

“From the perspective of officials in Africa, participating in regional conflict management is now one of the best ways for governments . . . to get international resources to strengthen their own authority.”

# The Regionalization of African Security

WILLIAM RENO

The past two decades have witnessed increasingly complex regional responses to conflicts in Africa. The result has been a remarkable improvement in the continent's security environment through the development of international agreements and greater regional willingness to manage and prevent conflicts.

Notably, members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have sent peacekeepers to five conflicts in their region since 1990.

**Reckoning  
with Regions**  
*Seventh in a series*

Since the mid-2000s, member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have mediated and contributed troops to enforce international agreements in conflicts in Sudan and Somalia.

African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions have supported these efforts in the past decade. A recent AU mission in Sudan served as the basis for an AU–United Nations hybrid peacekeeping force. In February 2012 the UN Security Council authorized the expansion of the AU mission in Somalia to 17,700 troops, drawn from Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, and Djibouti, with promises from Sierra Leone and Nigeria to add to the deployment. Armies across the continent increasingly focus training on preparations to join this and other peacekeeping operations.

At first glance, this level of regional cooperation is baffling. Cooperation should be scarce among the 54 countries that make up the AU, and even among the members of the smaller regional associations, given the countries' very divergent sizes, ranges of capabilities, and circumstances. Yet governments that won office in democratic elections

and those that came to power in violent conflicts alike play leading roles in cooperative responses to conflicts.

Cooperation is even more surprising considering the extensive domestic challenges that many African regimes continue to face. Even so, recent years also have seen a reduction in tacit and explicit government use of cross-border rebels to influence politics in neighboring countries, a practice that played a major role in fueling conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere in the 1990s and into the 2000s.

Regional cooperation is easier to understand as part of a deliberate strategy by officials in African states to extract resources from unequal relationships with powerful countries and international organizations beyond Africa's shores. Regional cooperation also serves the interests of outsiders in pacifying the continent. But African officials are far from passive actors as they shape regional cooperation to attract external support in their efforts to manage domestic challenges and impose greater control over their citizens.

This external dimension of regional cooperation has grown more pronounced in recent years, though strategies of particular states reflect varied domestic agendas and capabilities. Some participants, such as Sierra Leone, assume very dependent roles in cooperation while others, such as Ethiopia, exhibit high degrees of autonomy of action.

## MUTUAL VULNERABILITY

Leaders in Africa have long recognized that they share mutual vulnerabilities, and this has driven them to cooperate in mutual self-interest. This concern appeared in the principles of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) from its founding in 1963. The OAU charter forbade member state support for irredentist or separatist movements, a principle that has been violated in very few in-

WILLIAM RENO, an associate professor of political science at Northwestern University, is the author of *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

stances. Most governments recognized that support for altering the borders of a neighbor could easily result in a neighbor's move to alter one's own borders. Thus, when a state supported separatists in a neighbor's territory, it usually was calibrated to exert limited influence on the neighbor's politics, and care was taken to ensure that the rebels did not grow too strong.

But the OAU's charter, the 2002 charter of its successor organization, the AU, and the ongoing conduct of African international relations also highlight the critical importance of external ties for ensuring domestic security. Governments are more amenable to interstate cooperation when it brings external resources to bear on their domestic security problems as well as addressing regional challenges.

Two international developments have shaped the recent waves of African regional security cooperation. The first was the end of the cold war. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended superpower competition and removed a major driver of conflict on the continent. Angola, for example, was notable for bloody confrontations of superpower proxies, with the Soviets and Cubans backing the avowedly Marxist regime, while the United States and South Africa's apartheid government supported antigovernment rebels in the name of containing Soviet influence. By the late 1980s, it had become much harder to extract resources by playing rival powers off one another to bid up the price of diplomatic alignment in international affairs.

