An Assessment of Prospects for Ending Domestic Military Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa

by William G. Thom

The importance to nation-building of security (whether those challenging it are organized armies, politically motivated insurgents, or simple bandits) cannot be overemphasized. A reasonably secure environment is a prerequisite for orderly economic development, institutional growth, good governance, and effective humanitarian relief operations. Peacekeeping itself can succeed only with the cooperation of former belligerents. Thus, it is especially unfortunate that Africa has experienced extensive political and military violence over the past 35 years. The violence, in all its forms, has become even more widespread and predatory in the post-cold war era.

This contribution to CSIS Africa Notes begins with a brief historical review of African security issues during the cold war period, assesses the present situation, and concludes with some guarded predictions about the future.

The Cold War Period
An artificial security environment prevailed in Africa during the cold war, as the two superpowers engaged in a zero-sum political-military contest that featured war by proxy. In pursuit of their own interests, newly independent states with untested militaries chose sides. The developing states needed the aid of the superpowers or former colonial powers to underwrite relatively large ventures such as wars of liberation or counterinsurgencies. (It might be argued that the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war was an exception to this pattern. Even in that conflict, however, outside powers—many of them Soviet clients—assisted the federal government.) The Soviet Union was clearly the chief sponsor, pouring thousands of tons of military equipment into African conflicts. At first, relatively modest amounts went into wars of liberation against the tenacious remaining strongholds of colonial rule. Heftier amounts later went to newly “Marxist” states and their “nonaligned” cousins.

Wars of liberation by self-proclaimed Marxist movements, chiefly against white minority regimes in southern Africa, were a natural attraction for
Moscow and Beijing. A Sino-Soviet competition for the allegiance of various African liberation movements in the 1960s and early 1970s was eventually "won" by the USSR. In the early stages of these struggles in Angola, Rhodesia, Mozambique, Namibia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, Chinese provision of small arms and basic training was important to many of the movements. As the various guerrilla wars progressed toward more conventional forms of combat, however, the Soviet Union proved more willing to provide the heavier or more sophisticated weaponry required to attack government positions and engage enemy aircraft. For example, the provision to Mozambique's Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) liberation movement of 122-mm artillery rockets and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles gave Moscow the clear edge in political influence.

In this period, the West found it increasingly difficult on moral grounds to support the white minority regimes. Military aid was provided, however, to pro-Western states such as Ethiopia, Zaire, and Kenya. At the same time, the Communist countries provided sizable amounts of arms to new states anxious to break with their colonial past and burnish their socialist credentials (e.g., Guinea, Congo, Mali) or profess nonalignment (e.g., Tanzania, Nigeria).

In the mid-1970s, Soviet and Cuban intervention brought African conflicts into the big leagues. African "bush wars," border clashes, and rural insurgencies had heretofore been regarded as inhabiting the low end of the military sophistication spectrum. A 1975 Soviet move by air and sea into Angola, however, demonstrated Moscow's strategic reach. The USSR's long-range airlift turned a theoretical capability into an actual one at a time when isolationist feeling was running high in the United States in the aftermath of Vietnam. These Soviet deliveries provided the wherewithal to convert the Marxist MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertacão de Angola) guerrilla army into a conventional force capable of wresting control of Angola from two Western-backed rivals. The Soviet move, along with the unprecedented arrival in Angola of Cuban combat troops, seemed to suggest that the Eastern bloc was using African conflicts to flex its military muscle. This perception was reinforced two years later when an entire Soviet general staff was inserted into Ethiopia to coordinate the defense of another new Marxist regime against an invasion by a soon-to-be-former Soviet client, Somalia. Africa south of the Sahara was becoming a proving ground for testing just how far Soviet intervention could go without drawing a serious response from the West.

This was also an era when some African armies were amassing enough capability to engage in interstate conflict. Drawing on weapons and training made available to them largely through cold war competition, several African militaries broke away from the internal security force model they had inherited from the colonial era and developed the ability to field conventional forces capable of cross-border maneuvers and combat. An ironic case in point is the 1977-1978 Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia, in which the Soviet-trained and -equipped Somali military attacked new Soviet favorite Ethiopia. Due largely to years of Soviet training and their own traditional aggressiveness, the Somalis made good use of armor, and especially artillery. But poor equipment maintenance, shortages of spare parts and ammunition, and the Ethiopians' overwhelming advantage in terms of troop numbers, equipment, and foreign support ultimately led to Somalia's defeat.

In another cross-border military action, Tanzania sent some 30,000 soldiers into Uganda in 1979. No cold war advisers or troops were involved, but Communist equipment was much in evidence, with the Tanzanians using Chinese tanks and Soviet artillery, while being opposed by a Ugandan force whose most prominent heavy weapons were a fleet of Czech armored personnel carriers.

