

## Why the Biden Administration Can Use ‘Soft Power ‘and Restore Faith and Confidence in Human Rights and Democracy

“Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment.” Joseph Nye

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### Part III

As I was inquiring the origins and devastating effects of **manufactured lies and fake news** on societies and on the relations between and among nations, I read “**Politics, propaganda and censorship during the Civil Wars: a war of words,**” by Bethany Marsh, History Today, August 2020, Volume, 70 Issue 8. The line a **‘lie can travel halfway around the world while** the truth is still putting on its shoes’ caught my attention. The phrase is more apt today than ever before. Lies are propagated at speeds unprecedented in all human history. This is the pitfall and benefit of social media. Those who use ‘lies’ to guide public policy decisions might want to consider the unintended consequences first.

The use of lies and manufactured untruths to underpin policy and decision-making is dangerous, immoral, and unethical. When unsubstantiated narratives feed policy prescriptions that **ultimately lead to sanctions** and or to military interventions, the consequences are far reaching and lasting. Innocent people die or starve. When ‘lies’ feed decision-making that led to **punitive sanctions or military interventions,** the impacts are far reaching. Iraq is the best example.

Economic sanctions are coercive tools that harm the poor the most. There are other better and more humane tools to achieve “preferred outcomes.” One of this is “soft power.” Humanitarian aid is among these. The financing and advancement of dialogue for ceasefire of hostilities, peace, reconciliation, and national consensus is another.

I use Nye’s strategic term “soft power” to mean investing heavily in sectors and subsectors that empower ordinary citizens and that make a huge difference in the lives of ordinary people. People whose lives improve over time embrace human rights, human dignity, the rule of law and democracy. This is because these principles empower and energize them to become productive and self-sufficient. Those who are destitute do not really care whether their governance is autocratic or democratic; neo liberal or conservative; communist or social democratic.

For me, respect for human rights and the advancement of democracy are meaningful to the extent that tens of millions of ordinary people in need are assured of **food security, water security, energy security** (access to electricity), personal security, a modicum of basic health services etc.

This is the reason why the Ethiopian poor, including low-income farmers and shoe shiners are investing their meager incomes into the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (the GERD).** An estimated 65 million Ethiopians who lack access to electricity will benefit. Girls and women who carry woods on their backs will no longer be burdened. The fact that millions of females will benefit is, by itself, a compelling rationale for Western democracies committed to human rights, human dignity, and the alleviation of poverty to support this mammoth project. Unfortunately, Western corporate interests gravitate toward sources of wealth and influence. This undermines their own declared intentions of alleviating poverty.

### **Why is it vital to link alleviation of poverty with human rights and democracy?**

I used to listen to lectures at the World Bank that poverty triggers constant conflict. It induces instability and fragility. At a human level, poverty is a debilitating human condition. It robs the person of his or her human worth. Poor people are, each day, preoccupied with the essentials of life: food, water, shelter, personal security, and the like. Their penchant for human rights, the rule of law and democracy is directly correlated to the amelioration of their lives.

Therefore, investing in poverty alleviation projects and sustaining the effort is the surest way of advancing human rights, dignity, and democracy. **This is where the USA excels and is a model but is reluctant to practice it across the globe equitably and impartially.**

Disparate treatment in the allocation of financial resources to poor countries is hypocritical. Poverty is debilitating irrespective of race, ethnicity, or faith. Egypt jails political prisoners. It suffocates civil society. Its media is as good and as credible as any media in Russia. But it is supported by the USA financially and in other ways. On this scorecard, Ethiopia does better. It uses its limited resources to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Tigray. The accusation of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Tigray does not therefore hold. If you want to do that; you do not pour resources to save lives.

The contrast I want to underpin is this. Dictatorships are not necessarily inimical to US interests. It just depends on the level of loyalty to American corporate interest.

### **Good governance is key in the fight against poverty.**

Equally important, perhaps more so is the notion that internal good governance improves lives. Government officials committed to poverty alleviation have the lead **fiduciary responsibility** and accountability for the optimal utilization of aid funds. If aid had any chance of transforming the structure of a backward economy, Ethiopia would have achieved at least low middle income status by now. Tragically for the Ethiopian poor, thieves of state and party captured aid, leaving the poorest of the poor, including Tigrean-Ethiopians, worse off.