At first the end of the cold war seemed to promote new kinds of conflict. The US Congress drastically reduced aid to Liberia, Somalia, and Congo, which had been major recipients of American assistance, over concerns about human rights violations. These states then promptly collapsed. Conflicts followed in what seemed like a new era of strategic and economic marginalization and weak state institutions, as armed gangs of youths, the ragged remnants of national armies, and predatory business organizations (including rogue mining and logging operations, arms dealers, and, recently, drug traffickers) overran parts of the continent. Regional cooperation in this context seemed more likely among malevolent collections of warlords and international criminals than among states.

But the more durable underlying reality was that the end of great power competition ended a system of alignments that pitted African states against each other in return for aid they used to buy off or repress their own citizens. This development, cou-

pled with a French retreat by the end of the 1990s from automatic support for sub-Saharan francophone African states (18 in all), left governments without the crutch of direct great power patronage and increased the relative attractiveness of regional institutions for addressing security threats.

## OUTSIDE HELP

A second and more recent global development has been the active coordination of a diverse range of outside actors in support of Africa's regional efforts to deal with security threats. This in turn has given governments more leverage to manage their domestic security situations. These outside actors include permanent members of the UN Security Council, which has empowered the UN to play a significant role helping to coordinate regional responses to conflicts. The European Union, other international organizations, and overseas governments that become engaged in specific conflict responses also have played important roles in reinforcing African regional cooperation.

A key element of this second global development has been US and European promotion, particularly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, of hybrid civil-military responses to conflicts in Africa. This strategy aims to bolster African regional actions to remove security threats to non-African states by intervening in conflicts and controlling previously "ungoverned spaces" where radical groups can take refuge, recruit followers, and plan attacks.

Thus, British officials developed the so-called Africa Conflict Pool, which funds conflict-prevention, stabilization, and peacekeeping activities. US officials for their part engage in a version of "complex operations" to coordinate support for economic development and security assistance, and to promote the engagement of civilian agencies, militaries, multilateral organizations (including African regional groups), and humanitarian agencies. From the perspective of officials in Africa, participating in regional conflict management is now one of the best ways for governments, whether they face direct threats from conflicts or not, to get international resources to strengthen their own authority.

Critics see these new strategies as a cover for neo-imperial control, as Africa's states are forced to redesign institutions to accommodate a global system of surveillance and control that serves external (primarily Western) agendas. Others identify this effort as yet another, but now more massive, state-building endeavor that is doomed to fail.

In fact, cooperation in regional operations provides governments with access to foreign aid that helps them build and exercise power. Some governments manipulate these linkages to powerful external states and international organizations to extract other benefits and to lessen criticism of their behavior in other arenas. Authoritarian regimes try to use foreign support and training for troops for peacekeeping missions, for example, to show critics that powerful outsiders support their continued authority over citizens.

These shifts in Africa's broader strategic arena over the past two decades have produced a particularly benign environment in which the most important external actors share a basic consensus about how to manage their relations with African states. In intended and unintended ways this preserves the capacities of African states to extract benefits in return for cooperation.

The relative marginality of Africa to strategic agendas such as nuclear proliferation and the repositioning of Asia to the center of US foreign policy buffers the continent from tensions among great powers. Meanwhile, the remarkable rise of China's prominence as an investor and customer for African commodity exports currently plays into this general consensus. It is far better for resource-hungry China to deal with a peaceful Africa, and Beijing plays a role in supporting the global architecture for regional cooperation as a regular contributor to peacekeeping operations.

Although African states' leverage of external relationships for solving domestic problems underlies the rapid growth of coordinated regional responses to conflicts, the evolution of this cooperation is also shaped by shifts in interests and flows of resources from outside Africa. This external aspect was evident in the first, primarily West African, responses to regional security problems beginning in 1990, and has grown more pronounced in post-9/11 cooperation.

