

U.S. Policy towards the Horn of Africa

Western Michigan University

The Center for African Development Policy Research

Kalamazoo, Michigan

30 September 2011

Remarks by David H. Shinn

Elliott School of International Affairs

George Washington University

For the purposes of this presentation, I am defining the Horn of Africa as Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. Others might include Kenya and even Uganda. I will occasionally refer to those two countries. With only a few interruptions since the early 1960s, this is a region that I have either studied for academic purposes or worked on in connection with my State Department career.

The problems of the Horn are frequently interlinked and often cross international borders. The root causes of the conflicts include economic inequality, political marginalization, poor governance, ethnic tension, competition for scarce resources such as water and good land, periodic drought and poverty. Contributory factors are porous borders, widespread availability of arms, corruption, a poor record by governments on human rights issues and interference in the region by organizations and countries outside the Horn. When you add the fact that the Horn is located on a religious fault line, you have a recipe for frequent conflict. It has arguably been the most conflicted corner of the world since the end of World War II. The Horn has constantly posed a serious challenge for U.S. policy.

The Cold War, the Horn and U.S. Policy

Through the late 1980s, the Cold War determined U.S. policy in the Horn. The United States concentrated its economic and military support on Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie, who was a reliable ally of the United States. The U.S. military maintained a critical communications station known as Kagnew outside Asmara, which at the time was part of Ethiopia. In the late 1960s, Ethiopia was the location of the United States' largest economic and military assistance program and largest embassy in Sub-Saharan Africa. When Ethiopia was threatened by Somali irredentism or Eritrean separatism, the United States strongly backed the Haile Selassie government.

In 1974, when the military junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam seized power, the United States tried initially to maintain cordial economic, political and military relations with the new left-wing regime. The United States refused to provide all of the military assistance requested by Mengistu and Ethiopia turned increasingly to the Soviet Union for support. As Ethiopia slipped into the Soviet camp, the United States looked for a new ally in the Horn.

During the early 1970s, Sudan was not interested in close ties with the United States. Eritrea was engaged in a war of secession from Ethiopia. Djibouti did not become independent until 1977, but was not seen at the time as a sufficiently important country in any event. This left only Somalia as a possible U.S. ally in the region. Somalia had relied heavily during the 1960s and early 1970s on the Soviet Union for military assistance and was aligned with Moscow. As the Soviet Union turned its attention to Ethiopia, however, this opened the door for the United States to replace Soviet influence in Somalia.

Somalia invaded the Somali-inhabited parts of Ethiopia in 1977 and briefly captured most of the southeastern part of the country. Soviet military equipment and advisers and Cuban troops helped Ethiopia to push the Somalis out. While the United States was not providing military equipment to the Somalis during the war, it initiated the delivery of military aid not long thereafter. Ethiopia and Somalia became classic examples of pawns in Cold War policies with the Soviet Union supporting the former and the United States the latter. It was not until the late 1980s as the Cold War was coming to an end that the United States concluded that Somalia's Siad Barre was no longer a satisfactory ally and began to cut back its economic and military support.

By the late 1970s, Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiri had become a Cold War ally of the United States. By the end of his regime in the mid-1980s, the largest American economic and military assistance program in all of Africa was in Sudan. Chevron discovered and was developing Sudan's oil wealth. These close ties to the Nimeiri government resulted in the unwillingness by the United States to support John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), although it did try to maintain good relations with southern Sudanese.

The 1985 overthrow of Nimeiri, as he was en route to the United States for a meeting with President Reagan, led to the immediate erosion in relations with Sudan. U.S. ties with the successor interim military government were correct, but not warm. They improved slightly following the democratic election of Sadiq al-Mahdi early in 1986 but then slowly deteriorated during his rule. Sudan's military coup in 1989 and installation of an Islamic government led by Omar Bashir led to deep concern in Washington and progressively worsening relations between the United States and Sudan. As the Cold War wound down at the end of the 1980s, Washington had poor relations with Mengistu's failing regime in Ethiopia and growing concerns about autocratic governments in Sudan and Somalia. Eritrea was not yet independent and Djibouti remained a minor player in the Horn.

U.S. Policy in the Horn during the 1990s

The end of the Cold War coincided with dramatic political developments in the Horn. There was a new Islamic government in Sudan. In 1991, the left-wing Mengistu government fell to rebel forces that became known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and a secessionist rebel movement in Eritrea. The same year, several opposition groups removed Said Barre from power in Somalia and northwest Somalia, known as Somaliland, unilaterally declared independence. In 1991, Eritrea achieved de facto independence and two years later legally ratified that status.

The Cold War no longer dictated U.S. policies in the Horn; its termination presented an opportunity for the United States to focus on economic development throughout Africa. Instead, there was strong competition for scarce U.S. financial resources and relatively little interest in Africa. As a result, the 1990s witnessed a series of ad hoc decisions in Washington for dealing with both the Horn and Africa generally.

