

The Biden Administration's Policy Move

--From Ethiopia as an Ally to that of Adversary is Provocative and Dangerous--

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"Kissinger is the only person who ever discovered Africa through Cuba"

A critic in 1981

Part II

This commentary is intended to show continuity in U.S. policy toward Ethiopia; and to urge the Federal Government of Ethiopia as well as Ethiopians, including the Diaspora to focus more on offering alternatives in support of Ethiopia in a coordinated, focused, and strategic manner. Our engagements with the USA and other Western nations at odds with Ethiopia must be based on wisdom, imagination, strategic content that serve the mutual interests of parties involved.

More than two decades ago, one of the most prominent opinion-makers on U.S. policy toward the entire Horn of Africa, the late Paul Henze was interviewed on the Horn of Africa and its organic relations to the Middle East. What interested me to refer to Henze at this time is the missing narrative in today's intellectual discourse among Ethiopian scholars and academics concerning America's ambiguous policy toward Ethiopia and Ethiopia's organic link to the Middle East and North Africa.

Paul Henze said this:

"The Horn of Africa is really as much a part of the Middle East as it is of Africa. This is true historically and it is certainly true in terms of politics, it is also true in terms of what people think. a country such as Sudan regards itself as much a part of the Arab world in the Middle East as it does a part of Africa. **Ethiopia has related to the Middle East and the Mediterranean world** for most of its history. Somalia at one point declared itself an Arab country although of course it is not. But it has been involved, although it has collapsed in the last two years in Arab politics. So, you really can't consider the politics of the Horn of Africa without considering the relationships with the Middle East."

Ethiopia's distinct, unique, and long history must not be understated. I recall once at the World Bank that an Indian national (a Chief Economist at the time) run into me in the elevator and said this. "Aklog, someone mistook me and thought I was in fact you." I said, "We look alike, don't we?" He told me that "he felt at home" whenever he visited Ethiopia on missions. "Ethiopia should really be part of MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) don't you think." I said "it is also part of Black Africa. Let us discuss the pros and cons of your interesting proposal." The same thing happened to me in Indonesia. There are people there too who look like Ethiopians and believe that Ethiopia is part of MENA.

Ethiopia is an ancient country whose trade, cultural, spiritual, and other links and reaches with peoples as far as Russia, India and Indonesia are underappreciated and underreported by Western historians. This link is especially pronounced when it comes to the Middle East and North Africa. Ethiopia's historical roots and its distinct identity are not a mirage.

Ethiopia's geopolitical position and interest

It is this vital and strategic link with the rest of the world, especially Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea that it lost under the treasonous act of the TPLF that should guide the debate. It is Ethiopia's determination to harness the waters of the Blue Nile for the betterment of its vast population that Ethiopia's adversaries, especially Egypt and increasingly Western Europe and the United States are contesting subtly. I suggest that they are contesting the incontestable.

There is an adage that is pertinent here. "All roads lead to Rome." Do all roads in this geopolitical tug of war that involves the USA and the EU lead to Ethiopia's reemerging geopolitical position, its potential reclaims of access to the Red Sea and its legitimate demand for equitable use of Nile waters? They do.

What ultimately is the America's interest in this contest? Henze affirmed this.

"America's interests in the Horn of Africa stem from World War Two. They were basically a continuation of British interests. In fact, just as America in effect took over from Britain in respect to Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 40s.; in the early 50s America took over from Britain in Ethiopia and Britain lost its interest in maintaining its position in Ethiopia ...There were 2 aspects of Ethiopian history that up until recently were no nos. One was the importance of the Portuguese back in the 16th century, who essentially liberated Ethiopia from Arab domination... And Britain played a major role in liberating Ethiopia from Italy. Ethiopians of course played a role themselves too the partisan movement in Ethiopia was strong.... And Britain maintained a position in Ethiopia until the late 40s early 50s and was the principal occupying power in Eritrea. But gradually during that time, the United States in effect took over and the US position in Ethiopia was formalized in 1953 with treaties that gave the US base rights in Ethiopia."

