following the TPLF central committee meeting, there have been internal rifts within TPLF. The DebreTSION (PhD) and Getachew Reda split of TPLF can be traced to numerous internal differences, ideological differences, and power struggles. The factions led by these two leaders had radically different views about how the TPLF and, by extension, the region of Tigray, should be run [19]. Yet the very heart of the controversy concerns how to assess events in the past, especially the "war period" and the "Pretoria Agreement" [20].

Dr. DebreTSION's faction, now ably backed by Tigray forces (TDF) leaders, asserts that the Pretoria negotiation, manner in which it was negotiated, and its enforceability need a re-examination because they assume that Getachew Reda and his negotiating team acted *ultra vires* in their mandate laid down by TPLF during the negotiation of the peace accord with the Ethiopia federal government in 2022. They blame the Pretoria Agreement for failure to correct Tigray's present setbacks, particularly the designation of Western Tigray as a "disputed area." In contrast Getachew Reda's faction continues to assert that the issue shouldn't only circle the Pretoria agreement but should instead emanate from the evaluation of how the war had been commanded and coordinated. This position implicitly challenged Dr. DebreTSION's leadership, since he was in charge during the war. These differences were often manifested in policy disagreements and clashes over the TPLF's strategic direction.

Despite efforts by civil society organizations, religious

leaders, and the diaspora Tigrayans to broker [21, 22] the internal conflict remains unresolved. The conflict was further entrenched when TDF leaders joined Dr. DebreTSION's faction on January 2025 [23], taking over offices in Mekele Adigrat, and other major cities in March 2025 [24]. The interim government and opposition parties in Tigray condemned the move.

Getachew Reda has claimed that Dr. DebreTSION's faction has close relations with Eritrea and Egypt, and if they go ahead, their move could turn Tigray into the center of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia [25]. There were reports asserting secret negotiations between TPLF and Eritrea regarding potential cooperation against the Ethiopian federal government [26]. But TPLF and Tigray forces have denied the allegations as mere lies [27].

The split between Getachew Reda and Dr. DebreTSION Gebremichael are visions for Tigray's future [28]. TPLF chairman, Dr. DebreTSION's faction adopts a finite strategy based on the execution of the Pretoria Agreement. However their purpose is to revive political stature and reverse perceived reversals, maybe by deliberate co-options of Eritrea—a move in compliance with the finite objectives of regaining power. But this risks entanglement in Eritrea's destabilization game without end, where Asmara seeks to perpetuate war to weaken Ethiopia.

Getachew Reda faction, however, aims at wartime leadership, a policy that prioritizes internal legitimacy over foreign coalition [27]. The policy, while limited in its aim of consolidating power in Tigray, inadvertently emboldens Eritrea's endless playbook by deepening intra-Tigrayan fissures.

As Jawar Mohamed points out, The TPLF's long history of governing experience, now found in Tigray as a result of their federal marginalization, results in an excess of elites vying for scarce resources, a situation Eritrea takes advantage of to perpetuate instability. The Isaias Afwerki regime understands that a united Tigray would ultimately pose a threat to the security of Eritrea [28]; Therefore, Asmara's endless strategy makes sure Tigray continues to be destabilized to keep it from re-emerging as a regional force.

3.2. Amhara Fano Insurgency: Disunited Resistance and Exploitative Coalitions

The Fano insurgency in the Amhara region is another major actor. The extremely disunited Fano insurgency was a direct consequence of the security dilemma faced by the Amhara community following the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022 and the disbandment of the Amhara Special Forces [23]. As long as the Fano remain decentralized and without political organization and centralized command, they are more broadly united in their shared belief of defending Amhara interests and opposition to the Abiy Ahmed government. Fano leaders have declared that they will not negotiate with the federal government while Abiy's government is still in office [21].

