United Nations Organs and Their Functions in the Ethiopia–Eritrea Conflict

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Abstract

The Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict of 1998–2000 engendered an extensive international diplomatic, legal and peacekeeping participation. This article examines the roles of United Nations Organs and related mechanisms in managing the conflict and its aftermath from 1998 to 2024, using Idealism as its analytical framework. Particular attention is given to the Security Council, Secretary-General, United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), Eritrea–Ethiopia Claims Commission (EECC), General Assembly and the wider United Nations organization. Based on qualitative documentary analysis, the article opines that the United Nations assisted to conflict control, diplomatic engagement, peacekeeping, legal dispute settlement and the establishment of the Algiers peace process. These contributions, however, were limited by state sovereignty, political disagreement, limitations on United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the difficulty of transforming legal decisions into political implementation. The termination of UNMEE in 2008 therefore represents an important limitation of the United Nations peacekeeping effort but by itself demonstrate a complete effective international mediation in the Ethiopia and Eritrea conflict. The 2018 Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement further demonstrates the importance of political decisions by the two states also showing that the legal and diplomatic framework established earlier remained significant. The case supports key Idealist suppositions concerning diplomacy, international law, institutional cooperation and peaceful dispute settlement, while signifying that international institutions cannot secure durable implementation without sustained state cooperation.

Keywords: Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict, United Nations, mediation, Security Council, UNMEE, EEBC, EECC, Idealism, peacekeeping, conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

The Ethiopia–Eritrea war of 1998–2000 was a major interstate conflict in post-Cold War Africa. Fighting began in May 1998 following a dispute over the border, particularly around Badme and other contested areas. The conflict resulted in substantial human, social and economic costs and generated an extensive international response. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) played a central role in mediation, while the United Nations (UN), European Union and United States supported efforts to end the conflict (De Guttry, 2021).

The United Nations became involved during the early stage of the conflict. Security Council Resolution 1177 (1998) called for an end to hostilities and supported diplomatic efforts toward a peaceful settlement (United Nations Security Council (UNSC), 1998). Subsequent Council

resolutions supported the OAU-led process and called upon the parties to pursue negotiations. As fighting intensified in 2000, the Security Council adopted further measures and later established the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) to support the implementation of the peace process (UNSC, 2000a, 2000b).

The Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities of June 2000 and the Algiers Peace Agreement of December 2000 provided the principal framework for ending the war. The agreements established arrangements for an international peacekeeping presence and created the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) and Eritrea–Ethiopia Claims Commission (EECC). The EEBC was mandated to delimit and demarcate the border, while the EECC was established to determine claims arising from the conflict (United Nations, 2000).

The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) afterward monitored the cessation of hostilities, troop redeployments and the Temporary Security Zone. Its mandate reflected the close connection between peacekeeping and the wider peace agreement (UNSC, 2000b). The EEBC issued its final and binding boundary decision in 2002, but implementation remained politically difficult. The resulting stalemate contributed to the prolonged period commonly described as "no war, no peace" (Aweke & Seid, 2023).

The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) also faced escalating operational difficulties. Limitations on its activities and the interruption of fuel supplies eventually made the mission unable to carry out its mandate effectively. The Security Council terminated the mission in July 2008, while explicitly maintaining that the termination did not remove Ethiopia and Eritrea's obligations under the Algiers Agreements (UNSC, 2008). Thus, the end of United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) did not bring the wider legal and diplomatic framework of the peace process to an end.

The political relationship between the two countries changed significantly in 2018. The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship signed on 9 July 2018 declared that the state of war had ended, provided for the resumption of diplomatic, transport, trade and communication links, and stated that the boundary decision would be implemented (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia & State of Eritrea, 2018). The rapprochement reflected decisions by the two governments and a changed political environment rather than a direct UN achievement (Aweke & Seid, 2023).