## LIBERIA'S REQUEST

In July 1990, seeking to preserve his hold on power, Liberian President Samuel Doe invoked a 1981 ECOWAS protocol that pledged member countries to defend governments facing armed threats from groups receiving external support. The signing of this protocol had followed the in-

tervention by a feeble OAU peacekeeping force in Chad in 1979 and a brief Nigerian-led effort two years later to separate Chad's warring factions. Particularly alarming to Nigeria's government at that time was an effort by Libya's leader Muammar el-Qaddafi to unify Libya and Chad into a single state under his control. For a continent so recently freed from colonial domination and committed to the preservation of existing international borders, the colonel's adventures were most unwelcome. This was an especially sensitive issue among Nigerian officials who recalled that several foreign states had aided Biafran rebels in their failed effort to secede from Nigeria during that country's 1967–70 civil war.

The Liberian president's request led to the formation of the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), an ironic name since the intervention that began in late August 1990 occurred in the midst of combat between Liberia's government and rebels. ECOMOG was regularly involved in combat for the next six years in Liberia, and through much of the decade in Sierra Leone as fighting spread to that country.

Regional support for ECOMOG reflected regional splits. Doe was correct that foreign governments supported Liberia's rebels: in particular, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso and,

further afield, Libya. These countries were not going to support the intervention force, giving ECOMOG an anglophone complexion as Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Gambia provided contingents. Guinea's government contributed significant numbers of troops later when it became apparent that cross-border rebels were threatening its authority. Nigeria, however, took on the burden of providing the bulk of ECOMOG's troops, funding, and leadership.

This regional security threat had direct domestic consequences for many West African states. First, a number of governments in the region had come to power through violent unconstitutional means, and once in power they faced such threats to their own survival. Nigeria, for example, had suffered a coup in 1975, a president's assassination less than a year later, a failed transition to civilian rule that ended in a coup in 1983, yet another coup in 1985, and a failed junior officer coup in 1990. Ghana had suffered coups in 1978, 1979, and again in 1981. Officials in Nigeria and other states recognized the threat to domestic as well as regional political sta-

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bility when some states meddled in others' affairs by backing coup plotters and rebels.

Most troubling in this context was a growing tendency among junior officers and political outsiders to attempt to launch coups in West Africa. In countries where political control was based on patronage channeled through personal networks, the attempts of subordinates and political outsiders to seize power were particularly threatening because they could upend incumbent elite political networks in ways that palace coups did not.

Liberia's President Doe was one of these coup plotters, having been a sergeant when he took power in 1980 and then executed many members of the old regime. The 1979 coup in Ghana led to the execution of the head of state and five generals. A failed plot in 1981 in Gambia led to the deaths of about 500 people as Senegalese forces suppressed the attempt. The failed coup attempt in Nigeria by Major Gideon Orkar in April 1990 was especially ominous because he had promised to excise his country's northern states, an act that could have plunged Nigeria into a second civil war.

The ECOMOG intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone, followed by interventions with much smaller forces in Guinea-Bissau's civil war (1998–99) and briefly in Ivory Coast (2003–04), addressed core issues of domestic security throughout the region. It extended the principle of the preservation of existing international borders to include a prohibition against toppling regimes in other African states. It is not hard to get an otherwise diverse group of states that share a vulnerability to destabilization to agree to such principles.

Cynics observe that this vulnerability is a consequence of misrule that leads to weak state institutions and reliance on patronage to assert authority. These problems were root causes of West Africa's conflicts in the 1990s. The willingness of some politicians to collaborate with the forces of disorder, however, put the entire postcolonial order in this part of Africa at risk of unraveling as tit-for-tat support for proxies started to take hold.

## NIGERIA'S BURDEN

Regional interventions in the first instance were possible because Nigeria shouldered the bulk of the political and financial cost of fielding the peacekeeping force. Another necessary condition was

the post-cold war absence of any great power interested in exploiting disorder in the region for its own aims. The only real external factor was Libya's mercurial colonel, but given Qaddafi's propensity to become involved in nearly all armed opposition to regimes on the African continent since the late 1970s, it was not hard to assemble a coalition against him. This broader international context allowed for operational and strategic mistakes and shortcomings, as few onlookers were interested in exploiting the difficulties of the peacekeepers.

