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Many journalists and political scientists suspect that a Democrat-led White House would quickly return to the kind of interventionism which made Obama's Nobel Peace Prize feel a bit rushed in hindsight, but it was still surprising how fast Biden moved to continue his former boss' legacy. No new war broke out yet, but the first couple of months were enough to focus media attention to a number of international issues that could become bases of new conflicts any time soon. As if the new administration was slowly building up new evils and enemies for the American public, to justify an incidental invasion in the coming years, should the strategic need ever arise.

Only days after the current POTUS' inauguration, convoys of peacekeeping forces entered both Iraq and Syria, fulfilling Biden's promises of redeployment (ultimately reversing Trump's policy of gradually leaving the Middle East after the previous interventions' catastrophic consequences), most importantly as a means to keep up pressure on the neighbouring Iran.¹ As to what extent should America be afraid of Tehran is still a question, nonetheless, senior officials have been acting very serious about the issue lately. It is quite interesting how Iran did not significantly venture further in its nuclear project in the last four years (even after Trump withdrew from the JCPOA²), yet within just two weeks of Biden in charge of America, the intelligence agencies suddenly 'discovered' that the Islamic republic will be capable of building an atomic bomb in "a matter of weeks."³ With such justification, who would not approve a new invasion should Iran choose not to re-enter negotiations over its uranium enrichment plants?

Similar is the case of Myanmar. The former, pro-Western and liberal minded government was ousted during a military coup in late January, which gave all power to junta with a one-year mandate. The general who took charge of the country, almost immediately declared Myanmar a strong ally of China, something that is not taken lightly by any US government. The new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken (a long-time supporter of American interventionism), issued a call to “*reverse these actions immediately*”.⁴ And while it does make sense not to let formerly allied countries fall into the hands of Beijing so easily, a full-blown intervention on behalf of Burmese democracy would be too soon for now – though it could even come to that in a few years. But right now, nor Iran nor Myanmar could be served as Biden’s show of force, and judging from his and other top officials’ past record, they are actively looking for one.

An intervention – on behalf of democracy, human rights or whatever they choose it to be – would serve a complex purpose. For one, it would show the world that America is back in business, it’s done ‘leading from behind’, it takes its self-proclaimed responsibility-to-protect seriously, and is not afraid to be active militarily in the spheres of influence of other regional and global powers. Secondly, military success in a president’s first term is always a good way to consolidate domestic public support and secure a second term more easily, as nothing sends a clearer message of competence than prowess on the battlefield, rather sadly, I might add. And thirdly, with traditional (Mackinderian) geopoliticians like Blinken at the helm, there are always plenty of strategic targets on the chessboard of our planet, and as the old saying goes, a Democrat never misses a chance to miss a chance – unless it’s about bombing civilians in a far-away country.

Where there is need...

Now, I believe a more suitable conflict has been slowly building up in a completely different part of the world, and through a series of unique consequences it started to present itself as a near-perfect opportunity for Biden to reap a swift victory and show the world what he’s really made of. The country in question is Ethiopia, one of the most populated and poorest countries of Africa, where an ethnic conflict which broke out in November 2020 has developed into a civil war with multiple foreign actors involved at this point.

The conflict started when the regional government of Tigray, the northernmost province of Ethiopia, decided to hold its local elections in September, defying the federal decision to postpone every election until further notice due to Covid-19. After Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's Nobel Peace Prize laureate prime minister declared the elections illegal, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the region's governing party chose independence, calling Ahmed an illegitimate ruler. On November 4th, the Tigrayan forces launched an attack on several bases, then held by the Ethiopian federal army (ENDF), and suddenly the war was on.⁵