Fano's finite goal, to remove Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government, is undermined by its divided leadership and lack

of a common strategy. While some factions seek collaboration with Eritrea and TPLF, others are against working together with a historic enemy. Such division reflects a contradiction between finite goals (regime change) and infinite facts (historic ethnic competition).

There have been claims that, after the end of the Tigray conflict, two dissatisfied war allies, Amhara Fano and Eritrea, joined forces, with allegations that Eritrea was training Fano soldiers. The news remains to be verified. Efforts by the group to chart a corridor to Eritrea via the Welkait-Tegede zone (disputed zone/western Tigray) have been thwarted by the zone being in favor of the federal government, thus complicating its strategic status even further.

Eritrea exploits Fano's fragmentation, extending implicit sponsorship to other fractions to open a second front against Ethiopia. For Eritrea, it is a limitless goal: sustaining Ethiopia's civil war to prevent it from becoming a regional hegemon. The inability of Fano to be united under a command structure turns it into a chess piece for Asmara, where short-term gains (e.g., tactical military training) cover long-term costs, such as exclusion after the war.

3.3. Oromo Liberation Army (OLA): Strategic Ambiguity and Flexible Allegiances

The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is yet another Oromia-based rebel force, tracing its roots to Eritrea historically. Despite a recent peace agreement between the central Oromia wing of OLA and the federal government [21]. The movement is still active, particularly in Oromia as well as the Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara region.

OLA is the essence of limitless adaptability, shifting from finite coalitions and long-term independence struggles. The objectives of OLA are unclear in its coalitions. While it may join anti-Abiy coalitions, its long-term agendas do not align with the Tigrayan and Amhara elements.

In 2021, OLA formed a temporary coalition with Tigray forces in the Amhara region, demonstrating a finite way to challenge the federal government. The group has also maintained contacts in Eritrea, some of its fighters have received training.

There has been no lasting solution, however, after two rounds of peace negotiations held in Tanzania between the OLA and the federal government. OLA's vagueness makes it difficult for Ethiopia to pursue a counterinsurgency strategy. By basing itself close to Addis Ababa, the group challenges the security of the capital without confronting it, a characteristic of infinite strategies meant to drain state resources.

The federal government's finite emphasis on military responses neglects the OLA's ability to capitalize on ethnic grievances in perpetuity. Eritrea's backing of OLA serves to highlight Asmara's infinite objective of maintaining Ethiopia destabilized, even at the cost of working with ideologically dissimilar groups.

3.4. Federal Government: Limited Dreams in an Infinite Swamp

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has limited aims: securing access to the Red Sea and neutralizing insurgency. These intentions are at variance with the eternal realities of Ethiopian ethnic breakdown and Eritrea's strategy of destabilization. In war, Ethiopia may propose to conquer Assab and dethrone Isaias Afwerki which is classic finite play, taking territory and topple Isaias, but overlooks Eritrean proficiency at infinite warfare.

The fighting against the Oromia and Amhara insurgencies and the Tigray War has drained economic resources and eroded popular support from the national government. By framing the war against Eritrea as one of nationalist struggle, Abiy may repeat the same mistakes in which short-term mobilizations (i.e., the 2020 campaign) yielded long-term instability.

Ethiopia's limited approach also fails to address the infinite motives of external actors like Egypt, which assists anti-Abiy forces to defend Nile interests, keeping Addis Ababa mired in multi-front wars.

3.5. External Actors: Infinite Games in Ethiopia Destabilization

Eritrea: As a counter-reaction to Ethiopia's controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland for access to its ports, Eritrea accelerated its efforts at forming anti-Ethiopian coalitions. This is done through Somalia and Egypt, long-time suspicious partners of Ethiopia. There have been recent rumors that Eritrea is intensifying its army recruitment and mobilization, stoking suspicions that it is getting ready to go to a full-scale war with Ethiopia [27].

