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## Vision Ethiopia Policy Statement May 26, 2021

### On Determinants of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Digital Age: Disinformation, Money and Connections

#### Background

On May 23, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, announced visa sanctions against Ethiopian and Eritrean government officials and other individuals who are “... *responsible for or complicit in undermining the resolution of the crisis in Tigray.*” The State Department press statement also promulgated that the Biden administration has “*imposed wide-ranging restrictions on economic and security assistance to Ethiopia and will bring our defense trade control policy in line with them.*”

The draconian measure swiftly taken by the Biden administration appears to mark a watershed moment heralding a shift in the drivers of U.S. diplomacy. First, the measure, which typically is reserved for enemies of the U.S., is being targeted at a longtime ally in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the Horn of Africa. Secondly, the justification of the measures with respect to human rights protection is patently fallacious and discriminatory, as the Biden administration has deafeningly refused to break its silence about human rights abuses in other parts of the country, including the raging genocidal atrocities being committed against Amharas, Orthodox Christians and other minority groups who live in the Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. In addition, the basis for the hastily taken measures is not thoroughly-researched evidence, but instead dubious reports by journalists and social media activists with ostensibly nefarious intentions. Lastly, and most importantly, the real motivation for the uncanny measure appears to be personal connections shrouded in a lofty humanitarian veil rather than the advancement of a coherently framed foreign policy, as was the case in previous decades.

During the Cold War, the U.S. foreign policy was anchored on ideological foundations, reflecting the country’s commitment to uphold democracy and the sanctity of individual freedoms. Even in



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cases when there were idiosyncratic mishaps of external affairs, examples of which were in abundance, it was often possible to find justification with reference to the overarching policy objectives. The conflicts in Southeast Asia, the humanitarian tragedies in Central and South America, and the rise and fall of dictatorships in various African and other developing countries, in which the U.S. played significant roles in one form or another, could all be explained as a piece of the bigger puzzle, viz., the containment or abolishment of communism. When the Soviet Union collapsed and policy Americana prevailed, very few pundits challenged how the end had justified the means.

In the post-cold-war era, the US foreign policy was mostly driven by the fight against terrorism. While this policy shared many remarkable features in common with the Soviet-era strategies, it was markedly different in many other respects. One notable distinction is the absence of a rival superpower -- a factor that often complicated the formulation of a coherent policy and necessitated the need to reorient the focus toward an asymmetric warfare. On the other hand, other strategies have continued to be essential elements of the new policy. These include forging alliance with dictators that are perceived to be indispensable in the fight against terror. A case in point is the support accorded to dictators such as Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, a tyrant who had managed to hold the West captive, notwithstanding his proven records of human rights abuse, corruption and disastrous internal policies.

If the current policy of the United States toward Ethiopia is a bellwether of what is to come, it is a disconcerting shift from earlier strategies in a number of areas. At face value, it seems to be one characterized by a propensity to be influenced by disinformation, embezzled money and cronyism, rather than by a robust framework pivoted on time-honored Western values. In the following, we highlight some examples of these features and outline the consequences of such disastrous strategies to Ethiopia's integrity in particular, and regional stability and world security in general. In a more geopolitical perspective, we argue that this shift might portend the erosion of America's longstanding position in world stage as a bastion of freedom and democracy, and the beginning of the end of its dominance in shaping international diplomacy and the new world order. Most notably, we maintain that the implication of this for the emergence of new powers such as China is consequential, since the vacuum irresponsibly created by U.S. policymakers is likely to invite new players in some of these geopolitically lucrative regions.



## **The Backdrop to the Conflict in the Tigray Region**

After the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was ejected from power through a popular uprising in 2018, the leadership retreated to the Tigray region, and challenged the authority of the central government, both covertly and overtly. However, the crescendo of the conflict was the surprise attack, in the early hours of November 4, 2020, by the TPLF on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) stationed in Tigray. As acknowledged by the TPLF itself, the brazen attack was devastating to the ENDF, and, without the swift counteroffensive by the government, could have resulted in the disintegration of Ethiopia, with incalculable consequences on regional peace and stability.

Despite the criminality of TPLF's treasonous act, and the subsequent genocidal violence committed by its followers in places like Mai-Kadra, where hundreds of mostly ethnic Amharas were massacred by retreating TPLF cadres, there has been a general reluctance by U.S. and EU policymakers to put blame on or castigate the TPLF. Instead, a false equivalence has been established between the TPLF and the national government of Ethiopia, and the Biden administration has now flexed its muscles to bring the TPLF back to power at any cost.

## **Disinformation and Cyberwarfare**

The TPLF has demonstrated an exceedingly superb capability in using fabricated information to achieve its nefarious objectives since its formative days, even before the current digital platforms were available. Despite [its terrorist track records](#), the group had befuddled Western policymakers, journalists and human rights organizations portraying itself as a genuine organization that stood against repression and atrocity. For example, in one notorious and widely reported incident in June of 1988, the TPLF lured the authoritarian government in power into bombing the inhabitants of [Howzen](#), a town in a rebel-controlled area, and then used the tragic event to attract world opinion against the military dictatorship it was fighting against.

