

Joseph Hartung & Hassan Khannenje

Joe Biden walking a tightrope in the Horn of Africa, pray he doesn't fall

Since US President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, his administration has involved itself in several issues and crises in the Horn of Africa, primarily in Ethiopia and Somalia, to varying degrees of success.

In Ethiopia's Tigray crisis, the Biden administration adopted a more muscular foreign policy approach than that of Donald Trump in an effort to press for the protection of human rights.

However, US actions thus far have had a fairly limited impact on the Ethiopian government's conduct. As it considers more drastic measures, the Biden administration should beware the potential political blowback of further alienating Ethiopia.

The US should also step back from its mediating role in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute and issue support for a resolution effort led by the African Union, a more impartial and legitimate mediator.

In Somalia, US efforts alongside internal and international actors to pressure the President Mohamed Farmaajo to reject a two-year term extension were successful.

On Tigray Conflict

The primary focus of the Biden administration's attention in the Horn of Africa is Ethiopia. In response to the human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian government during the ongoing crisis in Tigray alongside ethnic militias and Eritrean allies, the Biden administration has passed security assistance and some economic assistance to Ethiopia and imposed visa restrictions on certain officials. It has also engaged in more symbolic efforts, placing diplomatic pressure on Abiy, the prime minister of Ethiopia, via remarks from the US Secretary of State and the newly-appointed US Special Envoy to the Horn, with the Secretary of State going so far as to characterise Ethiopian activities in Tigray as "ethnic cleansing".

However, American pressure does not seem to have significantly impacted Abiy's government regarding its conduct in Tigray. A key demand of the US, the removal of Eritrean troops from Tigray, has not been met. The Biden administration, according to *Foreign Policy Magazine*, is reportedly considering sanctions and targeting World Bank and IMF programmes in Ethiopia to ratchet up pressure on Abiy's government.

On Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Although overshadowed by the crisis in Tigray, the Biden administration is also working to resolve the dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan regarding the GERD, which Sudan and Egypt believe threatens their water supply.

The Trump administration heavily favoured Egypt and Sudan during negotiations because both countries were key elements of US efforts to push for an Arab-Israeli rapprochement, according to the BBC. The Biden administration has adopted a more neutral stance and has decoupled a previous pause in some US aid programmes to Ethiopia from the GERD dispute.



On Somalia

The Biden administration has not taken steps to restore US-Somalia security cooperation. The administration chose not to redeploy troops to Somalia after the Trump-ordered withdrawal. Further, Biden put a stop to Trump-era drone targeting policies in Somalia and now requires that all strikes in Somalia first obtain approval from the White House. This policy is intended as a temporary measure, according to the US Department of Defence, while the Biden administration develops its own drone targeting policies and procedures. Nevertheless, the lack of a sustained US troop presence and the reduced ability of commanders to target key al-Shabab personnel and infrastructure is certainly a boon for the terrorist organisation.

The Somalia election crisis elicited international condemnation and concern. The US under the Biden administration was no exception. When President Farmaajo accepted a two-year term extension, the US condemned the move and threatened sanctions and visa restrictions if Farmaajo didn't change tack. Under intense pressure internally as well as from the US and international actors, Farmaajo ultimately decided to reject the term extension and push for the indirect elections that were previously agreed upon by Somali stakeholders.

Policy recommendations for US Role in the Horn

Regarding Tigray, the US is correct in pausing security assistance and strongly condemning ongoing human rights violations. Imposing sanctions and working with international institutions to cut back on aid to Ethiopia does have a possibility of success.

However, the US must be aware of the potential for "blowback": For the Abiy administration, Tigray poses an existential threat. As such, US threats and actions may have little impact on his decision-making process and would further alienate Ethiopia, pushing it towards US adversaries.

Although the Biden administration has stepped away from Trump's favouritism in the GERD dispute, the US standing as a mediator for the dispute is irrevocably compromised. The US should shift primary responsibility for the resolution of the dispute to the African Union, a more impartial and legitimate mediator. Supporting AU efforts to resolve the dispute holds better prospects for success than continuing the US-led effort.

Due to domestic political sensitivities surrounding the "forever wars" and progressive Democrats' aversion to drone strikes, a return to the pre-Trump security cooperation in Somalia is highly unlikely. However, the Biden administration should issue revised guidance regarding drone strikes as soon as possible.

Joseph Hartung is a researcher and Dr Hassan Khannenje is the Director at the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies, a research and policy think tank.

American pressure does not seem to have significantly impacted Abiy's government regarding its conduct in Tigray. A key demand of the US, the removal of Eritrean troops from Tigray, has not been met



OPINION



A PUBLICATION OF THE NATION MEDIA GROUP
STEPHEN GITAGAMA
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

MUTUMA MATHIU
GROUP EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

JACKSON MUTINDA
MANAGING EDITOR

NATION CENTRE, KIMATHI STREET,
P.O. BOX 49010-00100
G.P.O., NAIROBI,
TEL: 2586000,
221222, 337710,
FAX 214831, 21946