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SOMALIA AND THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN INTEREST IN ETHIOPIA, I963 - I969

At a time when Somalia and the United States appear to be forging an understanding, if not an alliance, it might be instructive to discuss the limits of Washington's friendships, especially with poor and weak powers. It would be most instructive to evaluate such an international relationship in terms of geopolitics and military assistance. Since Somalia and Ethiopia seem to have exchanged clients, so to speak, it might clarify the situation to study the beginning of the end of Ethio-American cordiality in I963/ I964. At the time, the break in intimacy was hardly noticed, yet it led to America's gradual withdrawal from Ethiopia and ultimately to a still fluid geopolitical realignment.

From I953 to I956, U.S. military aid to Ethiopia was given out on a piecemeal basis, and the Pentagon remained uniterested in what the State Department claimed was Ethiopia's strategic importance to the United States. The diplomats were probably not themselves totally convinced of Ethiopia's geopolitical significance, since they rebuffed Addis Ababa's repeated requests for an American commitment guaranteeing the empire's frontiers. More striking, the military even refused to acknowledge the importance of Kagnew Base and American facilities in Asmara because their optic was near-sightedly directed at Europe. Time after time, the State Department had to resort to White House intervention to force the Joint Chiefes of Staff to fulfill promised military assistance programs. In I956, the diplomats turned to the National Security Council for a long-term

policy toward Ethiopia in which the military was a protagonist, not an antagonist. Even here, the Pentagon gracelessly yielded a "limited military assistance program ... justified mainly because of overriding political considerations."[I] The language permitted the National Security Council (NSC) to issue its report on 'U.S. Policy toward Ethiopia' (23 October I956).

NSC recommended that Washington introduce economic aid, as opposed to ongoing programs of technical assistance, especially to supplement "Ethiopia's capacity to support the planned reorganization of its armed forces." It directed the Pentagon to undertake a narrow military program "suitable for maintaining internal security and offering resistance to local aggression."[2] The assistance, which always remained small in absolute terms, was sufficient to provide Addis Ababa with sub-Saharan Africa's second or third most powerful army through the end of the I960s. American aid was not directed at providing Ethiopia with an offensive military capability, a limitation retained by the NSC when it reshaped American policy toward Ethiopia in light of Somalia's imminent independence.

The White House strategists found northeast Africa to be politically fragmented, ethically divided, and economically backward. "The conflicting aims and aspirations of Ethiopia and the Somalis are a major source of tension jeopardizing prospects for peaceful and orderly progress in the area." Somali demands for political unification "threatened Ethiopia's territorial integrity and ... aroused Ethiopian antagonism." Greater Somaliland was opposed because the resultant state would be weak and embryonic, easily manipulated by the USSR and Egypt, then under radical leadership. Since Somalia was already suspicious of close U.S. ties with Addis Ababa, the State Department was directed to

encourage Italy to continue "its major role in the maintenance of Somalia's stability and Free World orientation." In regards to Ethiopia, the Pentagon was "to avoid a military build-up (and) increased tensions in the area."[3] The same thinking remained basic in subsequent National Security documents.[4] Throughout its period of influence in Ethiopia, Washington was wedded only to providing defensive military aid for Ethiopia and to avoiding a military build-up in the Horn of Africa.

Somalia's irredentist attitudes and policies dashed these hopes and led inevitably, in October / November I963, to the outbreak of hostilities in the Ogaden. Initially, the Ethiopians fared badly against the Somali skirmishers, but advantages in numbers and especially in airpower won the day for Addis Ababa, which, however, was plunged into gloom by the poor performance of its soldiers. The Ethiopians immediately cried out for massive infusion of U.S. material and a large augmentation of the Military Assistance Advisory-Group (MAAG). General Merid Mengesha, the Minister of Defense, told Ambassador William Korry that the "time had come for (America) to choose who its friends were (in) this part of the world. Either (the) U.S. would come to Ethiopia's assistance (to) save it from (its) 'Greatest threat in recent history' or Ethiopia might have to 'deal with (the) devil itself' to save (the) country." Korry sent the request on to Washington.[5]

Already preoccupied by the first throes of the Vietnam war, the State Department replied that the United States could not afford to expand its military assistance effort in Ethiopia; that it did nor believe that the country's economy could suffer an expanded military program; and that the Ogaden problem had to be solved through socio-economic development and by granting autonomy to the population.[6] Since

the diplomats in Washington had hitherto been responsive to Ethiopian requests, the ambassador asked his superiors to reassess Ethiopia's importance to the United States in terms of geopolitics.[7] He was pleased to discover that there was a little value left in Kagnew station and in Haile Selassie's "leadership role in Africa and the non-aligned world." State Department once again championed Addis Ababa's cause and convinced the Pentagon in February I964, to agree to provide increased logistical and training support for counterinsurgency warfare.[8]

