

# The US risks losing its influence in the Horn of Africa. Here's how to get it back.

By [Gabriel Negatu](#), January 11, 2022 (Source: Atlantic Council)

FILTER RESULTS

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Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his freshly resigned Sudanese counterpart, Abdalla Hamdok, are arguably the most pro-US leaders in the Horn of Africa (HoA)—if not the entire continent.

But today, the evolving crises in their countries have exposed Washington's lack of a clear and coherent policy for the region. Whether in Ethiopia's year-old insurgency or amid Sudan's military coup, the United States was ill-prepared to respond.

As a keen observer of the region through my regular contacts with officials in both Ethiopia and Sudan, and as a longtime colleague of Hamdok's, I've seen this dynamic up close. By not being visible and sufficiently engaged, Washington could lose the capacity to influence policy and action to address the region's many vexing problems.

As the HoA undergoes dramatic changes, including sustained economic growth, a rising middle class, and a transition to stable democracy, Washington would be wise to rethink its approach to regional

cooperation and use of sanctions—among other issues—and lay out a more inclusive, values-driven, and future-oriented strategy for the region.

**‘Either you’re with us or against us.’**

During the Cold War, US engagement in the region centered on containing communist encroachment. In the ensuing years, US policy became static over several administrations and lacked strategy and coherence—not a good fit for a rapidly changing region. Then, shortly after the collapse of communism, the tragic fallout from the US intervention in Somalia stunted enthusiasm for engaging more actively in the region.

American attention was only refocused after a string of terrorist attacks—including the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the September 11 attacks—and incidents of maritime piracy. The superseding objective became disrupting local Islamic extremists linked to a global jihadi network, and the full might and resources of the United States and its Western allies descended on the region.

But combating terrorism and promoting trade held preeminence over all pretense of interest in addressing what Africans deemed to be more pressing priorities, such as combating drought and desertification, alleviating poverty, and promoting good governance.

The implicit US mantra of “either you’re with us or against us” coaxed countries to choose sides in a conflict which did not offer neutrality as a position. In return for prioritizing counterterrorism and trade, countries were offered ample humanitarian aid, assistance for democratic governance, and enhanced foreign direct investment (FDI). As the war on terrorism intensified, the United States established Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti in 2002 as the region’s operational centerpiece.

In the absence of an overarching framework to understand and address complex regional priorities, the United States pursued singular agendas and responded to challenges and crises when and where they arose—preferring to focus on individual countries rather than adopting a comprehensive regional strategy. This broad agenda was deficient in depth and obligation, and as a result, long-term vision and regional diplomacy declined.

Without clear direction and purpose, Washington was accused of abetting African despots bent on prolonging their power, either through election-rigging or violating term limits, in exchange for their cooperation in the war on terror. This dented US credibility and its ability to inspire popular policymaking and civic-minded diplomacy among the local populations.

For example, the United States cozied up to the Meles Zenawi regime in Ethiopia and that of his successor—fully aware of their stained human-rights records and reprehensible governance. A 2018 mass uprising that drove out the US-backed Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front caught Washington flat-footed and short on credibility to influence the turn of events. Abiy Ahmed, the charismatic new leader installed in Addis Ababa, lost no time in seeking broad international support and championing Ethiopia’s interest.

**Why messaging matters**

Another consequence of the lack of a clearly articulated US regional policy is the inadvertent message Washington conveys to both democratically installed governments and insurgents-in-waiting: Coming to power through free and fair elections matters—but other interests and priorities take precedence over democratic governance.

In Ethiopia, for instance, US hesitancy to vigorously condemn a rebel assault on a democratically installed government and constitutional order was the oxygen that fueled the conflict there. The muted response by Washington and Brussels to the aggression emboldened the rebels to set their eyes on Addis Ababa, and the forcible ouster of Abiy became their end game.

On a continent where political leaders and regional institutions have, at least officially, banned all forms of unconstitutional power grabs, the subdued US response to the unfolding rebel attempt was diplomatically unsettling and politically misguided.

