

THE U.S. IS SLEEPWALKING INTO ANOTHER FOREIGN POLICY DISASTER IN ETHIOPIA

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On the 1st of January, the delisting of Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) comes into force. This is yet another misguided and disappointing foreign policy decision made by President Biden – all in just the first year of his first term.

AGOA was designed to boost Sub-Saharan African economies by offering duty-free access to the US market. For Ethiopia, this meant poverty fell by 42% and over 1,000,000 jobs were created, with US investment flooding in and new factories opening.

Come the new year, there is a real risk we could see 200,000 jobs lost immediately and up to a million in the medium-long term, seriously damaging the country's economy. The vast majority of those losing their jobs are females on low incomes working in the textile industry. On top of these hardships, this decision is shocking because a Democratic White House has explicitly chosen to sanction and impoverish thousands of innocent Ethiopians, when really, they should have been focused on sanctioning the aggressors of the conflict, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (the TPLF).

The sheer pain and destruction being experienced across Ethiopia is already heart-breaking. With the AGOA decision, there is no doubt in the minds of many Ethiopian Americans that President Biden and his administration are responsible for pushing Ethiopia closer to the brink of collapse.

During the recent conflict in Ethiopia, the Biden Administration has made clear that it is not willing to support or work with the democratically elected Government of Ethiopia. This stance has only served to bolster the confidence of the TPLF who viewed this as indirect support for their violent insurrection. I have sat in dozens of meetings with US representatives and government officials over the past few months, few have understood the full complexity of the conflict and historical context.

Many in the administration have conveniently ignored the fact that the Ethiopian Government has been praised by the UN for its cooperation in investigations into human rights violations and has stated its willingness to begin a national dialogue mediated by the African Union. All this while, until recently, the TPLF forces continued to rape, murder, and loot their way through the neighboring regions of Afar and Amhara – all documented in reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

There is no question in my mind, the country is eligible for the benefits of AGOA. The Ethiopian Government has been actively addressing the reasons for the delisting decision, the US is ignoring this progress. Back in June, the Ethiopian government called for a unilateral and unconditional ceasefire at the US' request – the TPLF refused to acknowledge it. Before the TPLF insurrection, under the Abiy government Ethiopia had been undergoing radical economic reforms. The country liberalized the economy and strengthened its democracy - as seen in the recent election. The country may be fighting an insurgency, but all of this promise is still there and will be restored by the Abiy government.

There are some in Congress who recognize this, and are fighting for my birth country. Congresswoman Karen Bass and Senator Chris Van Hollen wrote to President Biden on the 21st December, urging him to reverse course on the AGOA decision. Congressman John Garamendi has also added his voice to the cause, penning his own letter to the President, Secretary Blinken, and Ambassador Feltman. And a long-time ally of Ethiopia, Senator Jim Inhofe, spoke on the Senate floor earlier this month drawing attention to the huge mistake the Administration is making. He commented during this speech, “there are those countries who are all too eager to pick up the pieces that we leave behind.”

He is right!

Not only does the AGOA decision serve to disrupt and dent Ethiopia's economy, but it is also an entirely counterproductive move for the US. Ethiopia has been a pillar of stability in a volatile region and a strategic geopolitical American ally.

Now, the door is open for China, Russia and others to invest and gain influence. Those trade competitors are not wasting any time, with China announcing a huge investment in Africa late last month, unsurprisingly just after the Biden Administration's decision on AGOA. And why

shouldn't Ethiopia let China fill their shoes, as US businesses are forced to wind back investments?

At a moment in history when Ethiopia, facing insurrection and conflict, needed its international allies more than ever, the White House turned its back.

I want to go back to words from Senator Inhofe, because I truly believe this is the crux of the issue. Addressing the Senate, he said, "one of my big criticisms of our State Department is that they tend to go around the world telling other countries what they need to do instead of focusing on building lasting friendships and alliances. This pushes countries away from us instead of bringing them toward us."

With their actions, the Biden Administration alone is responsible for pushing Ethiopia away... our only hope is that this once valued, now derailed, relationship can somehow be put back on track.

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