Here I would like to draw your attention to Henze's thesis:

"Ethiopia is looked especially important at that point and was particularly important because it was strategically situated where it had a major impact on traffic through the Red Sea on the Eritrean Coast. It was very important from the point of view of communications and it remained very important from the point of view of communications until the 70s. One of the interesting features of Ethiopia during the late 60s and 70s was that it was one of the few places in the world where it was possible for Western Intelligence people to intercept television and other internal broadcasts in the Soviet Union and that is one of the reasons that the American communications establishment in Eritrea was maintained until the mid-70s. Now that all became redundant when satellites came in."

Did the USA treat Ethiopia as a strategic ally or a country of special interest that it can dispense?

In his seminal study, "**U.S. foreign policy making toward Ethiopia and Somalia, 1974-1980**," the Greek Scholar, Loannis Mantzikos opines that American policy and decision-makers misunderstood Ethiopia's long and distinguished history, its indigenous and well engrained political and social culture. Regardless of ethnicity, faith and other designations, Ethiopians show exponential zeal, determination and national unity when faced with external threat. The Battle of Adwa comes to mind.

The critic who in 1981 was quoted saying “Kissinger is the only person who ever discovered Africa through Cuba” reminded me of the current misinformation and manufactured lies based policy and decision-making doctrine that the Biden Africa policy team seems to have adopted. This team seems to have determined that Ethiopia is serving the national interests of foreign powers, for example China or Russia or Turkey or Iran at the expense of the USA. This is not true. Why not accept the notion that Ethiopia is serving its own national interests first?

The misreading of Ethiopia’s history and the understatement of the determination of the Ethiopian people that their commitment is first and foremost to preserve Ethiopia’s sovereign and legitimate rights, the country’s territorial integrity and long-term interests entail substantial costs for the Atlantic Alliance in general and for the USA. As a country, Ethiopia serves its own national interest the same way as the USA or Russia or China or Turkey or Egypt etc. Ethiopia has always followed a collective security and multipolar approach. This is healthy for Ethiopia and for the rest of Africa.

US policy and decision-making that is premised with a different lens or different set of parameters diminishes the more than 120 years of mutual relations between the Ethiopian and the American people that benefit both. This special relationship has served American interests well not only in the Horn but throughout Africa. For example, the war against terrorism led by the Ethiopian Government and the Bush Administration in the Horn would have been virtually impossible without the participation of Ethiopian forces. Ethiopian lives were lost. UN Peacekeeping operations in Africa would have been untenable without Ethiopia. Ethiopian lives were lost.

“The carrot or the stick?”

The Biden Team must recognize that there are those of us who continue to support close relations between Ethiopia and the USA for the benefit of both countries. This cannot occur, however, if the Biden Team is deadest on its new doctrine of gross interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign and independent Black African state. Ethiopia serves as the seat of the African Union, several UN specialized agencies including the Economic Commission for Africa and numerous embassies.

The Biden Africa Team’s perspective that the Ethiopian people and their government are not as committed to the honor and dignity of Tigrean-Ethiopian girls and mothers; to the prevention of hunger and famine; and to the restoration of peace and stability in the region and in the rest of Ethiopia as much as the “Good Samaritans” borders the real of total unreasonableness. It is my assessment that the approach is driven by a colonial mindset. Some say it is “racist.”

Seventy percent of Ethiopia’s 120 million people is composed of youth. The peaceful protests in major urban centers among youth in defense of Ethiopia last week should send a powerful signal that applying “the stick” rather than the “carrot” might prove counterproductive in the long-term. The ethical and moral question is “Why punish any country using the “stick” in the first place?” What happened to diplomacy?

Anticipate the worst and hope for the best!

So far, the Biden Africa Team seems deadest in its way. The TPLF keeps killing Tigrean-Ethiopians, aid workers etc. The TPLF dismembers the bodies of their leaders when killed. They decapitate their heads to mask evidence. Is this not barbaric? Inhumane? It is not for the lack of evidence that Ethiopia is being punished; and being pushed to the edge?

