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11. African Conflicts in the Early 21st Century

Gérard Prunier

Africa was decolonized between 1956 and 1975, with the bulk of African states reaching independence during the 1960s. Since then, Africa has become—and remains today—the most violence-prone of the five continents. In spite of that fact, African wars are often understudied and considered negligible. When the Rwandan Genocide burst upon international attention in 1994, few people seemed to realize that it was the consequence of a war that had been going on for three-and-a-half years. And when a war involving 14 states eventually broke out in central Africa in 1996 as a result of that genocide, and lasted six years, it barely seemed to affect international opinion, even though it was the most murderous conflict since World War Two. A terrorist attack in Europe or Israel immediately makes the headlines even if only a handful of victims die. But hundreds or even thousands can die in Africa without making it to the front pages of newspapers. This is due to a mixture of racism, lack of perceived strategic significance, and cultural isolation. But all these factors are now changing, and African conflicts in the future will tend to become more and more relevant to the way the world works, and how it looks at itself.

In this essay we will be placing ourselves in a perspective where, out of the four possibilities outlined in the NIC's *Tomorrow's Security Challenges: The Defense Implications of Emerging Global Trends* report, we will consider a combination of two of the global trends presented: *a rise in non-state networks* and *a fragmented international system*. The one scenario we cannot see as relevant overall is the concert of powers, a choice it would take too long to justify within the framework of such a short paper. As for the possibility of seeing a return to great power confrontation, even though it may be a more realistic systemic possibility than the emergence of a global concern, it is hard to foresee significant great power confrontation arising in Africa. The emerging powers, particularly China, will not fight for Africa. Even if this trend occurs—and we cannot see it *dominate*—it will most probably create conditions similar to those of the 19th century. The Soviet Union's Vladimir Lenin was sure that an inter-imperialist war would come out of colonial competition in Africa.¹ It did not, and when the great inter-imperialist war came, it came out of a *European* confrontation. If renewed great power rivalry were to bring about a major military confrontation in the 21st century, the trigger is much more likely to be found in the Middle Eastern or Asia than in Africa.

The way it used to be

African conflicts in the 20th century started from a combination of causes, some of which were specific to the continent, while others pertained to the Cold War environment. Specific causes had to do with:

- Administrative and political weakness of the states.
- Absence of a coherent, long-standing national cohesion, the African “countries” being, in fact, arbitrarily cut chunks of the continent, parceled out according to prevailing relationships among the colonizing powers.
- As a consequence, the main problem was the coexistence of tribes with varying degrees of access to modernity (depending on colonial policies), different size, different cultures and economic

weight, leading to the dominance of some of them over others and to the exacerbation of previous relationship of hostility or exploitation. A common “national” good was an abstract notion. There was the good of one’s tribe and, within that precinct, the good of one’s clan or family. The “nation” remained an abstract point of reference, used in dealing with the non-African world.

- This situation of institutional weakness and lack of coherence was exacerbated by the fact that politics, i.e., the control of the state apparatus, was the only way to achieve riches and status. There was no entrepreneurial class worth the name (only traders) and, even for those in business, the state was the key factor to obtain foreign currency, lucrative public contracts, and preferential access to raw materials. The state was the key to everything and, as a result, fighting for its control was the main concern of politics.
- Politicians with a realistic view were few and far between. Those who had one were, in general, anti-colonialist ideologues who resented the short shrift their communities had been given by the former colonial masters. They tended to point the politics of their new countries toward an “anti-imperialist” line hostile to both the US and the former colonial powers alike.
- Because of colonial education policies, the public had been kept broadly ignorant of political issues. It was, therefore, easy prey for demagogues and military dictators, such as Idi Amin Dada and Bokassa. Rational politicians, such as Julius Nyerere and Tom Mboya, had a hard time.
- As a result, most African wars, if not all, until the massive Central African Wars of the 1990s, were civil wars.