### **Ethiopia: The trouble with sanctions**

Today, Ethiopia is mired in internal conflict with Tigrayan forces seeking to forcibly replace a democratically elected government. Faulting the United States for overt and covert assistance to one side over the other, both warring parties are snubbing Washington's appeals and warnings at will. Daily pleas from the Pentagon and White House to cease fire and come to the negotiating table continue to fall on deaf ears. Meanwhile, the new White House special envoy to the region, Jeffrey Feltman, learned the hard way that being the US president's emissary no longer carries the same sway it once did—and he [announced this month](#) that he's stepping down.

While the war has quieted down somewhat as the rebels have withdrawn to Tigray, [sporadic airstrikes](#) and artillery exchanges continue to cause collateral damage. In what is nothing less than a diplomatic mea culpa, US President Joe Biden [spoke directly to Abiy by phone on Monday](#). Biden expressed his concern about recent civilian deaths from the conflict and Abiy briefed him on efforts to address humanitarian assistance, human rights, and reconstruction. Such a gesture, though highly welcome, is unlikely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the conflict and events in the region, given the United States' limited leverage.

Before expending sufficient diplomatic energy to reconcile the conflict, the United States has expelled the Abiy government from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) for violating that trade pact's prohibition on human-rights abuses—a clear case of punitive economic policy gone astray.

First, many of the allegations have since been investigated by the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, [which accuse all sides](#) of the conflict of committing them. Investigators also accused all sides of blocking the delivery of humanitarian aid and stated that they could not verify whether starvation was used as a weapon of war, as previously alleged by the UN and the US State Department. Investigators were barred from entering certain parts of Tigray and proposed further investigation into claims of forced starvation by government forces as well as gross human-rights violations in areas under rebel control.

Second, the enforcement of AGOA violations has been selective and inconsistent. Past US administrations have been mute in the face of similar violations committed by other AGOA beneficiaries. This is why the haste to terminate Ethiopia's eligibility before giving bilateral and multilateral diplomacy a sufficient chance to succeed has far-reaching consequences, including on US business and strategic interests in the region.

The American-Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee estimates that termination potentially means a loss of some two hundred thousand jobs, with young factory workers—mostly poor young women and the heads of households—hard-hit, along with the mostly small- and medium-sized enterprises that supply and service those factories. An AGOA termination “would deal a serious blow to the welfare of millions of low-income workers,” Mamo Mihretu, Ethiopia's chief trade negotiator, [wrote in \*Foreign Policy\*](#).

Moreover, the impact will disproportionately fall on the poorest of the poor, who can least survive such a punitive action and who can least influence the war. In the longer term, this will significantly set back Ethiopia's long-term trajectory to become the region's manufacturing hub.

Beyond Ethiopia, the termination would also disrupt countless livelihoods in Djibouti, Kenya, and Somaliland—neighbors whose ports Ethiopia uses for the import and export of raw materials and finished products.

It is not lost on US policymakers that effective economic punishments must be smart and purposely targeted. Coupling trade agreements with imprecise political conditions is counterintuitive and achieves neither objective. Coming at a period of turbulence in the HoA, the termination of the trade deal throws into question the resourcefulness of US foreign policy to resolve political disputes through mature diplomatic insight before resorting to punitive measures.

It is worth pointing out that smart sanctions and other economic tools can address specific policy goals and objectives. But sanctions should never be the first tool out of the box to resolve bilateral disputes; rather, they should be a diplomatic standby of last resort. Nor should they be applied uniformly in vastly different circumstances around the world.

In the final analysis, hastily designed and poorly targeted economic penalties attest to the failure of diplomatic endeavors and portray a global power gradually losing influence over events and actors on the ground.

### **Sudan: Tuning out the US**

The unfolding crisis in Sudan, where longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir was ousted in a 2019 revolution, is proving to be just as risky for the United States.

The Trump administration's endorsement of a debt-relief package helped the country financially recover, while the Biden administration helped strengthen the transition by supporting a hybrid Sovereignty Council. The West, along with Sudan's Gulf neighbors, lavished Hamdok (who resigned on January 2) with promises of economic aid and FDI—on the condition, of course, that he implement painful structural reforms including removing food and fuel subsidies, harmonizing the exchange rate, cracking down on corruption, signing the Abraham Accords normalizing relations with Israel, and transitioning to elections in 2023.

Legions of US, EU and other international officials—including Feltman, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee, and US Agency for International Development Administrator Samantha Power—descended on Khartoum for endless consultations. The pace and substance of the transition excited the world about the promise of a new Sudan. Meanwhile, the country's political and military posture, guided mainly by the generals in the Sovereignty Council, pulled further away from traditional allies in the Horn and closer to Egypt.