President Isaias Afwerki's regime thrives on infinite conflict, leveraging proxy warfare to sustain Ethiopia's internal chaos. By training Fano and OLA factions, Eritrea ensures that Addis Ababa cannot consolidate power or challenge Asmara's regional influence. Isaias's refusal to engage in meaningful diplomacy reflects an infinite calculus: peace would diminish his regime's reliance on militarization and external threats for legitimacy.

Egypt: Cairo's strategy without end is maintaining hydro-political dominance of the Nile. Egypt has continued to create instability to sabotage negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) by supporting Ethiopian insurgents. This is under endless game rules where the objective is not to defeat Ethiopia but keep it too fragmented to challenge Egyptian interests.

Somalia: Following the Somaliland MoU, Eritrea and Egypt were able to galvanize the Arab world against Ethiopia. Even though the Ankara Agreement eased tensions in the short term, Somalia remains a potential flashpoint due to the presence of Al-Shabaab and other militant factions.

Sudan and South Sudan: Sudan is still engaged in an internal struggle between two conflicting parties, and neither of them is willing to accept a ceasefire. In South Sudan, tensions between Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir are escalating, creating the threat of an imminent civil war. Uganda has already deployed troops to support Salva Kiir's government.

4. Implications of Finite and Infinite Game Theory on Potential War in the Horn of Africa

The application of Finite and Infinite Game Theory to Horn of Africa geopolitics reveals deep insights into the stability of the region and the potential for conflict. The dynamic between actors with finite objectives and infinite strategies creates a rich equation that can either yield a definitive result or prolong long-term instability. We consider below the implications of these strategic moves for the potential Ethiopian-Eritrean war.

4.1. Finite Strategies: The Pursuit of Absolute Victory

If war were to break out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the probable belligerents, such as Ethiopia's federal government and certain sections of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Amhara Fano insurgency, will seek finite strategies. Finite strategy seekers desire open, limited objectives, such as control over territory, military victory, or the overthrow of a specific regime.

- 1) *Ethiopia's Federal Government:* Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government appears to be pursuing finite goals, including getting access to the Red Sea and destroying insurgent forces. Overextension is probably the result, as finite players are likely to exhaust all of their resources and political will in pursuing ultimate wins. The 2020-2022 war in Tigray confirmed the limitations of such a strategy since the federal government was unable to achieve a resounding victory even after initial victories on the battlefield.
- 2) *TPLF, OLA and Fano:* Both have finite objectives, such as such as reclaiming lost territories and/or overthrowing the federal government. However, their fragmentation and lack of coordination render them impotent in endeavoring these objectives, rendering them vulnerable to manipulation by infinite actors such as Eritrea.

These are Implications

- 1) *Escalation of Conflict:* Finite tactics are likely to lead to open confrontations, increasing the likelihood of full-scale war.
- 2) *Depletion of Resources:* Limited players may end up running out of their military, economic, and political resources, leaving them vulnerable to endless players who aim for longevity.

- 3) *Unforeseen Consequences:* The pursuit of final victories might inadvertently cause increased local instability, such as in the aftermath of the Tigray War that left millions displaced and created a humanitarian crisis.

4.2. Infinite Strategies: The Persistence of Instability

Eritrea, Egypt, and certain elements of Ethiopia's insurgent forces are likely to adopt infinite strategies. These actors believe in prioritizing persistence, flexibility, and the survival of conflict over winning a decisive victory.

- 1) *Eritrea:* Led by President Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea's strategy is necessarily infinite. By backing Ethiopia's opposition movements and encouraging regional fragmentation, Eritrea seeks to destabilize Ethiopia and retain its position in the Horn of Africa. Isaias knows that a powerful, cohesive Ethiopia threatens Eritrea's existence, so enduring instability is a matter of strategy.
- 2) *Egypt:* Egypt's endless strategy is to maintain Ethiopia in turmoil so that it can maintain leverage over the Nile River. By backing rebel groups and against the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Egypt keeps Ethiopia busy with internal conflict, preventing it from being able to utilize the Nile's resources to the fullest.
- 3) *Insurgent Groups:* Those parts of the TPLF, Fano, and Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) that are more interested in survival than in achieving decisive victories are suited to infinite strategies. These groups are adaptive to changing circumstances, forming temporary alliances and shifting tactics in order to remain viable.