Accordingly, the Ethiopian people within the country and the country's huge Diaspora must be prepared for more punitive actions.

I am hopeful that policy and decision-makers with cool heads will prevail in the end. The visit by Senator Jim Inhofe to "his second home" might generate calm and deliberation within the US Senate and the Atlantic Alliance. Ironically, the Biden Africa Team has dispatched its envoy, Jeff Feltman to the Middle East enroute to Ethiopia at the same time. It will be opportune for the two Senior American officials (one Democrat and the other Republican) to meet with their Ethiopian counterparts jointly. This way, there will at least be a semblance of coherence in US approaches and communication on Ethiopia.

If, on the other hand, the Biden Administration cuts more aid and if it uses America's substantial influence among multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF, the ADB and numerous others to halt or to cut more aid, the greatest impact will be on the poorest of the poor. It will also be unprecedented for the Bretton Woods Institutions to serve as an appendage of the United States. Such a move will be chilling and dangerous. In any case, any cut will prolong poverty. This will in turn aggravate civil unrest and instability. I am especially concerned that Ethiopian youth, 30 percent of whom are unemployed and millions more underemployed will be incentivized to join extremist forces.

Unintended consequences

In the event of more draconian actions against Ethiopia, I predict that anti-American sentiment will be wide and deep not only in Ethiopia but throughout Black Africa. More disheartening and disconcerting are the notion that relations between Ethiopia and the USA might not recover if socioeconomic and political impacts on Ethiopia and on ordinary Ethiopians become unbearable. The good that the USA has done since the 1950s might also dissipate.

As a "Superpower," the US must refrain from forcing its will on Ethiopia. For most Ethiopians including Tigrean-Ethiopians, Ethiopia's sovereignty is sacrosanct. Sovereignty includes non-interference in the country's domestic affairs; respect for Ethiopia's rights over Nile waters; and recognition of Ethiopian societal commitment to complete the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This dam will not cause significant harm to Egypt or the Sudan.

I was appalled to hear Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee since February this year suggesting that Egypt "might bomb the dam." How responsible is that? Who is he emboldening? Is bombing the answer? Is it not against international law?

An asymmetrical relationship that requires calibration.

To my knowledge and as research findings show, the USA has never established a strategic relationship with any Sub-Saharan African country. The USA established "a special relationship" with Ethiopia during the 1950s under Emperor Haile Selassie (the Kagnev military post in Eritrea comes to mind). This partnership was renewed under President George Bush during the war against terrorism.

The partnership had served America's national interests. At the same time, it has enabled the Government of Ethiopia led by the TPLF to access massive bilateral and multilateral aid averaging **about \$3.5 billion per annum** up to the end of 2018. Believe it or not the amount **was \$3.9 billion in 2009**. In large part, this largesse can be attributed to two important geopolitical factors:

1. TPLF's unbridled commitment to serve Western interests; and

2. US determination to dismantle the Soviet Union's penetration in the Horn of Africa.

Both objectives were met. But the human rights situation under Meles Zenawi was worse than it is today. Tens of thousands were jailed. Silent **ethnically motivated killing**, genocide and rape were normalized by the TPLF. These gross human rights violations are not acknowledged by the current Biden Team. Human Rights Watch had provided a plethora of compelling documentary evidence urging the donor community to link aid to their largesse. But nothing of the kind took place. Western democracies did not impose sanction then. Senator Jim Inhofe's eloquent testimony on the Senate floor could have and should have persuaded most Senators to change course. By changing course, I mean retraction of the Department of State's draconian measures against Ethiopia.

US and Ethiopian relations have considerable strategic values. The people-to-people relationships between the two countries are immense. The fact that the two countries never signed a strategic treaty is irrelevant. Henze was right in his statement.