They conducted provocative military exercises with Cairo just miles away from Sudan's borders with Ethiopia and Eritrea—a move that ratcheted up regional tensions at a time when Egypt and Ethiopia are feuding over a dam on the Nile River. The Trump administration's botched attempt to mediate the Nile dispute was oddly led by the US Treasury at the exclusion of the State Department. The White House attempt to coerce Ethiopia into signing a three-way peace agreement caused the latter to withdraw from the negotiations and disqualified the United States as an honest broker. The collapsed mediation process

was replaced by an African Union (AU) initiative focused on the pursuit of African solutions for African problems.

The US strategy in Sudan is being defined without input from Ethiopia and Eritrea, consequential neighbors with a long history of influencing peace in Sudan. Ethiopia and Sudan are presently in a low-intensity dispute over their long and unmarked border. This is not the first time such disputes have arisen, and both countries are committed to peacefully resolve the conflict through the Joint Border Commission. But, regrettably, neither party can mediate in each other's internal matters.

However, there is a bigger lesson here for Washington: Short-lived and frequently recurring rows among neighbors should not cause the United States to exclude regional influencers and neighborhood peacekeepers from its national and regional calculus, or from the list of countries to consult.

Following a round of “successful” meetings with both sides of the Sovereignty Council, and hours after Feltman's departure from Khartoum, the generals staged a successful coup d'état in late October. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan seized power, arrested the prime minister, dissolved the council and suspended the coalition government.

Working with limited intelligence on the ground and fewer friends in the region, Washington strategists were once again caught off guard. Condemned by the United States and its allies—with the exception of Egypt—and threatened with sanctions and other punitive measures, the generals continued to pay only lip service, claiming that the army had acted to prevent a civil war.

Within weeks of Hamdok's reinstatement as prime minister and amid a deadlock with the generals over the appointment of a technocratic government, the differences in the end proved insurmountable. He finally resigned his position on January 2, and in a televised address, [he told his people that](#) Sudan's very survival was questionable and that he had tried “to avoid the country from sliding into disaster” and wanted to “give a chance to another man or woman.”

The voices of democracy continue to denounce any power-sharing with the military and call on it to immediately hand over power to a civilian government. For its part, the military on December 30 announced the reinstatement of the notorious national intelligence service—now rebranded as the General Intelligence Service. This can only mean more civil unrest on the streets in the coming days and the grim prospect of the use of deadly force to squelch it.

Once again, escalating tensions in Khartoum expose a US Africa policy with limited diplomatic sway and few allies in the region who could be implored to mediate peace in Sudan. The United States must expend robust diplomatic energy to fully grasp the problems in their totality. It must also work with countries in the region in pursuit of a lasting solution. Barring that, the threat of sanctions and punitive economic measures in lieu of effective diplomacy will simply ring hollow and not give it the eminence and influence it seeks.

### **Meet the new powers**

The US goal of regaining commanding heights in foreign policy within the first one hundred days of Biden's administration was an ambitious target. It is now evident that it takes more than an “America is back” mantra to reverse Washington's eroded leadership position in the HoA.

Non-traditional partners, driven by geo-strategic interests and economic opportunism, have branded themselves as credible alternatives in the economic, political, and security spaces.

Gulf countries, plus Turkey, India, and Iran, view the Red Sea as a lifeline of global maritime logistics and seek to gain a military and commercial foothold in the region. Turkey, in particular, is quickly gaining new commercial and military traction. Distant powers such as China and Russia view the Red Sea and countries in the vicinity as an opening into the rest of Africa, a potential source of tomorrow's raw materials, and a market for their goods and services. Supporting voices in global politics and establishing strategic military footholds are also a consideration.

In return, these new partners offer African countries financial and technical assistance, defense agreements, and access to their markets. But most important—and perhaps a key differentiator from the United States—is their policy of “non-interference” in their partners’ internal affairs. While these partners are not even a distant second to the United States in terms of foreign aid and technical, financial, and military superiority, they provide sufficient support to cause African countries to believe they have a choice of credible alternative partners.