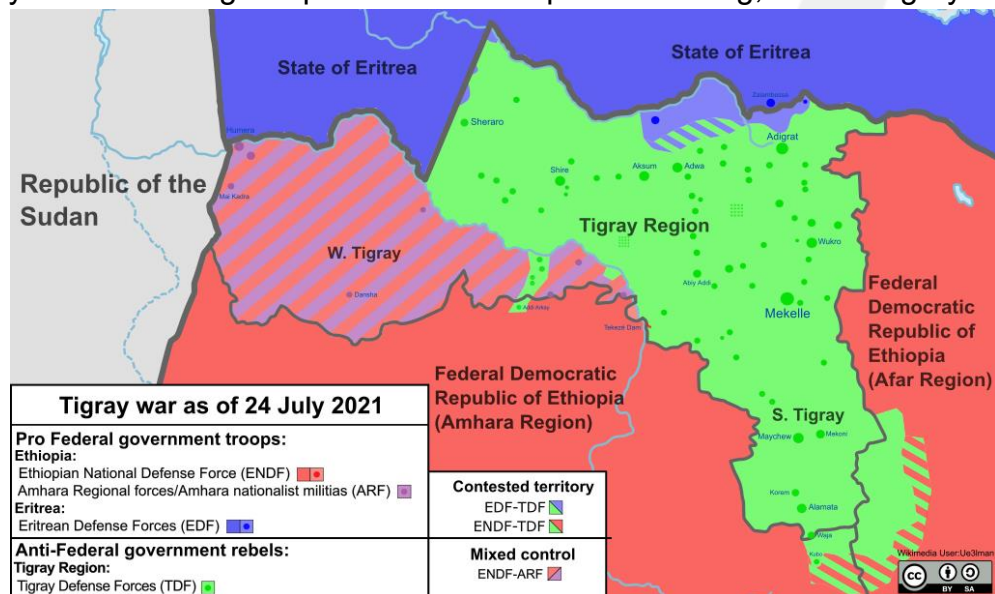
With an estimated force of more than 250 thousand troops, the TPLF proved to be a way more competent opponent than prime minister Ahmed had thought when promising the country a "*swift and surgical military campaign*".⁶ Facing the rebels, the federal government deployed around 150 thousand troops, aided by tens of thousands of fighters from Eritrea and Somalia, both of which denied involvement in the conflict initially, even after multiple reports emerged proving it. The Somali government's interests are clear: it needs the high number of ENDF peacekeeping forces deployed in Somalia to counter insurgencies and pirate activities, and since the war broke out many of them have been transported back to the Tigray border. Eritrea's case is a bit more difficult. The highly militarized one-party state has long set its eyes on its 100 thousand political refugees living in camps around Tigray for some time now, and this conflict has provided the perfect opportunity to use its military to forcibly return some of the refugees home to be persecuted for their crimes against the regime.⁷ According to an EEPA report, Eritrea also harbours territorial claims in Tigray, and already started to hand out Eritrean ID-cards to Ethiopian nationals, informally pushing its border inside the occupied territory.⁸

Apart from these, Sudan is also involved in the conflict, by letting more than 50 thousand Tigrayan refugees through its border, then by having its military engaged in minor skirmishes and border clashes against the ENDF, with both sides claiming the other attacked first.⁹ To make things even more complicated, the United Arab Emirates is suspected of being present in the war as well, although only in form of air support via drone strikes, launched from its leased airbase in Eritrea, as claimed by Tigrayan officials.¹⁰ So far, without formal declarations of war, the conflict has kept its 'civil' nature, but with all these actors involved, it has the potential of developing into a full-blown regional war.

The consequences of the war already paint a grim picture of what might yet come if the fighting doesn't end. According to the regional government, more than a third of Tigray's population, around 2.5 million people have been internally displaced, although the UN estimated that the actual number is around half of that. Both side lost tens of thousands of fighters, some estimates putting the total number over a hundred thousand¹¹ (with only 1,245 ENDF, 550 Tigrayan and 370 Somali casualties officially confirmed), while the civilian death toll, caused by several suspected massacres perpetrated by all parties, stays at the minimum estimate of fifty thousand.¹² Since the beginning of the crisis, Ethiopia has strictly controlled every access into Tigray, as well as imposed a total communications blackout in the region. The UN warned prime minister Ahmed, that unless he allows the international aid organizations in to restock their warehouses, the situation of millions already facing food insecurity could become much worse in no time.¹³

