

Pop-Up Case: Ethiopian Troops in Tigray

Fighting has raged between Ethiopian government forces and a rival political faction in the country's northern Tigray region since November 2020, threatening to destabilize the region and cause a humanitarian disaster. How should the United States respond?

Use the following *hypothetical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

In November 2020, conflict erupted in Ethiopia's northern Tigray Region after tensions boiled over between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics for decades, despite Tigrayans constituting only 6 percent of Ethiopians. The TPLF's control over government ended in 2018, when Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's prime minister. Abiy pursued policies to bolster the federal government's power and address dissatisfaction at the TPLF-led government's marginalization of Ethiopia's other ethnic groups. The TPLF, however, felt threatened by these measures and opposed Abiy's government. Tensions escalated through fall 2020 and erupted into open conflict on November 4, after Abiy accused the TPLF of ordering an attack on federal forces in Tigray. Subsequently, the Ethiopian government blocked phone and internet services in Tigray and deployed troops to the region. Ethiopian forces, joined by troops from neighboring Eritrea, quickly occupied Tigray's capital and declared victory. However, fighting has continued in Tigray's rural areas, and federal troops have yet to withdraw. So far, more than five hundred thousand people have been displaced and at least five hundred have been killed, although some estimates are considerably higher. Credible reports have emerged of Ethiopian and Eritrean forces committing mass atrocities, including ethnicity-based attacks, sexual violence, and attacks on civilians. Meanwhile, restrictions on access and communication continue to impede the flow of humanitarian aid and efforts to assess the true damage of the conflict.

The stakes of this conflict are considerable. Ethiopia has long promoted regional stability, providing diplomatic support to Sudan in its efforts toward a democratic transition, deploying its sizeable military in support of international peacekeeping operations, and assisting efforts to stabilize crises in neighboring South Sudan and Somalia. Ethiopia has also been an important partner in U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Somalia. The United States welcomed Abiy's reforms as a victory for democratic governance and an opportunity to deepen ties with Ethiopia. The current conflict, however, has undermined confidence in Ethiopia's democratic progress and risks limiting future cooperation. If it worsens, it could further jeopardize security and stability in the region, set back U.S. counterterrorism aims, and drive a humanitarian catastrophe that threatens millions. Consequently, U.S. policymakers have clear humanitarian and strategic interests in seeing an end to the conflict in Tigray, the provision of humanitarian assistance to the region, and a political dialogue that could ensure durable peace. However, a mishandled response could also harm U.S. interests. Policymakers need to weigh the desire to address the immediate situation in Tigray against their interest in maintaining a cooperative relationship with Ethiopia. Direct U.S. involvement could improve conditions in Tigray, but a heavy-handed response could also alienate a strategic ally, making future cooperative efforts to promote peace and stability and combat terrorism in the region more challenging.

Additional Resources:

1. [The Conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray Region: What to Know \(Council on Foreign Relations\)](#)
2. [The Case for U.S. Reengagement in Ethiopia \(World Politics Review\)](#)
3. [Did Eritrea Commit War Crimes in Ethiopia? \(Foreign Policy\)](#)



Decision Point:

The crisis in Tigray is far from resolved. Continued fighting in the region threatens to become an extended, destabilizing conflict and a humanitarian disaster. U.S. policymakers have condemned the violence and called on Ethiopia to lift restrictions on access and communication and work toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict. International pressure has spurred some improvements in humanitarian access to Tigray, but the crisis remains. Meanwhile, a recent U.S. government report has found allegations of ethnic cleansing by Ethiopian forces and allied militias to be credible. Considering the new report, the president has convened members of the National Security Council (NSC) to deliberate whether more direct U.S. involvement in Tigray is warranted and, if so, what that should entail. NSC members will need to consider growing humanitarian concerns alongside the risks of increasing instability to U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa, and the strategic importance of continued cooperation with Ethiopia.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Reiterate calls for the Ethiopian government to address the crisis*, including by removing troops from Tigray, initiating a political dialogue mediated by U.S. diplomats or other regional actors, and allowing access to international aid and investigations of atrocities. This option requires minimal U.S. resources and entails little risk but offers the least influence on the outcome of the conflict.
- *Enact sanctions on Ethiopian government officials or withhold development aid* until troops withdraw and aid efforts and investigations can proceed. This option would tangibly pressure Ethiopia to end the conflict and could improve conditions in Tigray. However, it risks damaging future cooperation with Ethiopia.
- *Send humanitarian assistance to the surrounding region and, when possible, into Tigray itself*. This would address the humanitarian crisis and could temper the conflict's effects on regional stability with less risk to future cooperation with Ethiopia. However, it would ignore the root causes of the crisis, potentially allowing it to worsen and require greater humanitarian assistance.
- *Support the creation of a multilateral peacekeeping mission to monitor conditions in Tigray and ensure humanitarian access*. This option could facilitate an end to the conflict and improve humanitarian conditions. However, it would be difficult to implement as it would require Ethiopian consent and resource contributions from other countries. A U.S. recommendation of peacekeepers and the ensuing negotiations could also harm relations with Ethiopia.

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



Don Pollard

Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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