At the opposite extreme of interstate warfare during this period was the six-day 1985 "Christmas war" in West Africa between Mali and Burkina Faso. Mali managed to push some of its Soviet-supplied armor across the border to seize disputed villages. Some of this equipment broke down, however, allowing Burkina Faso to claim its capture in battle.

Eventually, a number of Soviet client regimes came under attack from insurgent movements. With the tables now turned, these regimes found it extremely difficult to deal with guerrillas wars waged by determined opponents often supported by Western interests. Angola and Ethiopia, the two paragons of Soviet might and political influence in sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1970s and 1980s, soaked up late-model Soviet military equipment worth billions of dollars, several thousand Soviet and Eastern bloc military advisers and technicians, and tens of thousands of Cuban combat troops, all to no avail. Marxist Ethiopia's army totaled well over 300,000 troops at its height, yet eventually succumbed to determined guerrillas. In Angola, modern weapons and tactics employed by the MPLA's military failed to crush a
resilient rebel resistance or neutralize repeated South African incursions in the south. In the end, these two impressive military organizations built up by Moscow and Havana in Africa proved no more successful than the Soviets themselves were in Afghanistan.

Although superpower influence often fueled African conflicts, it also sometimes discouraged them. Potential belligerents came to believe that without the support of either East or West their likelihood of success was limited, especially if the prospective opponent did have such support. Moreover, both East and West had a stake in maintaining the integrity of the state system in Africa, because neither wanted to play on a chessboard where the squares kept changing shape and color. And neither side supported tribal warfare unless there was some connection to an important cold war strategic objective.

The Soviets tended to keep their clients on a short leash, by maintaining tight control over the flow of military supplies and the level of training provided on major weapon systems (e.g., combat aircraft). This prevented a client from building up a war chest sufficient to sustain a prolonged period of combat without continuing Soviet assistance. Thus, Moscow and its allies retained powerful influence over critical decisions by their clients on when or whether to use military force. The Eastern bloc countries even had a measure of control over guerrilla forces, which needed continuing training and resupply. In theory, arms could be obtained from non-Communist suppliers, but in practice these alternative sources were too unreliable and expensive for either guerrillas or African governments accustomed to long-term low-interest loans or free arms deliveries from the East. (A glaring exception to this pattern was Moscow’s inability to abort the 1977 invasion of Ethiopia by Somalia, whose government had evidently amassed a large enough quantity of ammunition and other consumables to be able temporarily to ignore Soviet disapproval. After Somalia abrogated its friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, it had a degree of success in obtaining ammunition for its Soviet-made heavy weapons from other Third World states, some of which produced their own ordnance. Eventually, however, the Somali military became desperate for ammunition, especially for its artillery, one important factor that led to its retreat from Ethiopia.)

In sum, from about 1960 to 1990 the superpowers supported African clients involved in military combat when it suited their interests to do so. Although this assistance selectively fueled some African conflicts, its denial retarded the development of many others.

### The Post-Cold War Period

The end of the cold war and the demise of the Eastern bloc took the lid off localized strife in Africa. Military conflicts have developed or intensified in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. A major civil war reigned in Angola, such countries as Uganda, Mali, and Chad have been experiencing persistent insurgency, and a dozen or more countries from Togo to South Africa suffered increased internal violence as a by-product of political reform.

These conflicts are internal, although (as in the case of the Rwandan civil war) the impact of the fighting can be regional. Most African state armies are in decline, beset by a combination of shrinking budgets, international pressures to downsize and demobilize, and the lack of the freely accessible military assistance that characterized the cold war period. With few exceptions, heavy weapons lie dormant, equipment is in disrepair, and training is almost nonexistent. Most militaries would have a difficult time scrap ing together a company or battalion for international peacekeeping duties. In short, the principal forces of order are in disorder in many countries at a time when the legitimacy of central governments (and indeed sometimes the state) is in doubt.

The end of the cold war both coincided with and catalyzed a cluster of troubling developments in Africa. The 1990s have seen increasing competition for ever scarcer resources at both the individual and political levels, a trend that has found expression in insurgency, political violence, and crime. Insurgency itself is no longer driven so much by political motivations as by blatantly economic interests. (It could be argued that African insurgencies have always had a strong economic component, although in the past this incentive was usually masked by a political agenda. The guerrilla war fought in Mozambique by Renamo [Resistência Nacional Moçambicana] from the late 1970s to the early 1990s may be a case in point.)