In 1991, the United States played a key role in helping to broker the departure of Mengistu from Addis Ababa, the replacement of his regime with the EPRDF and the independence of Eritrea. Due to concerns about Sudan's support for terrorist organizations, U.S. relations with its Islamic government continued to deteriorate. Osama bin Laden moved his headquarters to Khartoum late in 1991 and was not asked to leave by the Sudanese government until mid-1996. The United States put Sudan on the list of state sponsors of terrorism in 1993; this led to a major U.S. sanctions regime against Sudan.

In late 1992, at the end of the George H.W. Bush administration, the United States sent a large military mission to end a horrific famine in the failed state of Somalia. While this international effort ended the famine, it became by mid-1993 an obsession for capturing warlord Mohammed Aideed, whose militia was responsible for killing Pakistani peacekeepers under UN command. The international intervention ended as a failed political mission. The U.S. response was to pull out of Somalia and minimize engagement in Somalia's continuing crises throughout the 1990s.

In the early 1990s, the United States increasingly gave rhetorical and humanitarian support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and strengthened relations with the Meles Zenawi government in Ethiopia and Isaias Afewerki government in Eritrea. The most constructive Clinton administration policy in the region was the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative. It was intended to mitigate conflict and improve food security in the five countries of the Horn, in addition to Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. While it had some positive impact on improving food security, it failed as a conflict mitigation effort for many reasons, not the least of which were new conflicts such as the Ethiopia-Eritrea war that overwhelmed the initiative.

In the meantime, U.S. policy towards Khartoum became increasingly hostile as the Bashir government supported terrorist groups and U.S. domestic interests pushed Washington into the arms of the SPLM. In the mid-1990s, the United States pursued a “front line states” policy that encouraged Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda to put pressure on Sudan and backed up the initiative with a \$20 million grant of non-lethal military equipment.

Close ties to Meles, Isaias, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Paul Kagame in Rwanda led to a personalization of African policy in the second Clinton term and the brief designation of these leaders as the new hope for Africa. (Nelson Mandela in South Africa was in a class of his own.) In 1998, the outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea brought a quick end to the Clinton administration’s focus on these four leaders. It also resulted in the termination of military assistance to Ethiopia and Eritrea and the cancellation of that part of the \$20 million in “front line states” military aid that had not already been delivered. At the beginning of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, the Clinton team tried to follow a balanced approach towards both countries, angering both in the process.

For the next couple of years, the United States struggled to regain its position in the region. A period of U.S. policy retrenchment in the Horn was underway at the end of the Clinton administration and beginning of the George W. Bush administration.

U.S. engagement in Somalia was limited to modest amounts of humanitarian assistance. Policy level people in both the Clinton and Bush administrations fled from the Somali issue. Having been burned once in Somalia, neither administration had any desire to reengage there.

Relations were worsening with Sudan, especially following the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the mistaken belief in some quarters that Sudan had something to do with the bombings. The U.S. cruise missile attack on a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum following the embassy bombings was probably the low point in U.S.-Sudan relations.

U.S. ties with Eritrea were beginning to become testy in the aftermath of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, especially following Ethiopia’s military victory in 2000 and its unwillingness to accept the binding arbitration over demarcation of the border. Djibouti remained relatively unimportant to U.S. policy although it did begin to play a more significant role in the Somali peace process. The United States focused its efforts on rebuilding relations with Ethiopia while trying to maintain reasonably cordial ties with Eritrea as the 20th century came to an end.

U.S. Policy in the Horn during the 21st Century

--The Bush administration took office with some interest in Sudan, but otherwise the Horn was a low foreign policy priority. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, that began to change. The war on terrorism drove U.S. policy throughout the region except for Sudan where the United States also played a major role in the North-South peace process and worked hard to end the crisis in Darfur. Counterterrorism was about the only U.S. policy in Somalia during the Bush administration although the United States continued to send modest amounts of humanitarian assistance and food aid.

At the end of 2002, the United States established the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at a former French Foreign Legion post in Djibouti. The stated mission was to disrupt and defeat international terrorist groups posing an imminent threat to the United States, its allies and their interests in the region. Following the creation of this installation, the only American military base in Africa, Djibouti took on an importance for U.S. policy that it never had before. Today, there are about 2,000 personnel at CJTF-HOA.

Ethiopia, which itself felt threatened by extremist groups, became an increasingly important ally in U.S. counterterrorism policy in the region. It became difficult for the United States to maintain cordial relations with Eritrea as its ties with Ethiopia strengthened.

By the end of the Clinton administration there was modest improvement in relations with Sudan as the Bashir government decided to test possible cooperation on counterterrorism. This cooperation expanded after 9/11. Following progress beginning in 2003 on the North-South peace process and signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, there was a serious prospect for the normalization of relations with Sudan and eventual removal of U.S. sanctions. The United States played a key role in encouraging both Khartoum and the SPLM to sign the CPA; this was the Bush administration's signal achievement in its African policy.