Critics of the ECOMOG intervention point out that Charles Taylor, the main Liberian rebel leader, became president in flawed, internationally mediated elections in 1997, an early result of the wider international community's engagement in regional conflict management. Even so, the principle opposed to shooting one's way to power with foreign help was defended, even if only procedurally, as Taylor had to go through an electoral process to become president. Taylor's forced departure from office in 2003, and his indictment before the UN-sanctioned Special Court for Sierra Leone for war crimes and crimes against humanity, gave teeth to the principle that winning a rebel war or staging a coup was no longer a guarantee that a new regime would receive international recognition.

The 2000 Lomé Declaration under OAU auspices codified a broader prohibition against unconstitutional changes of government. Aimed at protecting elected governments, the declaration proscribed seizures of power through coups or the use of mercenaries, or by raising rebel movements. The newly formed AU adopted these rules in 2002, and they were supplemented with a 2007 charter that specified penalties to be applied to violators—including diplomatic and economic sanctions and threats to prosecute perpetrators. Though inconsistently applied, these rules and international pressure subsequently have forced coup leaders in Mauritania (2008), Guinea (2008), Guinea-Bissau (2009), and Niger (2009) to commit to political transitions that resulted in their leaving office.

The reduction of tension among UN Security Council permanent members in the 1990s enabled ECOMOG forces to benefit from growing, broad international political support and resources for their mission. A small UN monitoring mission begun in Liberia in 1993 pioneered a partnership be-

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tween regional and international organizations to manage conflicts. A much larger UN peacekeeping mission (17,500 at its top deployment) subsumed the ECOMOG force in Sierra Leone from 2000 to its conclusion in 2005. In 2003, a UN mission in Liberia also fielded 17,500 troops at its height.

This evolution of cooperation in West Africa largely ended state support for cross-border rebels and reduced the threat that governments would face violent removal from power. The Nigerian-led ECOMOG played a critical role in initiating this change. Although the intervention's designers probably did not anticipate the degree of non-African participation and resources, regional cooperation enabled them to leverage these additional assets to increase domestic as well as regional security.

Nigerian officials made clear, for example, that overseas funding was expected to support Nigerian participation in other peacekeeping missions, such as in Burundi in 2001. US diplomats had good reasons to approve such requests in their pursuit of closer military-to-military relations after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This multilayered regional/international coordination to address security threats continued into the 2000s, and came to drive the evolution of regional cooperation beyond West Africa.

## GAINING LEVERAGE

In mid-2000, about 1,000 British soldiers arrived in Sierra Leone to rescue 500 UN peacekeepers from Revolutionary United Front rebel fighters who had taken the peacekeepers hostage despite participating in a coalition government established a year earlier. This event convinced British officials that West Africa's chronic conflicts reflected an underlying politics that thrived on and profited off violent disorder, and that uncoordinated aid would not solve this crisis and would only expose Britain to periodic calls for costly and politically risky military interventions.

Britain's Africa Conflict Pool was the response, prescribing close coordination between British civilian and military agencies in concert with international organizations, humanitarian groups, and Sierra Leonean NGOs to remake Sierra Leone's government and to tackle causes of conflict rooted in Sierra Leonean society.

The 9/11 attacks convinced American and European officials that these conflicts posed a more immediate threat. In 2002, US President George W. Bush said: "An ever more lethal environment exists in Africa as local civil wars spread beyond

borders to create regional war zones" in which terrorists might find refuge, recruit followers, and plan attacks. Bush declared, "Africa's capable reforming states and subregional organizations must be strengthened as the primary means to address transnational threats on a sustained basis."