Certainly the many-sided civil wars in Liberia and Somalia qualify as new-breed economic insurgencies. Charles Taylor’s NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) has exploited the timber and other industries in areas under its control. This war was driven less by political idealism than by a desire to seize corporate profit and individual spoils. Somali warlords vie for dominion over the airports and seaports to exact payment for their use and to control relief supplies. In Sierra Leone, armed gangs fight for control of diamonds and other resources in the interior.

A recurring pattern is apparent. A breakdown in the rule of law makes the unarmed peasant the prey of gangs masquerading as political movements (e.g., Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front). As the political violence and terror persists, the infrastructure of the country deteriorates or is destroyed, and economic targets of opportunity become ever more scarce. This eventually causes the lawlessness to spread to new areas and in some cases even to feed on humanitarian relief efforts.

Another common thread is that these internal wars are increasingly evolving along ethnic lines, a development driven in part by the factors mentioned above. Although ethnic strife is not new to Africa, the call to arms by ethnic affiliation in the 1990s is nonetheless a cause for concern. Virtually every ongoing conflict on the continent has had its roots in tribal identity, often at the cost of a national identity. Nearly 20 African countries are currently experiencing political violence along ethnic
lines. The most extreme contemporary cases are Rwanda and Burundi, where up to a million people may have been killed since 1994 because of their ethnicity, and the bloodletting continues. A general decline in some states of central authority and the rule of law is strengthening the magnetism of tribal identity. If the state cannot protect individuals, the tendency is to turn to one’s ethnic roots for refuge.

One key reason for Africans’ greater willingness to take up arms is the demographic situation. The continent has a large pool of young people who matured during the era of independence and lack firsthand experience of life under colonial rule, which was generally orderly and systematic (albeit repressive). They have witnessed only the failure of African governments to improve their lot, and have often seen things get worse. They are better educated than their parents, and more aware of their limited socioeconomic prospects. Too many impetuous youths are attracted to criminal pursuits and learn to live by the gun. “Boy soldiers,” sometimes including preteens, have become an all too common sight in African conflicts. Meanwhile, population pressures are nibbling away at the quality of life, leading to a scarcity of key commodities and a heavy demand for basic social services. Each conflict worsens population pressures (because persons rendered destitute and nonproductive by the fighting far outnumber those killed) and further degrades the environment, thus making it necessary to produce more with fewer resources.

The glut of weapons (mainly small arms and infantry support weapons) left over from the cold war makes recourse to violence all too easy in many places. The continent is often described as being “awash with arms”; in some areas small arms have become a trade staple and a form of currency. In Mozambique, the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifle was selling for as little as $2 a few years ago. Moreover, weapons are still coming into the continent from a myriad of First, Second, and Third World producers. In any case, the factions involved in internal wars (especially economic insurgencies) do not require expensive heavy weaponry. Small arms, whose sale and movement are much harder to control, are well suited to rural insurgency and criminal activity.

Also noteworthy is the local development of “Road Warrior”-style hybrid weapon systems that mate heavy armaments with civilian platforms. Although this concept did not originate in Africa, it seems to have taken root there. From Chad’s “Toyota wars” to Somalia’s “technicals,” regular and irregular forces have enjoyed great success by mounting heavy or rapid-fire weapons—such as heavy-caliber machine guns, rocket launchers, or antiaircraft guns—on light trucks. The Eritreans have successfully used speedboats with similar weapons affixed. Civilian helicopters mounting machine guns and rockets were used in Rwanda in 1994. And all this may be just the beginning of an evolutionary process. The distinction between insurgency and banditry, and between war and crime, is becoming blurred in Africa as elsewhere. Armed gangs with military-style weapons are a problem in the cities as well as in the countryside.

Although usually devoid of any serious political motivation, criminal elements can pose a major threat to the welfare of the state. In Kenya, for example, the economically vital tourist industry is being damaged by lawless activity. In cities such as Luanda, Abidjan, and Freetown, urban crime interferes with normal commerce and challenges the government’s ability to provide security. International relief organizations and their resources are a common target.