All these factors played out against a Cold War background. Local quarrels were immediately probed to see who was a “Communist” or Communist ally, which were considered the same, and who was “a friend of the West.” As a result, the strangest judgments were passed. Patrice Lumumba was dubbed a Communist because he was anti-colonialist and the US saw Belgium as a close and necessary ally, while Joseph-Désiré Mobutu was toasted as a “friend of the West” in spite of his brutal and thieving dictatorship. France supported a series of abominable dictators because they were *des amis de la France*, and France had been subcontracted for the anti-communist control of Francophone Africa by the United States. Conflicts in such cases—or political repression, two sides of the same coin—were practically on automatic: the pro-Western camp being awarded immediate support by Paris or Washington while Moscow supported the “anti-capitalist” side. “Anti-imperialism” could produce strange policies on the Soviet side as well, such as praising Somali dictator Siad Barre for his “socialism” when he did not know what the word meant, and supporting General Idi Amin Dada for his alleged “anti-imperialism” when he expelled the Indian communities from Uganda.

As a rule, African conflicts were rooted in local problems and grievances (about which neither the West nor the Communists usually had any clear understanding), and tended to escalate, or at least continue unabated, as the contestants sought to align themselves with one side or the other in the Cold War as a means of seeking outside support. There were some ambiguous cases, such as Nigeria’s Biafran war of the late 1960s, where Great Britain and the Soviet Union ended up as uneasy allies of the Federal Government, while Portugal and France supported the secessionists.² But such ambiguities tended to be the exception, not the rule.

Such conflicts achieved no lasting results because they were linked to, and partially caused by, ineffectual development policies. These kept the tribal gaps open, did not provide African societies

with power bases independent from the state, and kept the local economies subject to foreign interests. These acted as boosters to the state's interests, therefore making its conquest all the more attractive.

Grand ideological narratives acted both as camouflage and as mobilizing factors for the fighters and for their civilian constituencies. The conflicts were deeply local, even at times sub-national. They typically involved large numbers of combatants. Most conflicts were financed and equipped by one of the two Cold War blocs or by their local proxies. The weaponry tended to be relatively simple or even makeshift. The media provided very little coverage for these conflicts, which, in contrast to conflicts in Asia, Latin America or the Middle East, did not usually inflame world opinion. The protracted civil conflict in South Africa, which never broke into open warfare, was the only one that proved capable of mobilizing Western public opinion, because one of its contending parties was white and could thus provide a locus for foreign identification, be it "the defense of freedom" (US) or "the brutality of racism" (USSR).

The new dispensation

The end of the Cold War had a massive impact on African conflicts. After 1989, the rules of the game changed:

- The one-party state, which had been the rule whether it dubbed itself "progressive" or promoted a form of right-wing Leninism, suddenly became obsolete.³ "Democracy" became the order of the day and, just as the one-party state had mimicked Bolshevism, new systems appeared to be mimicking Western multi-party democracy. But this was without any of the social, economic, or cultural factors actually underpinning democracies elsewhere. The Rwandan Genocide was one of the unwarranted consequences of this "democratization without a democratic base."
- Fitting this new political dispensation, human rights became a new ideological norm. The human rights bandied about by the "new democracies" often had no more reality than the "socialism" previously displayed by "progressive" regimes. But a ritual homage was now paid to the concept of elections, even if they were flawed and even if the contenders did not represent any clear democratic alternative to whomever they were pitted against.
- Democratic paraphernalia, especially when it was used by a regime that had recently replaced an obviously autocratic one, was often sufficient to gain worldwide acceptance. The conflicts of these new "democracies" with either their internal opposition or their neighbors, were usually looked upon with benevolence by Western opinion. When these "new democracies" violated the dominant human rights ideology, they tended to be only mildly reprimanded. Rwanda under President Paul Kagame became a prime example of this aspect of the new dispensation.
- Grand narrative ideologies, usually a variety of socialism but at times hyper-nationalism or some form of ethnic fundamentalism, waned and faded away.
- Open declarations of ethnicity as a political marker started to regress, due to the unifying influence of modern media and growing urbanization. But where it persisted, it did so under the guise of "pride," "roots," and "cultural heritage," an Africanized version of political correctness. Post-Apartheid South Africa exemplified this trend.

