

Counting the Cost: The Greater Horn of Africa

Part One of Three

Sixty-four years ago, “John F. Kennedy made 479 references to Africa during the US presidential campaign. He observed that America had lost ground on the continent because of failures to meet the ‘needs and aspirations of the African people.’” (Amin)

We have yet to hear any current US candidates or surrogates mention Africa in this election. Once again it is the forgotten continent.

As a senator, John F. Kennedy was the one who pressed the White House to establish the Bureau of African Affairs in 1958, and the following year, he became chairman of the African Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. As president Kennedy implemented a new policy toward U.S. relationship with Africa. by creating the Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). “And, unlike his predecessors, he began to show more respect and dignity for African leaders” (Amin). This can be seen in his extraordinary hospitality and high regard towards His Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie and the friendship he established with Ethiopian Ambassador Berhanu Dinkie, who happens to have been my uncle.

At the height of the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984-5 I was honored to take President Kennedy’s brother, Senator Edward Kennedy, on a few days’ tour to drought-affected areas of Jijiga, Korem, Makale and Bati. It was clear he too had a very high regard for our people. However, the new policies Kennedy initiated as a president were short-lived as his successors reverted to previous practices. Richard Nixon claimed blacks were ‘genetically inferior’ to whites” and Ronald Reagan favored what amounted to a pro-Apartheid policy in South Africa. President Clinton refused to react or take a position on the genocide in Rwanda. The exception is George W. Bush who personally championed an enormous health initiative PEPFAR (the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief), eclipsing anything that either President Obama or Clinton did for Africa. PEPFAR has been a huge success, saving millions of African lives, and has ensured Mr. Bush’s popularity in Africa to this day. (Pilling)

Bush was followed by Obama, who as a son of Africa was greeted with high hopes, but he was largely a disappointment. During his eight years in power, he lacked a clear vision and a strategy. His focus was on Asia (Einasse; See also my article “Absent from Africa”). His successor, Trump, referred to African countries as "shithole" nations in a meeting. During his term as president, there was nothing or little that he could be remembered for except his extreme unpopularity. Most Africans don’t expect that they would be better off if he were to be elected again.

President Biden's legacy for Africa is no better than Trump's. His most visible, trumped-up "achievement" was The US African Leaders Summit in 2022 in the White House. It was more a PR stunt than anything else.

Africa needs the United States' engagement. The continent is awash with troubles. Its economy and security are worse than they have been for decades. For many years now, Africa has experienced drought, famine, epidemics, more political unrest, more violent extremism, and coup d'états than any other region in the world and yet has gotten the least attention. The Horn of Africa has most recently become the next epicenter of global instability along with the Israel-Gaza crisis. The Middle East and the Horn of Africa have become one enormous, complex security problem that could lead to a catastrophe worse than the Second World War. Much of the insecurity is owing to the failure of US policies in the Middle East and Africa. The United States needs a new approach that is both value- and interest-based. Conflict resolution is an art and a skill. It requires a personality that commands respect, is knowledgeable and experienced. The US seems to have run out of visionary global masterminds, far-sighted, intelligent and respected figures.

The first US envoy to the Horn under the current administration was Ambassador Jeffery Feltman, who stepped down after nine months (April 23, 2021, to January 10, 2022.) In January 2022, Ambassador David Satterfield became the new U.S. envoy until June 2022. He was replaced by the current envoy, Ambassador Mike Hammer. In three years, three US envoys were for the Horn of Africa. This is only a sign that the current administration has never taken the Horn of Africa seriously. The Horn of Africa is a complex region with conflicts rooted in colonial legacies, its strategic location, diversity in culture language, religion, and geopolitics. I don't want to make any judgment on the individuals appointed but on the administration which seems at a loss to find the right person for one of the most complex and volatile security zones in the world.

Africans and indeed many other countries in the world would have wished for conflict resolution without the intervention of the superpowers. We can confidently attribute the success in the liberation of almost all the countries of Africa from colonization to determined African leaders from within and the support of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in every aspect of the struggle. Without their support, decolonization would have taken much longer and would have been more costly because the colonizers were the Western European countries.

With a unipolar world all that has changed. In a world that has evolved since the end of the Cold War, development and conflict resolution have been near to impossible without the involvement of the Western World and the global order created since the Second World War in institutions like the Bretton Woods System, the UN, IMF, World Bank, ICJ, UNSC, and UN agencies. Until this global order is changed or until Africa possesses the capacity, unity, and determination to challenge this order, Africa will have no alternative except to seek international mediation and intervention in the conflicts that have been created directly and indirectly by the same superpowers whose assistance we seek today.

The Horn of Africa needs the most serious attention. The human cost of the conflict is already staggering. It is expected to be the largest human migration ever if the situation is not managed by the international community with the skills and resources the situation demands. The political implications are being seen today. Alliances are shifting, arms manufacturers are braced for the heavy demands, traffickers are grouping, and extremists are ready to activate their sleeper cells.

Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and a complex alliance of Arab countries and powerful non-state actors have already stepped in to exploit a growing power vacuum in the region. That should be yet another reason for America to change course and be at its best.

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