



## Barely Out of Afghanistan, Now America Is Supposed To Save Tigray From Ethiopia and Eritrea?

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To most Americans the collapse of Afghanistan called into question Washington's ability to manage the world. After devoting 20 years, thousands of lives, and trillions of dollars to creating a stable, democratic, and liberal Afghanistan, the entire Potemkin structure collapsed in 11 days.

Hundreds of thousands fled as the Taliban successively captured provincial capitals. Tens of thousands thronged the Kabul airport in a desperate effort to escape the newly proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. If only a few of them had joined the security forces that were supposed to sustain their country, instead of leaving the fight to those who decided the regime was not worth defending, perhaps the outcome would have been different.

Many liberal Afghans likely will be trapped in a future that looks more like the past. Perhaps stable though intolerant Islamist rule. Perhaps regime breakdown and renewed civil war. Perhaps domestic conflict spurred by foreign intervention. Whatever the outcome, Washington dramatically demonstrated yet again that militarized social engineering is an art Americans have yet to learn.

However, other crises loom around the globe and, of course, those who demanded that America stay in Afghanistan now insist that Washington take on these new responsibilities, presumably to demonstrate improved levels of competence. Consider the extraordinarily brutal tricorn battle ongoing among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tigray.

The complex confrontation returns a peaceful region to its terrible past of war and oppression. Eritrea spent three decades fighting for independence from Ethiopia as the latter moved from monarchy to communist dictatorship to generic authoritarian rule. Eritrea gained its independence in 1993 and created a regime so infamously cruel and repressive that it was known as the North Korea of Africa (according to Freedom House, Eritrea actually is *less free* than the North, rating just 2 out of 100). Five years later Ethiopia and Eritrea staged a short-lived border war, finally forging a peace treaty in 2018. Last year fighting erupted between the Ethiopian government and local security forces in the Tigray region, which long had dominated the country's politics. Eritrea joined Ethiopia and the fighting continues. (The relationship between Addis Ababa and Asmara is complicated, but Ethiopia has enabled Eritrea's atrocious Afwerki regime to escape what had been well-deserved diplomatic isolation.)

The conflict is largely unknown to the American republic. However, it is a true humanitarian horror. Alas, US efforts to halt hostilities have proved unavailing.

The *Washington Post* recently detailed the many offenses committed by the parties. For instance, Eritrean forces "have committed among the war's worst atrocities, including civilian massacres and rapes meant to be so violent they render victims infertile. In its sanctions announcement, the Treasury Department said that Eritrean defense forces have gone house-to-house in search of Tigrayan families to evict and men and boys to execute. Those who survive must leave behind dead loved ones or face execution."

Although Addis Ababa is slightly less repressive – only South Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan reach Eritrea's depths, according to Freedom House – Ethiopia's "troops have committed many of the crimes for which the United States is sanctioning Eritrea. Amnesty International reports that Ethiopian government forces and allied militias have also weaponized rape. Ethiopian soldiers have forced Tigrayan women into sexual slavery, engaged in gang rapes and targeted Tigrayan women fleeing to neighboring Sudan."

Lest you decide to toss in your lot with Tigray, however, its forces seem no less cruel. Explained the *Post*: "civilians fleeing the conflict are accusing Tigrayan forces of committing a range of atrocities, including door-to-door executions, as they have widened the conflict beyond the borders of their own region. Displaced people blame Tigrayan troops for 'killings, widespread looting and the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas,' Agence France-Presse reported."

This is a terrible conflict and utterly wrong for all concerned. Of course, the combat should end. But what can the US do?

The Biden administration has not been silent. The Atlantic Council's Cameron Hudson allowed: "In fairness to President Joe Biden's administration, its efforts have not been half-hearted. The White House has doubled down on diplomatic engagement by appointing veteran diplomat Jeffrey Feltman as the first-ever special envoy to the region, while also dispatching Cabinet secretaries, cajoling a reluctant U.N. Security Council to speak up, and corraling like-minded allies to keep the diplomatic pressure."

However, the result, which should surprise no one, was zilch. If countries and regions are willing to accept the high cost of going to war, why should we expect "diplomatic pressure" to halt the fighting? It's worth making the effort, but that is likely to have an impact only if all parties are reluctant combatants or fear losing. Neither apparently is the case here. Unsurprisingly, then, Hudson worried that the administration relied too long on diplomacy: "Now, as the death toll continues to mount and more recruits join the fray, its delay in utilizing those measures is beginning to undermine its credibility."