The initial phase of the fighting seemed to be over by 28 November, when the Ethiopian federal army captured Mekelle, the capital of Tigray region, and Ahmed declared victory over the rebels. However, the blackout and roadblocks around the border remained in place, and ENDF and Eritrean forces stayed in the region, fighting TPLF which still controlled most of Tigray vowing to carry on until the 'invaders' are out. In the end, half a year was enough to prove Ahmed's optimism wrong, as the Tigrayan

forces were able to drive the ENDF out of Mekelle on 28 June, 2021, effectively recapturing the capital and holding it to this day.¹⁴



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tigray_War_territory_July_2021.svg

On the same day, Addis Ababa unilaterally declared ceasefire, something that the rebels haven't

agreed upon since. So, it is clear by now that the conflict will not be resolved on its own any time soon.

From liberal reformer to petty war criminal

While both sides accuse each other of massacres and human rights violations, Western media outlets have seemingly decided that they would take Tigray's side over Addis Ababa's, and unilaterally declare Prime Minister Ahmed as the 'bad guy' of the story. Any honest attempt to decide which side committed more atrocities would be futile at this point due to lack of information, and yet the West prefers to talk only about Ahmed's inhumane decision to lock down and 'starve' all of Tigray, while mainly ignoring reports of atrocities committed by the TPLF, such as the one written by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, detailing the ethnic cleansing of 600 non-Tigrayan civilians in a single day.¹⁵ Even the Norwegian Nobel Committee issued a rare statement in response of the actions taken by the prime minister, subtly saying that it wouldn't want to regret granting him the Peace Prize in 2019 as it "*follows the developments of Ethiopia closely, and is deeply concerned*".¹⁶

Enter the US State Department. As soon as late November, Antony Blinken, then foreign policy advisor of President-elect Joe Biden, stated that he was "*deeply concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia, reports of targeted ethnic violence, and the risk to regional peace and security*".¹⁷ During his inaugural hearing in late January to become Secretary of State, Blinken revisited the issue of Ethiopia, saying that "*we have seen a number of deeply, deeply concerning atrocities... we need to see much greater access to the region [and] accountability*".¹⁸ On 4 February 2021, the SoS talked with prime minister Ahmed himself, expressing his "*grave concern*" about the crisis and demanding "*immediate, full and unhindered humanitarian access*". Blinken also reminded Ahmed of the US' support for democracy and human rights,¹⁹ in case he would need some 'assistance' with those. On 27 February, Blinken issued a statement calling for the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean and Ethiopian forces from the region again and for the African Union to join in on pressuring Addis Ababa on the matter.²⁰ In March Blinken went one step further and outright called the atrocities of the ENDF "*ethnic cleansing*", saying that the situation is "*very significant, and it's one that we're very, very focused on*". Along with the SoS' statement, the CNN also

published an especially moving video report on the federal forces' cruelty.²¹ Nothing on the rebels though.

And it's not only America that's got Addis Ababa in its crosshairs. The UK's foreign secretary, Dominic Raab also stated that the recent events 'tarnished Ethiopia's beacon-like reputation', while EU minister of foreign affairs Joseph Borrell announced that Brussels shall freeze its €88M budget support for Ethiopia until the war is resolved.²² This decision hit especially hard since the \$130M US aid Ethiopia was receiving until recently also had been suspended by President Trump, and Biden has no intention to reverse this particular order for the time being.²³

All because of a... dam?

As to why did this conflict spark such an unexpectedly biased hostility against Abiy Ahmed, we would need our final piece to complete the story and answer the question. Of course, it has geopolitical reasons behind it, but to narrow it down to one – almost absurd – factor, it is because of a dam.