Repressive and corrupt governance steals and squanders aid monies. In the case of Ethiopia, massive aid inflow at an annual **average of \$3.5 billion** spanning almost three decades of TPLF rule squandered precious capital through theft, graft, bribery, and illicit outflow of precious capital. Tens of billions of dollars of aid monies were siphoned off by the TPLF. These monies are now deployed to undermine Ethiopia.

One would then wonder why G-7 countries led by the USA would even give credence to the TPLF?

I will illustrate this with one example. If the TPLF was genuinely concerned about the plight of Tigrean-Ethiopians, it would have **invested billions of dollars of aid monies** in Tigray. Instead, its leadership siphoned off monies, invested it in villas and other assets; and sent families and children abroad to enjoy life and safety. Today, the TPLF uses poor Tigrean-Ethiopian children, including girls as human shields.

### **What is the role of aid anyway?**

Humanitarian and development aid that boosts capabilities improves the human condition for the better. Therefore, such aid is admired by the poor. On the other hand, aid that enriches the few at the

expense of the majority is resented by the public. The TPLF is vilified across the board in Ethiopia because it was cruel, oppressive, divisive, and incurably corrupt.

**Sanctions are coercive tools that should not be deployed carelessly.**

**“Biden’s Foreign Policy Is Largely Indistinguishable from Trump’s,”** 31 March 2021, Global Policy CONFLICT AND SECURITY, Professor Noam Chomsky, a distinguished scholar and world-famous “public intellectual” offers insight into the use of coercive tools to achieve US policy. The following question was posed to him. “Two months after being in the White House, Biden’s foreign policy agenda is beginning to take shape. What are the signs so far of how the Biden administration intends to address the challenges to U.S. hegemony posed by its primary geopolitical rivals, namely Russia and China?”

“The challenge to U.S. hegemony posed by Russia and particularly China has been a major theme of foreign policy discourse for some time, with persistent agreement on the severity of the threat.”

**Ethiopians pride themselves in their country’s independence and sovereignty.**

In the case of Ethiopia, the assertion or perception that threat from Russia or China will diminish America’s influence in Ethiopia understates the independent mindedness and patriotic mindset of the Ethiopian people. Ethiopia is among the few countries in the world that tries to establish mutually beneficial relations with all countries. So, this variable of undermining US interest is bogus.

Ethiopia is one of the few countries on the planet where commitment to the country’s **sovereignty, dignity and independence is unassailable.**

In terms of the core foreign policy agenda that the USA follows, there is rarely a dramatic or radical change from one administration to another. The core principles that guide US foreign policy (Make America Great Again under Trump or America is Back under Biden) are similar but not identical. The Biden Administration is projecting a more assertive and often arrogant foreign policy to contrast itself from that of former President Trump. But the thrust remains the same.

Deliberations at the G-7 Summit show that America’s national security and economic interest underpins US foreign policy. The methodology in generating international consensus for action varies from one Administration to another. The following illustrative samples show that the “preferred outcomes” are identical.

- Under the watch of President Clinton, Democrat, on March 24, 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) initiated air strikes against Yugoslavia and bombed Serbian military positions in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The pretext for this offensive was “**ethnic cleansing** launched by Serbian forces against the Kosovar Albanians on March 20.” In addition to the human toll, the destruction of economic and social infrastructure, Yugoslavia was dismembered and balkanized into small nations. Ethnic-cleansing of Tigrean-Ethiopians is now used as a rationale by the Biden Africa policy team with intent to impose sanctions. The Ethiopian ruler at the time that President Clinton identified as one of Africa’s “Renaissance Leaders,” namely, Meles Zenawi, was a Marxist-Leninist and a tribalist/ethno-nationalist ruler who ruled Ethiopia with an iron-fist.

Why did the US Administration under President Clinton show uncritical support for a declared Marxist who adopted revolutionary democracy, ethnic-federation, and the developmental state instead of a market

economy and political pluralism? Did the favoritism toward Meles and his party change under President Barack Obama? You figure out the answer.

My assessment will be included in Part IV of this series that I plan to release shortly.

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