This article therefore examines the functions of UN organs and related mechanisms rather than treating the UN as a single actor. It argues that the UN contributed substantially to conflict management and to the creation of a rules-based framework for settlement, but its ability to secure implementation was limited by the political choices and cooperation of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Idealism provides the analytical framework for examining the roles of diplomacy, international law, multilateral institutions, cooperation and peaceful dispute settlement.

2. Theoretical Framework

Idealism emphasizes the prospect of managing international relations through cooperation, diplomacy, international law and international institutions. It holds that international

disputes can be addressed through rules and collective arrangements rather than relying primarily on military altercation (Dunne et al., 2021).

The United Nations replicates several of these ideologies. The UN Charter establishes peaceful settlement of disputes as an important principle of international relations and gives the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security (United Nations, 1945). Mediation, negotiation, peacekeeping, legal settlement and collective action can therefore be understood as institutional expressions of Idealist principles. The Ethiopia–Eritrea case provides a useful setting for examining these assumptions. The international response included regional mediation, diplomatic engagement, peace-keeping and legal dispute settlement. The establishment of UNMEE and the creation of the EEBC and EECC characterized attempts to move the dispute from military confrontation into institutional and legal processes (De Guttry, 2021).

Idealism, however, does not eradicate state sovereignty and International institutions rather it operates within a system in which states retain significant right over their own actions. The Ethiopia–Eritrea experience is therefore essential because formal agreements and legal mechanisms were established, yet implementation remained reliant on political decisions by the parties. The issue is therefore not whether organizations matter, but how effectively they can influence state behaviour when political commitment declines.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative documentary analysis of the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict from 1998 to 2024. Primary sources include United Nations Security Council resolutions, Secretary-General Reports, UNMEE documents, the Algiers Agreements, and documents relating to the EEBC and EECC. These are matched with appropriate scholarly literature and publications of international and regional organizations.

Documents were purposively selected according to their in-depth relevance to United Nations mediation, peacekeeping, international law, institutional cooperation and conflict resolution. These materials were analyzed thematically with attention to diplomacy, peacekeeping, legal settlement, state cooperation and implementation. The 1998–2024 period provides a basis for examining both the immediate conflict and the longer-term development of the peace process.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Security Council and the Establishment of the Peace Process

The Security Council was the foremost United Nations Organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security in the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict. Its participation developed from early diplomatic pressure to institutional support for the peace process.

The Resolution 1177 (1998) called for an end to hostilities and prop up efforts toward a peaceful settlement. Subsequent resolutions supported the formal Organization for African Unity (OAU) mediation process and persuaded the parties to return to negotiations (UNSC, 1998, 1999a, 1999b). Howbeit, when fighting escalated in 2000, the Council adopted Resolutions 1297 and 1298, strengthening demands for moderation and supporting further diplomatic efforts (UNSC, 2000c, 2000d).

The Council subsequently moved from diplomatic pressure to institutional maintenance for the Peace Agreement. Then Resolution 1312 established UNMEE, while Resolution 1320 approved the expansion of the mission. United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea was mandated to monitor the cessation of hostilities and support security measures associated with the peace process (UNSC, 2000a, 2000b).

The Council therefore performed a broader function than mediation in the narrow sense. It provided the organizational authority within which peacekeeping, diplomacy and legal settlement could function. This reflects an important Idealist principle; international organizations can provide rules and procedures through which states can address disputes without returning to armed conflict.

The Security Council's restrictions were also noteworthy. Its resolutions could establish obligations and international mechanisms, but implementation depended largely on Ethiopia and Eritrea. In 2008, for example, the Council reaffirmed that the two States were responsible for achieving a comprehensive and lasting resolution and stabilizing their relations (UNSC, 2008). Institutional authority therefore did not abolish the role of state cooperation.