The construction of the *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* (GERD) on the Blue Nile has begun in 2011, and immediately sparked international controversy. The project is approaching completion now, making the dam the largest hydroelectric powerplant in Africa, and the seventh largest in the world. Given its size, one can easily imagine why some of the neighbouring countries feel threatened by it. During the filling process, the dam's reservoir could reduce the natural flow of the Nile by up to 25%, affecting the income of millions of Egyptian and Sudanese farmers downstream. Additionally, as Egypt claims, it would also reduce the country's electricity supply by 25 to 40%.²⁴ The offended parties initiated a lengthy negotiation process with Addis Ababa, but after seeing that Ethiopian officials cannot be pressured (nor threatened) into changing their position, the talks froze in 2014 without an agreement, but the tension remained. In 2019, due to Cairo's successful lobbying, the US re-vitalised the negotiations, and as a mediator it mostly took Egypt's side in the issue.²⁵ President Trump's move to cut US aid to Ethiopia was in fact a tool of pressure on behalf of its North African ally, albeit an unsuccessful one, as still no agreement has been reached.

The ultimate goal of the US State Department, now even more than under the previous administration, is to cater to the needs of its quintessential ally in terms of Middle

Eastern security, which is not Ethiopia, but Egypt. Its unique geographical position, its relatively stable government and promising economic prospects make it a keystone to achieving stability in the region, and so far, Egyptian officials proved to be valuable partners on a range of African, Arab and Israeli issues.²⁶ Now, as Cairo stated a number of times, it would do anything to counter the filling of the dam, except starting a war over it.²⁷ At least not alone, one might add.

Humanitarianism with a twist – the worst-case scenario

And that's how we arrive to the present crisis. President Trump always tried to avoid actual conflicts during his term, and resorted to purely economic actions to apply pressure. With Biden, however, things may go down very differently. Both the President and Secretary Blinken have previously proved their willingness to go to war overseas, and if Biden is indeed looking for an opportunity to show the world who's in charge, then Tigray would be perfect.

For the US military to deal with an underdeveloped country like Ethiopia would be hardly be more than an exercise. If prime minister Ahmed refuses the US' demands for open access for aid organizations, it would be up to the military to solve the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Tigray, or so they would claim. A medium-sized contingent of 'peacekeeping' troops along with a few drones could easily end the conflict amid happy sighs of global relief, and the swift victory would send a strong message to Beijing and Moscow as well. All President Biden would need to start this intervention is ample public support, the building of which – judging by the Western media coverage – has already begun.

Most importantly, under the disguise of humanitarian interventionalism, the US could seize military control over not only Tigray, but other parts of Northern Ethiopia as well, just where the Blue Nile dam conveniently happens to be. The GERD is located near the Sudanese border, just two hundred kilometres South of Tigray. And with the dam under the US' control, we could be certain that the filling of the reservoir would not happen before a satisfactory agreement is reached, one that Ahmed would be forced to accept if he wants to remain in charge of his country.

In other words, an Ethiopian intervention would be just the perfect war for Biden's first term. It has all the opportunities a good show of force needs and helping the starving

Tigrayans would send a message of noble American altruism once again to the world, all while fulfilling one of the many geopolitical challenges the US and its allies face, namely the protection of Egypt's water security.

But if there's one thing we've all learnt from the history of post-9/11 interventionism, then it's the need to refrain from it. The campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and Syria have one thing in common, which is that they caused bigger humanitarian crises than those they were designed to end. The rise of new terrorist organizations with state-of-the-art weaponry, the instable governments with no authority whatsoever, the famines and extreme poverty, and then the massive refugee waves Europe experienced in the last couple of years were all (direct or indirect) results of American interventionism.

Ethiopia has a population of 110 million people; it is larger than any of those countries mentioned above. The consequences of an Ethiopian campaign would be way more disastrous than we could imagine. If this hypothetical war described above were to happen in the next few years, the resulting refugee wave would absolutely diminish that of 2015, and Europe is not prepared for it. Not to mention what would happen if the war would be drawn out for years – like the others were – with multiple regional powers tangled in its web of interests.

For the time being, of course, we are nowhere near this scenario. This article – what you might call food for thought – merely demonstrated the interests and circumstances that give it a slight probability to happen. In the end, the United States simply can not be so irresponsible to initiate such an intervention, however, there are few things of we can be absolutely certain these times. The future will surely tell, but I hope for the good of Africa (and Europe) that I'm wrong.

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