The outbreak of conflict in Darfur in 2003 ended prospects for the normalization of relations between Sudan and the United States. Under pressure from Congress and domestic advocacy groups, the Bush administration declared in 2004 that genocide had taken place and put the blame on the government of Sudan. Charges of continuing genocide, or at least a failure to assert that the genocide had ended, continued well into the Obama administration. In fact, the genocide probably ended in 2004. Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer, stated at a September 2011 public meeting in Washington that there was no genocide in Sudan when she assumed her position late in 2005. Neither the Bush nor the Obama administration was willing, however, to acknowledge this fact in the face of intense pressure to the contrary from some members of Congress and domestic pressure groups such as the Save Darfur Coalition. The United States welcomed Khartoum's willingness to move forward with the CPA and its cooperation on counterterrorism.

But there were always new issues, first Darfur, and subsequently conflicts in Abyei and Southern Kordofan along the North-South border that prevented normalization of relations with Sudan. The heavy focus on Sudan's North-South peace process and the Darfur crisis by the Bush administration and, to a considerable extent, the Obama administration sucked all the diplomatic oxygen out of the air. It was difficult to get high level attention on other issues in the Horn, except for Somalia when it became a center for extremist activity.

In 2006, Somalia became a major issue for U.S. policy in the Horn when a group of Islamists, some moderate and some extremist, threatened to seize power in Mogadishu. The United States made its biggest policy blunder in Somalia since the ill-fated focus on the hunt for Mohammed Aided in 1993. It financed a group of discredited Somali warlords who took the name Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) to attack the Islamists. The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) defeated the ARPCT by mid-2006 and seized control of most of central and south Somalia. U.S. policy in Somalia was in a shambles.

The Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), located in Nairobi and with the support of the international community, invited Ethiopian forces into Somalia to remove the UIC. By early 2007, Ethiopian troops forced the UIC out of Mogadishu. Many analysts argue that the United States not only encouraged Ethiopia to invade Somalia but financed the operation. I disagree. While the United States did not do enough to discourage this inadvisable operation, I believe this was a decision taken solely by the government of Ethiopia. Once Ethiopia seized Mogadishu, however, the United States appears to have encouraged Ethiopian troops to stay so that Islamist forces could not return.

Eritrea seized upon the conflict in Somalia and Ethiopia's direct involvement to put pressure on Ethiopia. It supported extremist groups in Somalia, including one of the successor groups to the UIC, al-Shabaab, which opposed the Ethiopian intervention. This Eritrean action, in addition to hostile actions towards its neighbor, Djibouti, caused a further deterioration in U.S.-Eritrea relations. The United States and Eritrea are barely on speaking terms today.

The independence of South Sudan in 2011 and low level of violence in Darfur offered the possibility of a normalization of relations between Washington and Khartoum. Unfortunately, new problems in Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan regions along the North-South border have complicated the normalization process. In the meantime, Washington has excellent relations with the new state of South Sudan. U.S.-Ethiopia and U.S.-Djibouti ties are also solid.

The immediate problem for the United States is the crisis in Somalia. Washington strongly opposes al-Shabaab but is increasingly concerned about the ability of the TFG to establish a viable government in Somalia. It has cordial relations with Somaliland, which in 1991 declared its unilateral declaration of independence. On the other hand, the United States is not prepared to recognize Somaliland's independence until the African Union does so.

In the fall of 2010, Washington announced a new “dual track” policy for Somalia whereby it said it would continue to support the TFG while providing more assistance to Somaliland, semi-autonomous Puntland and even try to work with anti-Shabaab groups in south and central Somalia. While some additional funding has gone to Somaliland and Puntland, the amounts have been modest and the leaders of both entities are disappointed with the results so far. It has not been possible to put development assistance into those parts of Somalia under al-Shabaab control. It has even been difficult to respond to the severe famine in those areas.

The United States continues to treat counterterrorism as an important part of its policy in the Horn, but is implementing that policy in a more nuanced manner than was the case during the Bush administration. In Somalia, surveillance drones have been in widespread use for several years. The United States has conducted occasional aerial strikes against suspected terrorist targets inside Somalia; there were several early this year. According to press reports coming out of the port city of Kismayu, which is held by al-Shabaab, U.S. drones or aircraft struck the al-Shabaab military camp at the airport and possibly other targets on 24 September.

U.S. contributions to the anti-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean have become an important part of U.S. policy in recent years. While the United States pays lip service to improved human rights conditions in the region, the other issues that I have discussed often trump concerns about human rights, particularly in countries that are supportive of U.S. policy. One common thread through U.S. policy in the Horn since the end of World War II has been to provide assistance to combat hunger and famine. In terms of lives saved, this has been America’s most successful policy in the region.

The challenges for U.S policy in the Horn remain huge. From the perspective of American policy, relations with Ethiopia, Djibouti, and South Sudan are currently good. They are terrible with Eritrea and complicated with Sudan. Somalia is a special case. While Washington has a good dialogue with the TFG, Somaliland, and Puntland, it wants to see the demise of al-Shabaab. The interrelationships of the countries in the Horn are such that it is virtually impossible to have good relations with all of them at the same time.