As for peacekeeping itself, the international community seems to be doing it more and enjoying it less in Africa. Since the end of the cold war, major peacekeeping/enforcement operations have been undertaken in six sub-Saharan countries (Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia), with unambiguous success only in Namibia. There is a clear preference for regional solutions for regional problems, with the use of local peacekeepers to the extent possible. The United Nations, as well as regional bodies such as the Organization of African Unity and the 16-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have had to learn to grapple with an array of new circumstances that include interventions in internal conflicts even when there is no functioning central government. Intervention is often driven by a sense of moral imperative, and the threshold of pain needed to trigger an international response has been getting lower thanks in part to the effective role of the Western media in spreading awareness of otherwise remote conditions and persuading political leaders around the world to lend their support.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that African states have increasingly been stepping forward to take responsibility for the security of their own regions. Their ability to conduct peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations is also improving. Nigeria’s leadership and support since 1990 of ECOMOG (the military arm of ECOWAS) will probably come to be regarded as a milestone in African security self-help. The Nigerian and Ghanaian performances in Liberia greatly exceeded expectations. Senegal, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia have also engaged in noteworthy peacekeeping efforts in recent years, and the ranks of the peacekeepers have been joined by (among others) Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Namibia, and Guinea. Prospects for collective regional security are clearly on the rise in Africa.

Beyond 2000
It is my view that military conflict in sub-Saharan Africa in the early years of the next century will be almost exclusively internal, deceptively unsophisticated, more openly ethnic, more widespread, and will have regional and extraregional implications. Interstate conflicts will probably be limited to occasional border disputes over control of resources (perhaps resembling the recent series of clashes between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula). Somali-style collapsed states with chaotic, uncontrolled violence, although far less numerous than those which will have made successful
transitions to democratic pluralism, will increase in number and have a disproportionate negative impact on the continental and global security environment. As more governments prove unable or unwilling to provide for basic human needs or protection from criminals and warlords, individuals will tend to fall back on their ethnic roots and support ethnically based organizations and interests. Armed combat will take place at a more elemental level. Consequently, the security forces, whether they be international police (i.e., peacekeepers) or the local military, will have to fight down at the level of the armed insurgents/factions/bandits, a dirty and dangerous job in which modern equipment (assuming it is available) will be of comparatively limited effectiveness. Moreover, guerrilla adoption of a few modern weapons, perhaps in conjunction with ingenious new tactics, could provide some painful surprises. Finally, it is unlikely that the ramifications of this form of internal combat will be confined to a single state, or even to the continent. Breakdown and upheaval within one state will affect neighboring countries as populations flee. And such population movement may not be confined to African destinations. In the long run, Europe, and to a lesser extent North America, will be increasingly affected.

The differences between military conflict and police actions will also become more difficult to determine. Lawlessness within the weaker states will become a critical problem, a harbinger of disintegration. Some countries may subdivide along mainly ethnic lines as the result of new wars of "liberation" or of legitimate secessions in search of self-determination. In any case, localized combat will increasingly disregard existing borders.

International and pan-African attempts at peacekeeping/peacemaking will yield only marginal results until such efforts become more serious, more deliberate, and better supported. Even then, their utility will continue to be suspect. Peacekeeping simply cannot succeed unless there are well-defined, competent parties to the settlement, and those parties see peace as being in their best interest.

This brings us to a key determinant of Africa's future military/security milieu—the question of whether the international community will grow weary of repeated intervention in Africa and drastically scale down or terminate altogether its efforts to address regional security issues. Too many expensive peacekeeping failures, too many new conflicts, too many humanitarian crises in difficult security environments, and too many imploed states beset by anarchy could try Western patience and resources to the point of strategic disengagement. A significant peacekeeping disaster could accelerate a move away from African security responsibilities. Or, more likely, the emergence of other crises involving the West's traditional strategic interests (e.g., in the Middle East, Korea, or Cuba) could quickly deflect international attention from managing or resolving conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Such a loss of interest in African security problems could have a catastrophic effect on the continent. If no effective court of appeal (even if it is only the court of international opinion) is available to address African calamities, and if the local combatants believe they are totally free from outside interference, then guerrilla leaders, warlords, and thugs will expand their circles of influence, bringing political violence and terror to an ever larger portion of the continent. The potential consequences of growing conflict and anarchy in Africa, especially the associated uncontrolled population movements, could mean trouble for Western countries. Areas controlled chiefly by local warlords could become a natural breeding ground for organized criminal activities, and perhaps crimes against the environment itself.

In sum, it is my view that armed conflict in Africa south of the Sahara seems likely to persist and propagate, presenting a challenge to the international community. The disease of state collapse and anarchy is not confined to Africa, and it can spread. The West will eventually determine whether the instruments of the state can be brought to bear in defense of order and general welfare on a continent of no abiding strategic interest—if the international community of states is even up to acknowledging such a challenge.

On the other hand, organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity have made significant progress in recent years in addressing peacekeeping and other regional security concerns. Indications are that this trend will continue into the next century. Under their banner, regional groups such as the Economic Community of West African States, the increasingly relevant 12-member Southern African Development Community (SADC), and others may play stronger roles in organizing and enforcing "neighborhood watches" in their portions of Africa.

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