- Conversely, the importance of religion grew, particularly in the case of Islam. But this trend also affected Christianity. Protestant fundamentalism, often supported by US churches, began to challenge both Islam and older established forms of Christianity. This has particularly been the case in Ethiopia where the Pentacostal churches bit deeply into tāwahādo “orthodox” territory. Religious violence grew apace.
- Syncretic cults and witchcraft movements (re)appeared, recycling elements of larger religions into a semi-coherent body, allowing them to win or browbeat converts and marshal them to action. The best-known example of this phenomenon is the notorious Lord’s Resistance Army, an initially Ugandan cult, whose members later migrated to Southern Sudan, the Northeastern Congo, and finally the Central African Republic.
- The media started to cover African conflicts a bit more seriously, though global coverage remained far behind that of contemporary wars in the Middle East or South Asia.
- As a result of this deeper coverage, it became possible for smaller armed groups to have an influence far beyond what their numbers would otherwise have allowed. Guerilla movements were re-designated as “terrorist groups,” i.e., the case of the Afar and the Somali in Ethiopia, as were bandits with a thin ideological veneer, such as al-Qaida au Mahgreb Islamique (AQMI) in the Sahel. Given the American fixation on terrorism following the attacks of September 11, 2001, “terrorist” became an oversimplified, catch-all category in which to fit armed movements nobody understood too clearly. African states lobbied to get their enemies put on the terrorist list in order to attract additional aid, while rebels accused states of carrying out repressive policies against so-called terrorists. The net result has been a general overestimation of the relevance of terrorist attacks, such as the May 2011 bombing in Marrakech, Morocco.
- These smaller armed movements, at times, still had foreign sponsors. But the acceleration and greater ease of transport, even in very remote places, enabled the movements to capitalize on local natural resources. The new global market provided them with ready customers who could operate through various shadow companies and recycle their money in tax havens. Armed movements patterned their logistics on those of the drug gangs and, at times, the two could meet. This gave armed movements a degree of freedom from foreign sponsors that they had not previously enjoyed and also made the complete mavericks more dangerous, since they did not have to satisfy the minimum requirements of organizing around an ideology or political stance.
- The spread of information technology also allowed for greater coordination between disparate groups that could make, or later break, tactical alliances with an ease their forerunners did not enjoy.
- The role of popular feeling in political mobilization increased even as use of ideological frames decreased. This emotional attraction was a raw, gut product of a world, which was trusting political philosophy less and less and feelings more and more. Popular feeling tended to be re-packaged as human rights and in cultural terms, which substituted for the obsolete ideology/ethnicity previously used. The transformation of the militant Oromo Liberation Front in Ethiopia over the years is very revealing from is point of view.
- These lighter and more nimble forms of conflict opened up avenues not previously used for violent action, such as hostage taking, sexual violence, and the displacement of refugees. These forms of action depended on media coverage, which would not have been afforded previously,

but which was now more readily available for these violent repertoires than for “classical” armed action, both because of a shift in contemporary sensibilities toward a greater concern with human rights made them more distasteful for public opinion, and because they were less dangerous for the reporters covering them.

- Low-technology weapons persisted and became even more readily available than they had been in the past, since transport was easier and the former USSR, in economic ruins in the 1990s, provided a cheap and almost unlimited supply of small arms. High-technology weapons wielded by better-equipped armed forces only had a moderate advantage over their older counterparts, because they were (a) expensive and, therefore, less easily available; (b) fragile, hence dependent on a sophisticated chain of maintenance not readily available in Africa; and (c) complicated to operate properly, thus not easy to pass on to friendly local militias, whose members were often technologically illiterate.

But a number of features persisted:

- The African continent’s balance did not grow any stronger. Some of its technological and administrative capacities were strengthened. But this was more than offset by the rise in power of non-state actors, such as religious groups, civil society organizations, ethnically organized militias, opinion pressure groups, and bandits, which increasingly usurped the powers of the state. Some were still practicing the old game of trying to remove the state and replace it with their own power. But others preferred to take the shortcut of acquiring wealth, power, and privilege directly, rather than using the peripheral and more complicated road of regime change.
- As a result of persistent state weakness, salaries were often not paid to the agents of the state, thereby facilitating the challenges non-state groups could pose.
- Africa’s armed forces tended to remain unprofessional, undertrained in the use of modern weapons, and politically divided in their loyalties. It, accordingly, remained difficult for the state to retain its monopoly of legitimate violence, since it possessed neither the legitimacy nor controlled the violence. The worst Africa case today is probably the *Forces Armées de la République du Congo* (FARDC), the DRC’s “army.” This force is probably more dangerous to its own population than several of the non-state actors it is supposed to fight in the Kivus.