For instance, with thirty-nine African countries signed up, China’s dominance in infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative is a case in point. This is an alarming trend the United States cannot afford to ignore.

After decades of alliance with the United States on regional and global matters—consider, for instance, Ethiopia’s UN Security Council vote to approve the 1991 Gulf War when the evidence wasn’t compelling—most African countries regrettably claim they’ve gained little in return for their longstanding ties to Washington. In 2021, the same Security Council discussed the Tigray conflict almost a dozen times, but the United States did not once support Ethiopia’s position.

A forward-looking US-HoA engagement policy must embrace strategic competition and cooperation with new partners that have gained a new foothold in the region. As in the recent past, containing the advance of an adversary—China, in this case—is no longer a sufficient objective for engaging with the region.

In a geo-strategic theater with competition from China and other entrants, it’s essential for the United States to assert its values and clearly communicate the interests it stands for (including the red lines in any relationship that cannot be crossed). Africans must know this with a degree of certainty, and well beyond the four-year election cycles. Consistency and predictability are imperative in international relations.

Since early December, the US embassy in Addis Ababa, out of an abundance of caution following the collapse of Kabul, has flooded US citizens with alerts about the deteriorating security situation and encouraged them to leave the city. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Wang Yi of China flew into the same Addis Ababa and reaffirmed his government’s support for the government and people of Ethiopia, while also discussing other regional interests. Then after a sweeping visit to several countries in the region in early January, Wang announced that China would name a new special envoy to the Horn of Africa, garnering an enthusiastic reception. This is the contrasting friendship and influence that the United States is missing out on.

### **The way forward**

A progressive reset of US relations with the continent is long overdue. A new Africa policy between partners, anchored in a framework of shared principles and a vision centered on economic, social, and environmental justice, as well as the democratic aspirations of citizens, would be a good place to begin. There should be relationships in which both parties recognize that each side has something to offer and gain.

Compelling Africans to choose between the United States and new partners is a relic of the Cold War; twenty-first century Africans are capable of defining and articulating their interests and partners of choice. The [Prosper Africa trade initiative](#) is an example of a positive pivot away from the traditional donor-recipient model to bilaterally negotiated trade and investment pacts. It allows countries to benefit from their US ties and also uphold their right to cooperate with other partners. But for this to work, all sides must actively invest in building the capacity of African countries and institutions to negotiate from a position of strength and close the knowledge and information asymmetry.

A defining feature of the HoA is its high degree of interconnectedness, both organically and by design. In 2020, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia agreed to form a new regional bloc—the Horn of Africa Cooperation, with other neighbors to possibly join later. A regional bloc within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—built on a convergence of economic and social interests as well as political, military, and security priorities—it deserves weighty consideration in Washington as part of its HoA engagement strategy.

Going forward, a US-HoA policy must pay particular attention to the role of African institutions at various levels. It must focus on strengthening the capacity of African-led regional bodies such as the AU, IGAD, and the African Continental Free Trade Area. Such institutions serve to develop and enforce neighborhood consensus and standards of good governance while also collectively repelling assaults on democracy and constitutional orders.

Biden’s remarks at the February 2021 AU summit struck the right foreign-policy chords, centering on democracy, human rights, and mutual prosperity. The administration has since declared a policy focus on counterterrorism and security, climate change, the pandemic, inclusive democracy and constitutional rule, and rebuilding post-COVID economies. But these lofty pronouncements must now be backed by resources and action on the ground.

An Afrobarometer survey in 2019-20 showed that Africans prefer to follow the United States’ development model rather than China’s [by 32 percent to 23 percent](#). Meanwhile, [68 percent](#) of African citizens prefer democracy over other forms of government. Despite its convergence of values with Africans, the United States still lags behind the new partners.

The Biden administration is well-placed to reverse past missteps and set HoA-US relations on the right course. But the fast-changing region will not wait for the United States to catch up; US rhetoric must be backed with action and signal a perceptible change of course, anchored on mutual trust and tilted toward shared values.

Building loyal allies and gaining influence in the Horn will take time. Even then, the United States may not win over all the countries nor solve all the region’s problems. But either way, tomorrow’s US foreign policy must sufficiently exploit the HoA-US values convergence, a unique advantage not enjoyed by new entrants. This requires a shift from the transactional brand of yesterday and building on shared values and principles.

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