The following are Implications

- 1) *Long-Term Instability:* Infinite players like environments of uncertainty and chaos, and they ensure that conflicts will persist without end.
- 2) *Regional Destabilization:* The Horn of Africa is set to be transformed into a perpetual war theater with outside powers like Eritrea and Egypt taking advantage of splits within the population.
- 3) *Humanitarian Crises:* Prolonged instability undermines humanitarian crisis concerns, such as displacement, hunger, and economic collapse, which are rife in Tigray and other hotbeds.

4.3. The Interplay Between Finite and Infinite Players

When we pit a finite player against an infinite player, it's tragic because a finite player is playing to win the game, and an infinite player is playing in order to play some more. They are making very different strategic choices that they are making, and eventually sooner or later what happens is the finite player finds himself in a quagmire. The finite-infinite dynamic creates an unstable dynamic which makes it impossible to attempt to establish a durable peace.

- 1) *Finite Players Eroded by Infinite Players*: Ethiopia's federal government, as a finite player, is likely to be strategically exhausted when it battles for a long time with Eritrea, an infinite player. Eritrea's adaptability and capacity to sustain its strategy in the long term would drain Ethiopia's resources and political will, as seen in America's withdrawal from Vietnam.
- 2) *Temporary Alliances*: Finite players like the TPLF and Fano may temporarily form alliances with infinite players like Eritrea to achieve short-term goals. These alliances are always precarious, however, as the long-term goals of finite and infinite players are inherently contradictory.
- 3) *Shifting Dynamics*: The fluid nature of the infinite strategy ensures that alliances and confrontations shift perpetually, and it is difficult to predict or manage the direction of the war.

Implications:

- 1) *No Clear Solution*: The dynamic of finite and infinite players ensures Horn of Africa wars will not bring about clear victory or lasting peace.
- 2) *Regional Spillover*: Ethiopia and Eritrea's crisis could spill into neighboring countries like Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, increasing regional instability.
- 3) *International Implications*: The strategic position of the Horn of Africa, particularly its proximity to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, means that prolonged instability will have global implications, including stemming international trade and increasing migration streams.

5. Strategic Recommendations

To prevent the risks of prolonged conflict as well as regional destabilization, the Horn of Africa stakeholders must adopt a recognition of finite and infinite game behaviors.

- 1) Ethiopia should resolve internal grievances and build national unity to counter foreign manipulation.
- 2) The reintegration of TPLF into the body politic of the Ethiopian federation and its bureaucracy.
- 3) Diplomatic efforts to resolve underlying causes of grievances, e.g., Nile River disparities and border conflicts.
- 4) The International Community to facilitate mediation and negotiation to de-escalate tensions and foster regional cooperation.

6. Conclusion

The Horn of Africa is in a juncture, and it can sink into a ruinous war or precarious peace. Application of Finite and Infinite Game Theory shows that stability in the region hinges on strategic choice-making among its main stakeholders. In pursuing pure wins, finite players like Ethiopia opt to seek a victory with finality, but infinite players like Eritrea and Egypt choose survival and growth and thus allow war never to be over yet never win or end definitively.

To break this spiral, the performers must rise above zero-sum behavior and embrace practices that benefit longer-term stability despite short-term benefit. With the combination of intra-state cohesion, diplomatic strategy, and international cooperation alone will the Horn of Africa be able to break away from the vicious cycle of limited wars and unlimited aspirations.

Abbreviations

MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TPLF	Tigray People Liberation

Author Contributions

Daniel Mekonnen Yilma: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing -original draft., Writing -review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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