"There was never a formal alliance between the United States and Ethiopia just as I suppose there was a formal alliance between Britain and Ethiopia in terms of World War Two. The American position toward Ethiopia was always called **a special relationship**. The United States never committed itself to defend Ethiopia against invasion or outside problems. But the United States did commit itself to give Ethiopia substantial military aid. Haile Selassie however was a very clever ruler. He did not want a relationship with a single country. He wanted his relationships to be very varied."

The same principle applies to the Government of Ethiopia led by Prime Minister Aby. The difference is this. At the time of Emperor Haile Selassie, the major tension was between the USA on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other. Today, the major actors on the scene include the second most powerful economy on the planet, China. The perspective, if any, that Ethiopia's economic, investment and trade ties to China are being conducted at the expense of the USA is off the charts! It is wrong. Access to military hardware and access to investment capital are both important for Ethiopia.

"When it came for example to modernizing the Ethiopian Army, Haile Selassie sought help from the Swedes, the Indians, and the Belgians. At the same time, the United States was the logical source for major military equipment and the military equipment the United States supplied to Ethiopia was looked on as in effect payment for the use of air facilities, communications facilities, and naval facilities in Ethiopia. So, Ethiopia was an important position from a strategic point of view in the 50s and 60s" said Henze.

The point I would like to underscore here is mutual benefit. This doctrine continued under Mengistu Haile Mariam. "The US did not continue to support the Mengistu regime as such." Instead, or rather "The US continued to support Ethiopia. The US commitment in the last analysis was never to Haile Selassie as an individual; it was to the country." What has really changed now?

At the time, Ethiopia was deemed important for US policy and decision-makers for the following primary reasons:

- "Ethiopia was important because of its location; its size; its historical position; and its basic political orientation" as a fiercely independent and patriotic country.

- “Americans had hoped when Haile Selassie was overthrown, and the pretty half-baked military bunch took over that somehow they could be steered in a direction that would be favorable to the US and to the West.”

Henze’s rationale is correct. There are other variables, for example, the mushrooming of ethnic-based National Liberation Fronts including the TPLF that were financed and supported by external interests to which he failed to give weight. This flaw is important today. The leftist ideologue and champion of the developmental state in Africa--- among the few coveted, admired and supported by the USA and other Western powers---Meles Zenawi repressed Ethiopians. He crafted and imposed an ethnic federation that haunts Ethiopia today. Ethiopia is “at a dangerous crossroads” not because of its diversity; but because of its quarreling ethnic-elites and their foreign sponsors.

The hopes and expectations that Henze mentioned and embraced by none other than Henry Kissinger, US Security Chief, and later Head of the Department of State were ultimately dashed. Mengistu’s decision to join the Socialist camp changed America’s attitude toward Ethiopia. This Ethiopian regime affinity to a Superpower prompted Kissinger to change his mind. He met with and supported Said Barre, the President of Somalia who had invaded Ethiopia unprovoked. Despite this, American humanitarian aid to Ethiopia was not completely severed.

Is there a parallel here with the unprovoked invasion of Ethiopia by Sudan that just concluded a week-long military drill jointly with the Egyptian military?

Why has the Biden Team showed a great deal of restraint regarding: a) Sudan’s unprovoked invasion of Ethiopia and its annexation of large tracts of Ethiopian lands? b) The weeklong joint military exercise on land and sea by Egypt and Sudan?

Would it not be a **Statesman like act** to ask if not to demand what the ultimate objective of the military exercise is; and what rogue country Egypt and Sudan are targeting? Is it not within the scope of his responsibility for Secretary of State Blinken to advise Egypt and Sudan that the militarization of the Horn and North Africa will threaten regional peace, stability, and collective security? Is it not prudent for Blinken to ask why the Egyptian military is still in the Sudan after the duet’s provocative military exercise across the Ethiopian border?