Currently, the TPLF has perfected and honed its disinformation strategy, dizzyingly using the available technological platforms. Thanks to the [billions of dollars it had siphoned off](#) while in power, its cadres are actively disseminating manufactured news about alleged atrocities committed in the Tigray region. Episodes of rape, genital mutilation, mass murder, use of



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chemical weapons, and ethnic cleansing are carefully choreographed and fed to humanitarian organizations, journalists from major news outlets and certain policymakers from the West. These reports are then used as evidence to substantiate policy statements and congressional proceedings. Through false [impersonation](#), criminals are presented as eyewitnesses or victims of crimes, and acts of atrocities are re-enacted. In one such fabricated story, a TPLF operative who actually resides in Boston was videotaped pretending to be a [priest in Axum](#). In another case, an [Amnesty international report](#), which was alluded to in a recent U.S. State Department statement and cited by the mainstream media, was mostly based on the accounts and testimonials of the criminals who had executed the Mai-Kadra genocide against Amharas and then escaped to Sudan.

Western media have published numerous reports on the Tigray conflict that have conveniently been used as reliable sources without regard to the neutrality of the reporters or the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the underlying messages, either by the publishing companies or by agencies of the U.S. government. When Anthony Blinken testified in a Congressional hearing declaring that there was evidence of ethnic cleansing in a region that was once forcibly annexed by the TPLF, he was relying on a baseless report which had no evidence to back it.

While it would be patently irresponsible to doubt there could be crimes committed in a region of conflict such as the one in Tigray, or to suggest that such crimes should not be investigated legalistically and journalistically, the manner of reporting by most of these correspondents, the egregiousness of the purported crimes, and the lack of balance in the content of the reports are too histrionic to be considered as a basis for the formulation of the foreign policy of a Superpower. One notable example that summarizes the TPLF disinformation campaign is the brazen [remarks by Martin Plaut](#), a proponent of TPLF, who was caught on camera advocating the need to manufacture the news for such news outlets as the BBC, the VOA and CNN.

### **Embezzled Money in Policy Formulation**

It is no revelation that money plays a critical role in shaping U.S. policy, both domestic and foreign. This has long been recognized and effectively used by the TPLF before and after it lost its grip to power. During the atrocious regime of Zenawi, firms such as [DLA Piper](#) were paid huge sums of money to help stifle passages of bills in congress intended to mitigate human



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rights violations in the country. Currently the TPLF is deploying the billions of dollars [it had embezzled](#) while in power to rally behind its cause members of congress and other policymakers. As acknowledged by CNN in one of its articles published on May 21, 2021, its reports and a pro TPLF lobbying firm, Von Batten-Montague-York, were responsible in influencing U.S. Senators to support S.Res.97.

### **Cronyism and Connections in Relation to Foreign Policy**

Over the three decades the TPLF was in power, it had successfully forged and nurtured friendships with powerful officials, journalists and intellectuals in the West. [Herman Cohen](#) in 1991 brokered Meles Zenawi's assumption of power, and he remains an ardent proponent of TPLF causes to this date, even pleading for a safe passage to exile for [TPLF leaders](#). In subsequent years, a cadre of diplomats, including [Susan Rice](#), cemented the power of the TPLF. Leaders like [Barack Obama](#) celebrated the glory of TPLF's dictatorship, while the regime made a mockery of democracy declaring [100% election victory](#) in successive ballots. TPLF friends, who are now holding critical positions in the Biden administration, are unabashedly expressing their support for the group. Susan Rice, who once eulogized Zenawi as "[selfless](#)", has incessantly warned, in [tweets after tweets](#), of imminence of severe sanctions as a consequence of the law enforcement campaign in Tigray.

In addition to foreigners, the TPLF has implanted key members of its inner circle in strategic positions in Western governments, and international and humanitarian organizations. [According to a Reuter's report](#), for example, the WHO chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has been accused of supporting and trying to procure arms and diplomatic backing for the TPLF, of which he is a senior member.

### **Toward a Pragmatic Policy on Ethiopia**

By all measures, the current policy of the U.S. State Department with regard to Ethiopia is biased, misguided and likely to lead to disastrous outcomes with far reaching consequences for decades to come.



While sanctions can be an important tool to advance cogent policies, they can only be effective if they are driven by cherished Western values of protecting human rights, strengthening democratic institutions and advancing the sanctity of individualism without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, religion or any other convictions.

In the case of Ethiopia, imposing sanctions just to protect a criminal group, while disregarding the overall humanitarian crises in the country, including the ongoing genocidal violence in other regions or the crimes committed by the TPLF, is not only myopic, irresponsible and ineffective, but also dangerously counterproductive. As such, the overarching objective of a pragmatic policy toward Ethiopia should be to strengthen democratic institutions and secure regional peace and stability. This would entail not only bringing to justice perpetrators of crimes, whether in Tigray, Oromia or Benishangul-Gumuz and enforcing the rule of law, but also holding the government in power accountable to address foundational issues, including the drafting of a constitution that is based on the preservation of individual rights and freedoms, equality of all Ethiopians under the law, and the establishment of a genuinely democratic society.

## **Conclusion**

If the U.S. continues in its current path of advancing an injudicious policy, guided by expensive lobbyists, disinformation and personal connections, the end result would undoubtedly be calamitous, that would dwarf the consequences of previous foreign policy foibles witnessed in Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Somalia. Ethnic violence would claim the lives of millions of innocent civilians, and the out flux of refugees would destabilize neighboring countries and strain the resources of many European nations. The inevitable disintegration of Ethiopia would create a fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist forces, including external groups such as Al-Shabaab from Somalia, and internal ethno-nationalists, such as the Oromumma fanatic zealots. Given the geopolitical significance of the region, the disruption created by these policies would not be left unnoticed by emerging powers, including China, Russia and major Arab countries, thereby creating new flashpoints for confrontation and conflict. On the U.S. domestic front, the political and economic ramifications should not be lost on those diplomats who should have learned hard lessons from the [disastrous policies that engendered the Libyan debacle](#) of the last decade.