4.2 The Secretary-General and Preventive Diplomacy

The Secretary-General played a vital diplomatic role from the beginning of the conflict. Kofi Annan contacted the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments following the outbreak of fighting, advocated control and supported efforts to find a peaceful settlement. He also supported the OAU mediation process, including through the involvement of Mohammed Sahnoun (United Nations, 2000; De Guttry,2021).

The Secretary-General continued to contribute through good offices, diplomatic engagement and reporting to the Security Council. This role was imperative because it provided channels of communication between the parties during periods of political tension. The United Nations' involvement therefore extended beyond formal Security Council resolutions to continuing diplomatic engagement.

The experience nevertheless shows the limits of preventive diplomacy. Diplomatic commitment can create opportunities for dialogue and encourage negotiations, but it cannot alternate for political agreement between sovereign states. The Secretary-General could offer good offices and facilitate communication, while the final political decisions remained with Ethiopia and Eritrea.

4.3 UNMEE and Conflict Repression

UNMEE was the major United Nations peacekeeping mechanism created to support implementation of the cessation-of-hostilities arrangements. Its mandate included maintaining connection with the parties, monitoring the cessation of hostilities, observing troop redeployments and supporting the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) (UNSC, 2000a, 2000b).

The mission's role was primarily operational and its presence provided an international method for monitoring the security measures and reducing the risk of renewed large-scale

fighting. It also provided the Security Council and wider international community with information about developments on the ground (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025).

UNMEE nonetheless depended on cooperation from the parties. The mission required access, movement, logistics and communication in order to carry out its mandate. Over time, these conditions deteriorated. Eritrea imposed restrictions on the mission and later interrupted fuel supplies, seriously affecting UNMEE's ability to operate (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025).

The Security Council in time terminated UNMEE through Resolution 1827 on 30 July 2008, with the termination taking effect on 31 July. At the same time, the Council reaffirmed the parties' obligations under the Algiers Agreements and supported sustained international engagement (UNSC, 2008). The Secretary-General also maintained that good offices remained accessible to assist the parties in implementing the agreements (United Nations, 2008).

UNMEE therefore presents a mixed record that contributed to conflict repression while it was able to operate, but it could not autonomously resolve the underlying political dispute. Its termination illustrates the limits of peacekeeping when the political and operational conditions required for a mission declined (de Guttry, 2021).

4.4 The EEBC and the Use of International Law

The Eritrea and Ethiopia Boundary Commission represented the legal dimension of the Algiers peace process. In its place of leaving the border question to continued military or political confrontation, Ethiopia and Eritrea agreed to submit the dispute to a legal process. The Commission was mandated to demarcate the border, and its decision was to be final and binding (United Nations, 2000).

The EEBC issued its boundary decision in 2002. The Security Council consequently reaffirmed the final and binding nature of the Commission's resolution and adjusted UNMEE's role to support implementation of the peace process (UNSC, 2003).

The importance of the EEBC from an Idealist perspective lies in the movement of the dispute from military confrontation toward international law and institutional procedures. A territorial dispute that had aided to armed conflict was placed within a legal framework.

The subsequent difficulty was implementation and the existence of a binding legal decision did not automatically produce political acceptance, physical demarcation or normalized relations. The case therefore exhibits a difference between establishing a legal settlement and securing its political implementation.

4.5 The EECC and Post-Conflict Legal Remedy

The EECC addressed claims arising from the conflict, including claims relating to loss, damage and injury. Its function was different from that of the EEBC: the EEBC dealt mainly with the boundary, while the EECC addressed claims resulting from the conflict (United Nations, 2000).

The EECC provided a legal mechanism through which disputes arising from the war could be addressed through arbitration rather than continued political or military disagreement. Its importance therefore lies in the institutionalization of post-conflict legal redress.

The Commission should be assessed according to its specific legal mandate rather than according to whether it produced a complete political settlement. Its work formed part of the wider effort to manage the consequences of the conflict through international law.