He suggested applying Magnitsky Act sanctions against human rights abusers. He also urged Washington to "sanction a wider range of individuals and entities. Potential targets could include individuals who are intentionally blocking humanitarian aid shipments; those using social media and other information platforms to incite violence and foment hate; and anyone seeking to undermine diplomatic efforts to achieve a cease-fire and long-term political settlement."

No doubt, such penalties would inconvenience the guilty. However, they would do little to change government policy. Local elites typically are more committed to the regime than to foreign visas and bank accounts.

Moreover, Hudson advocated a formal ban on arms sales, a sensible step, though sometimes doing so has disproportionate and perverse impacts on combatants. With Ethiopia continuing to purchase weapons from such countries as Iran and Turkey, a unilateral prohibition would have only limited impact, causing him to call for a UN embargo, which would require Chinese and Russian acquiescence, no sure bet.

Avoiding the quagmire of secondary and financial sanctions, by which the US penalizes other nations' individuals and companies, Hudson advocated targeting local firms involved in the war effort, such as Ethiopian Airlines and the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. Hudson argued that "stiff sanctions against them could curtail the government's ability to make war and push the companies' executives to use their own influence over [Prime Minister] Abiy to pursue peace." These steps would damage national prestige and marginally weaken Ethiopia's war-making ability, but businessmen would remain unlikely to challenge their authoritarian political leaders. The war almost certainly would continue.

Indeed, when have economic penalties caused governments to yield what they consider to be vital security or political interests? The Trump administration increased sanctions on a gaggle of states, some serious enough to be termed "maximum pressure." However, the result was a complete bust. Although China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and Venezuela all felt varying degrees of pain, none changed their policies as a result.

Even the *Washington Post*, which ran an editorial urging the Biden administration to Do Something!, acknowledged a sense of futility: "US sanctions against Eritrea probably will not force Eritrean troops out of the conflict. The United Nations sanctioned Eritrea for nine years, in part for refusing to withdraw troops from neighboring Djibouti, and the country did not relent. But they should be a warning shot, signaling to Ethiopia's government and to Tigrayan forces that the world is watching this horrific war – and that the United States will act. The United States should use whatever leverage it has not only to end human rights abuses but also to force both sides to the bargaining table."

This is a terribly unserious argument from a supposedly serious publication. Today the world is not watching and certainly is not acting, at least in ways that do much more than irritate Ethiopia and Eritrea. To grandly intone that "the United States will act" commits it to do so. But how? Surely not military action. Financial sanctions, to isolate the two governments from the world economy, would raise hackles across Europe, China, and Russia which have tired of American overreach wherever Washington sought to conscript the world for its political priorities. Anyway, near total sanctions were imposed on Sudan, but did not halt the fighting in Darfur and elsewhere.

Moreover, there is a downside to such measures. Admitted Hudson: "Critics may argue that the punitive measures outlined here would disproportionately harm the Ethiopian government, further imperil bilateral relations, diminish American influence and drive Addis Ababa deeper into the clutches of Tehran, Moscow and Beijing." Such has been the case in the past; for example, Beijing gained economic influence in Burma and Sudan when both were under sanctions by the West.

Hudson expressed hope to counter the appeal of China and other states: "this is precisely why the use of tough sanctions must be accompanied by a continued commitment to diplomacy and dialogue, as well as an articulation of the conditions necessary for these sanctions to be

removed." However, if Addis Ababa and Asmara are determined to prosecute the war and can receive many of the same economic benefits from other countries, they are unlikely to go with US commitments and articulations.

The ongoing conflict in the Horn of Africa is horrendous. However, the US has little leverage over the contending parties. Long ago President George H.W. Bush proclaimed "that what we say goes," delusional hubris that wasn't even true then. It certainly isn't true today. American policymakers must come to terms with the fact that the US is a hyperpower no longer.

Washington should work with European and African states to press for an end to the battle over Tigray, as well as greater freedom in Ethiopia and especially Eritrea. The US also should look for support in unusual places. Moscow and Beijing might be willing to cooperate to promote stability in the Horn of Africa for economic reasons even if they are less concerned about the ongoing human carnage.

However, Washington is likely to be most effective if it moderates its ambitions. US hubris doesn't have a good track record of late, even when deployed with the best humanitarian intentions. These days what we say increasingly goes nowhere.

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