At this time, the Soviets had begun a $ 30 million program of military assistance to train and equip a 20.000 man Somali army, and the first MIG-I5 planes and T-34 tanks had arrived.[9] In Addis Ababa, the Ethiopians complained to their American suppliers that U.S. aid was insufficient to counter the threat of a modern Somali force.[I0] Although the charge was then nonsense, Washington had not yet shipped equipment promised Addis Ababa years before. Annual "sharp funding ceilings" had delayed deliveries by three or four years in many cases, and some major items had been postponed to Fiscal Year I974, astonishingly enough. Ethiopia's ceiling of $ 9.5 million was too low to meet the Imperial Government's demands for advanced jet planes to counter the MIGs.[II] By May I964, Addis Ababa complaints that Washington was "not keeping (its) commitment" had become "a very serious irritant (in) U.S.-IEG relations."[I2]

By then, a U.S. army survey team had studied the situation. It acknowledged that deliveries was so far behind that the Washington was not fulfilling its pledge of I960 to provide support for an Ethiopian army of 40.000 "in light of delivery performance to date (and) the outlook for coming years under the current programs." The team did not, however, believe that the recent Ethiopian military failure was caused by shortages of equipment or men, as the Addis

Ababa government asserted. It attributed the poor performance of the ground forces to "training deficiencies", for which no amount of hardware could compensate. If, the team suggested, Kagnew remained a valuable facility, then a new, six-year military program for I965 - I970 might be introduced. It would add MAAG personnel to advise higher staff echelons in training, logistics, and administration and to assist "in massively retraining ... the Ethiopian armed forces in the shortest time practicable." The team also recommended an additional $ 33.7 million through I970, to permit the acquisition of twelve F-5s and to bring the Ethiopian army to its promised strength of 40.000 men.[I3] The thrust of the team report was against a great infusion of equipment but toward improving the battle readiness of the army and the airforce; and the suggested program would have cost little.

Yet, because of its financial problems, the United States government could not agree to finance even a modest expansion in military aid for Ethiopia. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, explained to the embassy that shortfalls throughout the entire military assistance program, an expected Congressional cut, "plus unexpected demands for Congo, Vietnam, Laos, and other crisis situations," did not permit an increase in military assistance for Ethiopia, then costing a niggardly $ 9.9 million a year; Rusk did suggest, however, that if Addis Ababa decided to assist Washington "in African collective security measures to stabilize the Congo situation ... USG would most definitely consider resultant requirements."[I4] In other words, Kagnew station was old coin that could not purchase military modernization. Given the global situation, Washington sought Ethiopia's active participation in its geopolitical program, its only real reason for being involved in the Solomonic empire.

State Department and Korry tried to hold the political damage to a minimum by expediting deliveries and by winning an increase in funding ceilings for I966 - I97I, to a paltry $ I3.5 million.[I5] The Ethiopians continuously pushed for more, convinced of a mortal threat from Somalia and its Russian arms.[I6] Washington believed that the Ethiopians were paranoid about the danger and were exaggerating the force levels that the Somali army had achieved, but it was a fact that in I966/I967, bands of armed Somalis up to fifty in strength were raiding well into Bale and obtaining the cooperation of the people living there. Simultaneously, the threat from Eritrea was growing in proportion to the return from military schools in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt of hundreds of fighters armed with mortars, bazookas, modern automatic rifles, even small-caliber artillery.[I7] The Ethiopian government believed that it had to respond militarily to these challenges, and in January I967, requested a new five-year program of American assistance which would completely modernize and reequip Ethiopia's forces.

Ambassador Korry was scandalized: he knew that Washington would never agree, and he also believed that Ethiopia could not afford it. The plan could have cost the U.S. tens of millions of dollars over and beyond the current ceiling figure, and would have added $ 30 million in local support funds to the annual Ethiopian budget. At meeting with high ranking officials, the American pointed to the extravagance of the scheme in terms of the government's recent request that Washington help feed starving Eritreans, since Addis Ababa could not "afford to ship food from the surplus producing areas of the country because of heavy transportation costs and could not afford to buy grain for non-reimbursable distribution." Korry warned: "If investment were not made

in the productive centers of the economy, it would simply multiply the security problems and lead to chaos and the collapse of the structure of the Empire." The major threats faced by Ethiopia were internal: "there could be no security without development ... who was going to be responsible for all the unkept promises to Ethiopia when funds would not be forthcoming for schools, public health, agricultural and industrial development?" Such projects were particularly important for Eritrea, Harerge, and Bale, where social and economic programs might retard and finally block the drift toward separatism. Finally, Korry brought to the Ethiopian government's attention the fact that the United States was fighting a costly war in Vietnam, and that it might be more appropriate for Addis Ababa to ask how it could assist Washington than to request aid at a time when President Lyndon Johnson was asking his countrymen to pay higher taxes.[I8]