4.6 The General Assembly and the Normative Dimension

The General Assembly did not possess the same operational responsibility as the Security Council in the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict. On the other hand, its broader calculated and normative role forms part of the United Nations' involvement to international cooperation and peaceful dispute settlement.

The UN Charter establishes principles relating to peaceful relations, sovereign equality and international cooperation (United Nations, 1945). These principles provide the wider normative environment within which more direct mechanisms such as Security Council action, mediation and peacekeeping operate.

The difference between the General Assembly and the Security Council is therefore important. The General Assembly provides a broad many-sided forum, while the Security Council has primary responsibility for international peace and security. The Assembly's significance to the Ethiopia–Eritrea case is consequently more normative and political than operational.

4.7 The UN System and Humanitarian Assistance

The conflict generated displacement, humanitarian needs and damage to communities and infrastructure. Addressing these consequences required international assistance beyond diplomacy and military security.

The wider UN system supported humanitarian and recovery-related activities in the affected populations. UNMEE itself also integrated humanitarian and mine-action elements into its broader operation, demonstrating that peacekeeping was related to wider efforts to stabilize the affected areas (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025).

This dimension broadens the meaning of conflict resolution. Ending armed confrontation is important, but sustainable peace also requires attention to human welfare, displacement, recovery and the conditions that allow communities to rebuild. Such cooperation is dependable with the broader normative course of Idealism.

4.8 UN Cooperation between the Regional Organizations

The Ethiopia–Eritrea peace process was not solely a UN undertaking. The OAU played a central role in mediation, while the UN supported and complemented the regional process. The June, 2000 Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities specifically called for a UN peacekeeping operation in cooperation with the OAU (United Nations, 2000).

This relationship discloses the value of combining regional diplomacy with global institutional support. Regional organizations can provide political access and background knowledge, while the United Nations can contribute international legitimacy, peacekeeping capacity and institutional resources.

The shift from the OAU to the African Union (AU) in 2002 did not remove the importance of regional engagement. Instead, the Ethiopia–Eritrea case exemplifies how regional and international institutions can interrelate in tackling interstate disputes. The UN's role should therefore be understood as part of a wider international and regional response rather than as an isolated mediation effort (de Guttry, 2021).

4.9 Limits of UN Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Several factors that limited the effectiveness of the UN responses were:-

First, state sovereignty remained fundamental. Ethiopia and Eritrea were sovereign states, and UN mechanisms therefore operated within a system in which the parties retained substantial control over their own decisions.

Second, political commitment affected implementation. The Algiers Agreements established formal obligations, but implementation depended on decisions by the two governments. The Security Council itself recognized that the primary responsibility for achieving a comprehensive and lasting settlement rested with Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNSC, 2008).

Third, the existence of Chapter VII authority did not automatically result in coercive enforcement. The Security Council possesses powers under Chapter VII, but the exercise of those powers depends on Council decisions and the political circumstances of each case. Thus, the presence of legal authority should not be confused with automatic enforcement.

Fourth, UNMEE was operationally dependent on access, movement and logistical cooperation. The deterioration of these conditions substantially reduced its capacity to perform its mandate (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025).

Finally, the case exposed the gap between legal settlement and political implementation. The EEBC established a binding legal decision, but legal finality did not automatically produce political reconciliation or physical demarcation.

These limitations do not make international institutions irrelevant. Rather, they show that institutional effectiveness is partly conditioned by the political environment in which institutions operate.

4.10 The 2018 Rapprochement and the Long-Term Relevance of the Peace Process

The 2018 rapprochement provides an important point for assessing the longer history of the conflict. The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship signed on 9 July 2018 declared that the state of war had ended and provided for renewed political, economic, transport and communication relations. It also stated that the boundary decision would be implemented (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia & State of Eritrea, 2018).

The rapprochement should not be presented as a direct result of UN mediation. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the importance of political change and decisions within Ethiopia and Eritrea in creating the conditions for renewed relations (Aweke & Seid, 2023). The UN therefore should not be credited exclusively for the 2018 breakthrough.