Let me summarize Part II and provide a set of recommendations to consider:

1. The first and foremost priority is for the Federal Government of Ethiopia to harness the creative, innovative, and productive potential of the Ethiopian people; to defend and protect their lives and their livelihoods irrespective of ethnicity, faith, and location; and to raise awareness among the Ethiopian people that their **destiny is intertwined** and that they must unite in defense of their country. In the face of adversity, **internal unity** is quintessential.
2. The Federal Government of Ethiopia must take the lead in articulating Ethiopia’s foreign policy and diplomatic agenda. This can be done in the form of a strategic diplomatic road map. This road map will provide a framework that will facilitate external support by the Diaspora as well as Ethiopia’s foreign friends of whom there are many. Regardless of location, ethnicity, faith or status, Ethiopians must speak from the same script.

3. The Federal Government of Ethiopia must lodge a formal complaint to the UN Security Council that Egypt and Sudan pose an existential threat to Ethiopia now. It must also urge America's Special Envoy, Jeff Feltman as well as Senator Jim Inhofe that Sudan and Egypt endanger the entire Horn and Eastern Africa.
4. During this coming national election and beyond, Ethiopia's political leaders, academics and civil society must be bold and imaginative enough to consider the **Constitutional and structural** hurdles that continue to haunt Ethiopia and that limit its prosperity. I know of no single African country whose constitutional preamble states "We nations, nationalities and peoples." How do you defend Ethiopia as one country with one national identity as Ethiopians under ethnic federalism?
5. Ethiopia's agenda is everyone's business. In this regard, I welcome the Ethiopian Orthodox Synod's recent pronouncement critiquing Western interference in Ethiopia's domestic affairs and questioning the value-added of punitive actions against Ethiopia. This pro-Ethiopia position is a model that other Ethiopian civil society, professional, youth, women and other groups may wish to replicate.
6. Ethiopia's youth has shown its commitment to Ethiopia. I support recent peaceful protests. I urge youth to refrain from vitriolic and unacceptable statements and slogans. Combative statements and slogans undermine Ethiopia's relations with the people of the United States and other Western democracies.
7. The Ethiopian Diaspora in the USA has huge potential to help Ethiopia fill the resources and capacity gap. I have repeatedly suggested that **a 50-State strategy that is led**, owned, and managed by motivated Ethiopian Americans from Hawaii to Maine is critical. For this to succeed, the work must start at the grassroots and local level. It starts with identification of highly motivated and committed Ethiopian Americans in every state. The Terms of Reference must be from the same script. I am ready and willing to provide a draft framework for consideration.
8. The Biden Africa Team must stop its gross interference in Ethiopia's domestic affairs. I have shown in this commentary that America's own national security and market interests are also affected adversely by the sanction. The Team might wish to remember that Meles Zenawi, an American friend and sometime critic had said this. "To impose democracy from outside is inherently undemocratic." By the same token, to use the humanitarian crisis in Tigray created by the TPLF that murders its own people as a pretext for punitive action is wrong and dangerous.
9. When I was at the World Bank, I recall that there were numerous high officials who found it repugnant to reconcile their own ethical and moral values with the largesse of Western aid. In private settings they expressed outrage dismay with the oppression in Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi's TPLF. In **"Aid donors, democracy and the developmental state in Ethiopia, 2019"** Stephen Brown and Jonathan Fisher quote a Senior aid official who said this. "We are here because Ethiopia is a strategic country, and we have mutual interests. **It is not to save lives.** Ethiopia holds a key strategic position, and we want to support it – maybe "at all costs."

Has Ethiopia's strategic location changed? It is the same country that the Biden Africa Team is dealing with. Is the intent that the humanitarian crisis in Tigray will be used by donors to punish Ethiopia at all costs? If yes, what is the strategic value for the American people?

Protection of human rights is a universal phenomenon by which all UN member countries are bound. But to "impose" adherence to human rights through external pressure and punitive measures is the same thing as "imposing democracy from the outside," to use Meles's term. Meles "got away with murder" so to speak for geopolitical and strategic reasons. This happened at a huge cost to Ethiopia and to the Ethiopian people.

Finally, I urge the Biden Africa Team led by the US Department of State to rescind the recent sanction. I also urge the US Congress to defend and protect Ethiopia's status as a "Special country of interest" with strategic value.

June 2, 2021.