Wisely, the Ethiopian government chose not to play the high-stakes American game, but it lost, anyway, when a year later, it became obvious that the United States was winding down its military involvement in Ethiopia. The embassy was informed that assistance would continue "as long as US interests require but we do not have a legal commitment for indefinite support." The ambassador was instructed not to use the term "support commitment" in discussions with Ethiopian officials, and to "give no indication that we accept any obligation to replace worn out equipment for (an) indefinite period of time."[I9] In I968/I969, Secretary of State Dean Rusk announced a reduction of Ethiopia's military assistance ceiling to $ I2 million, which he suggested did not represent "any lessening of interest or withdrawal of support for Ethiopia. There has been no change in our policy or objectives."[20] In fact, Rusk was

commenting within clear U.S. policy guidelines established in the late I950s, when the NSC decided that U.S. military aid to Ethiopia would be limited to the needs of internal security and the policing of frontiers. Washington would provide counter-insurgency aid until the I977, but refused to provide the massive weaponry that both imperial and revolutionary Addis Ababa felt it needed to retain its frontiers and peoples inviolate.

There are the lessons here for Somalia. Washington was never willing to guarantee Ethiopia's frontiers. Two, the United States responds to client states in terms of its own geopolitical needs. Three, Washington is not interested in the internal requirements of small states such as Somalia. The disinterest may work to the advantage of entrenched political interests and not to political dissidents; in other words, U.S. aid tends to support the status quo as much as it dampens revolutionary zeal; yet, if the internal political situation deteriorates sharply, as in Iran and Ethiopia, it will withdraw and seek new clients. Four, the National Security Council probably has figured out the minimum military and supporting aid required to retain Mogadishu's pragmatic interest, and it will not be enough truly to challenge the frontier alignments in the Horn of Africa. It will be enough, perhaps, to cause Addis Ababa at least to think about negotiations and to guard Somalia from an all-out Ethiopian attack. There does not seem to be any way for Somalia to obtain enough U.S. assistance for a concerted action in the Ogaden. Five, if Mogadishu were to pressure Washington for such assistance, the United States might fold up its tents and depart, just as it did in Ethiopia, when Addis Ababa's demands were beyond established policy limits. Six, only if Somalia completely conformed to American geopolitical positions might Washington consider

a large increase in military aid to Somalia, and even this possibility is doubtful. If George Washington were alive today, he probably would advise Siyad Barre to eschew foreign entaglements, and to work out his nation's destiny in terms of its own geographic setting. The trouble with foreign alliance is that the parties to them have different agenda. When one side fulfills its goals, it quickly divorces its partner, who is left with aims unrequited.

FOOTNOTES

I H. G. Marcus: Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States, I94I - I974 (Berkeley, I983), p. 89 - 96; Joint Strategic Plans Committee, in collaboration with Joint Logistics Plans Committee, "Survey of Ethiopian Military Aid Requirements", a memo presented to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, II January I956, Dept. of Defense 092, Ethiopia (9-26-56), Sec. 2.

2 National Security Council: U.S. Policy toward Ethiopia, NSC 56I4 (23 October I956), approved 29 May I957 as NSC 56I5/I with no important changes.

3 National Security Council: U.S. Policy toward the Horn of Africa, NSC 5903 (4 February I959), approved 2 March I959 with no changes.

4 See, for example, National Security Council: U.S. Policy in the Horn of Africa, NSC 6028 (30 December I960), approved without change on II January I96I.

5 Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, 25 November, I963, no decimal classification (hereafter ndc).

6 Ball to Embassy, Washington I5 (?) December, I963, ndc.

7 Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, I8 December, I963, ndc.

8 Rusk to Embassy, Washington, 29 February, I964, ndc.

9 Aryeh Y. Yodfat: The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa, in: Northeast African Studies, vol. I, no. 3, I979/I980

IO Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, I8 December, I963, ndc.

II Vance to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, 9 May, I964, ndc.

I2 Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, 2I May, I964, ndc.

I3 USTRICOM to JCS and to Secretaries of State and Defense, n.p., 29 May, I964, ndc.

I4 Rusk to Embassy, Chief MAAG, and USCINCMEAFSA, Washington, I3 August, I964, ndc.

I5 Rus to Embassy, Washington, 2 (?) May, I967, ndc.

I6 Memo of conversation between General E. Eschenburg and HIM, 2I June, I966, in Vance to Department, Addis Ababa, 25 June, I966, ndc.

I7 Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, 25 June, I966, ndc.

I8 Memo of conversation between Lt. General Kebede Gebre, Minister of Defense; Lt. General Iyasu Mengesha, Chief of Staff, Ethiopian Armed Forces; Robert Sonhauser, Deputy Chief of Mission; Brig. General E. Eschenburg, Chief MAAG; and Ambassador Korry, Addis Ababa, I8 January, I967, encl. in ibid.; and Korry to Secretary of State, Addis Ababa, 2I January, I967, ndc.

I9 Rusk to Embassy, Washington, 20 April, I968, ndc.

20 Rusk to Embassy, Washington, I7 January, I969, ndc.