At the same time, the 2018 declaration referred directly to an issue that had been central to the earlier international peace process: implementation of the boundary decision. This indicates that the legal framework created through the Algiers process had not simply disappeared after the termination of UNMEE.

The long-term record therefore suggests that mediation cannot be assessed only by the duration of a peacekeeping mission or by immediate implementation. International agreements, legal decisions and institutional arrangements may continue to influence later political developments even after an international mission has ended.

5. Findings

First, the Ethiopia–Eritrea case demonstrates that UN involvement was multidimensional. Different UN organs and related mechanisms performed different functions within the same peace process.

Second, the Security Council provided the principal institutional framework for international engagement. It supported diplomacy, authorized peacekeeping and repeatedly called upon Ethiopia and Eritrea to implement their obligations under the Algiers Agreements (UNSC, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2008).

Third, the Secretary-General contributed through preventive diplomacy, good offices, communication with the parties and support for the regional mediation process. These functions demonstrate the diplomatic dimension of UN conflict management.

Fourth, UNMEE contributed to conflict containment but could not independently resolve the political dispute. Its termination in 2008 shows the limits of peacekeeping where political cooperation and operational access deteriorates (De Guttry, 2021).

Fifth, the EEBC and EECC demonstrate the role of international law in managing interstate conflict. They provided institutional alternatives to military confrontation, although the EEBC experience also established that a legal decision requires political implementation.

Sixth, the case supports important Idealist assumptions concerning diplomacy, international institutions, international law, cooperation and peaceful dispute settlement. At the same time, it demonstrates that these mechanisms operate within a system of sovereign states and therefore depend significantly on political commitment.

Finally, the longer-term record suggests that mediation effectiveness should not be judged only by immediate implementation or by the lifespan of a peacekeeping mission. The legal and institutional framework created through the peace process remained relevant to later developments, including the 2018 rapprochement.

6. Recommendations

a). The United Nations should strengthen implementation planning when supporting future peace agreements, particularly where agreements contain legally binding decisions.

b). Peacekeeping mandates should anticipate possible restrictions on movement, logistics, access and provide practical responses to such challenges.

c). Preventive diplomacy should be strengthened at the early stages of interstate disputes before territorial disagreements develop into full-scale warfare.

d). The United Nations should continue strengthening cooperation with the African Union and relevant regional organizations, particularly where regional actors have direct political access to the parties.

e). Legal settlements should be accompanied by sustained political dialogue and confidence-building measures. A binding legal decision can settle a dispute formally, but political acceptance remains vital for implementation.

f). Post-conflict international assistance should combine security, humanitarian relief, economic recovery and reconciliation rather than treating peacekeeping as an isolated activity.

g). Finally, assessments of international mediation should consider both immediate outcomes and longer-term institutional effects. This provides a broader basis for understanding mediation where political settlements develop over extended periods.

7. Conclusion

The Ethiopia–Eritrea case shows that the United Nations made committed involvement through diplomacy, peacekeeping, legal settlement and humanitarian support. The Security Council provided the institutional framework, the Secretary-General supported diplomacy, UNMEE contributed to conflict containment, and the EEBC and EECC provided legal mechanisms for addressing the border and consequences of the war.

These mechanisms, however, could not independently secure a lasting political settlement. The termination of UNMEE in 2008 and the prolonged execution difficulties surrounding the EEBC decision demonstrate the limits of international institutions when political commitment weakens. The 2018 rapprochement, driven principally by decisions of the two states, nonetheless confirmed that the earlier legal and diplomatic framework remained relevant.

From an Idealist perspective, the case supports the importance of diplomacy, international law, multilateral institutions and peaceful dispute settlement. At the same time, it reveals that international institutions operate within a system of sovereign states and therefore require sustained state cooperation to translate international rules and agreements into durable political outcomes.

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