The global overview

It is clear from what we have just read that the dominant situation in Africa is likely to be the continued growth of non-state networks, which would be made easier by a fragmented international system. The Central African wars may prove a portent of things to come, and are a perfect example of this situation.⁴ For all its appetite for African raw materials, China is unlikely to fight a big international war over them.⁵ Rivalry over raw materials is likely to remain muted and under the horizon, mostly because the African states do not have the capacity to become autonomous enough to force the hand of their protector/driver/minder, as do, at least, some states in Asia and the Middle East.⁶ As a result, atomization and localism will remain characteristic of African conflicts. And solutions, to the extent that they exist, *will remain extremely specific*. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to African warfare. But some recommendations can be made here for the benefit of US forces.

- For use in Africa, US forces are over-equipped and too heavy. Their logistics are enormous and preclude use in heavy terrain. In many ways, operations would be easier if their gear was closer to what was used in the Pacific theater during the Second World War or even the Vietnam War.
- Conversely, US forces are politically and culturally underprepared. Their behavior often grates on local sensibilities, particularly in Muslim-majority areas. A volunteer army should allow for better preparation for operations in culturally different terrain.
- Mobility in Africa is very much the heart of the matter, particularly when faced with an enemy that neither looks nor feels like a conventional army, i.e., the case of AQMI in the Sahel or what could have happened in the case of an intervention in Darfur, where the janjaweed looked like “normal” camel nomads.
- Mobility in Africa means good, old-fashioned mobility on foot. Helicopters are fine for combat support but not for transport where their noise is too easily detected from a great distance. In many ways, African warfare is and will remain archaic for the foreseeable future.
- Cultural adaptation to the context on the ground should not only be defensive, it should also allow for the possibility to use the counterforce of groups that are opposed to the ones the US is fighting. But such choices have to be thoroughly investigated. The April 2006 CIA-sponsored coup in Somalia, supporting a highly unpopular warlord alliance, was a massive error that was due to a poor assessment of the internal political situation in that country. Incorrect analysis, in turn, was due to poor intelligence gathering.

In any case, African situations will remain a secondary feature on the world stage. No African country is equipped with nuclear weapons, and no African country has the capacity or the will to brutally intrude on the world scene and use a form of violent blackmail to bend local geopolitics to its desired views. The one form of quasi-violent tactics Africa could use to capture the world’s attention is disease epidemic and/or migrant invasion. Disease and the migration of masses of poor people could be considered Africa’s nuclear bombs. HIV-AIDS came out of Africa, and the present North African revolutions-cum-civil-wars triggering large refugee flows are viewed as a direct threat to the northern Mediterranean shores.⁷ But, can we see these threats as likely to be managed by a hostile political force or are they just the uncontrollable consequence of political spontaneous combustion? In many ways, such threats are closer to natural catastrophes than to warfare as normally understood.

¹ He based this view on events such as the Franco-German tension over Morocco and the near-war situation after the Fashoda incident in the Sudan in 1898.

² When the Federals won, they chose to ally themselves solidly with the US.

³ The ideal type of right-wing Leninism had been Mobutu’s MPR.

⁴ See Gerard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. Oxford University Press America. 2009.

⁵ Beijing’s attitude concerning the 2011 Southern Sudanese secession is typical of this.

⁶ No African country, not even South Africa, has the capacity for dangerous autonomy displayed by Israel, Iran, Pakistan, or even Afghanistan.

⁷ Back in 1987, when working in the presidential African unit in Paris, I heard then-Senegalese President Abdou Diouf voice this possibility, adding bitterly that, given Africa’s weakness, this was its last weapon.