Like Britain's Africa Conflict Pool, this approach combines military and civil capabilities in a sort of preemptive counterinsurgency doctrine. It stresses conflict management and prevention through bolstering state authority and coordinating with regional organizations such as ECOWAS.

This doctrine and various external interests and resources associated with it have been a boon to many African governments. It brings material assistance and political support to states that participate in multilateral peacekeeping operations. It also gives the states leverage in dealing with international actors.

For example, Rwanda's government in 2010 threatened to withdraw 3,300 soldiers from a joint UN-AU peacekeeping force in Sudan's Darfur region, a force that one of its officers commanded, when a leaked UN report accused Rwanda of massacring tens of thousands of civilians in the course of its 1996 invasion of Congo. Rwanda's government also faced foreign criticism for flawed elections. Rwanda's threat earned it a visit from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and the release of an edited version of the report.

Likewise, Uganda's foreign minister warned that the report's accusation that Uganda's army participated in war crimes in Congo in the 1990s would weaken Uganda's resolve to keep several thousand troops in an AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM). He issued the warning just as plans were under discussion to directly confront Islamist Shabab militias that threatened the UN-backed Somali government.

This episode revealed remarkable clout on the part of two countries that otherwise would not be expected to be able to defy international pressure so directly. Rwanda retains this clout despite its dependence on foreign aid worth about \$500 million per year and on good relations with international institutions for debt relief.

Uganda benefits further with a commitment of US soldiers to help it put down an insurgency. In late 2011, President Barack Obama announced that about 100 Green Berets would help Uganda's army battle the Lord's Resistance Army. This decision came several months after Uganda faced international criticism for official mistreatment

of the opposition during an electoral campaign. Meanwhile, foreign donors and NGOs play a major role in providing social services in Uganda, including \$355 million from the United States in 2010 for health initiatives. In 2010, foreign aid stood at about 6 percent of Uganda's GDP.

Burundi's contribution of about 4,000 troops to AMISOM provides its government with an opportunity to fulfill promises—made in a peace agreement that ended its civil war—to integrate rebel forces into its army, and then send them off to Somalia. The AU pays these troops with EU-donated money while a US contractor trains the entire military. This assistance, coupled with foreign support for Burundi's budget, bolsters the otherwise very fragile post-conflict government.

This kind of hybrid operation is a feature of regional security cooperation in other parts of Africa. The UN Office for West Africa helps coordinate UN agencies to support efforts by the AU, ECOWAS, and other regional organizations to combat organized crime and drug trafficking, deal with the return of armed groups from Libya to their homes in Niger and Mali, and assist in counterterrorism activities. This cooperation provides an architecture with which foreign donors can tie aid to particular countries.

Regional cooperation also comports well with the role of the US military in Africa. Since it began operation in 2008, America's new Africa Command has provided military training to African peacekeepers, advised peacekeeping operations, and supported associated humanitarian relief efforts under a strategy of "cooperative conflict management." Although many African governments are suspicious of American intentions, this support, by funding the provision of weapons and private contractors, has significantly strengthened the AMISOM operation in Somalia.

## **BOLSTERING REGIMES**

Regional cooperation on security matters in Africa started in part to address threats to incumbent regimes. Cooperation has proved to be remarkably effective, and as it has evolved it has become a tool that weaker states can use to manage their relations with much more powerful international actors. The overall effect has been to bind Africa more closely to a system of standards and routines that promotes order in the domestic realms of individual states.

Regional cooperation also makes executives more powerful in the domestic politics of many countries,

as national leaders occupy more exclusive roles as negotiators and conduits for resources from abroad. US aid to Uganda, for example, is widely seen as a "thank you" to President Yoweri Museveni for participating in a war against Somalia's Al Qaeda-aligned Shabab militants, regardless of US officials' actual intent. In similar situations, aid from international organizations and foreign countries will be seen in this light and will strengthen the political position of the recipient country's leader.

For governments in countries with conflicts that draw cooperative responses, UN missions open the doors to overseas resources that are huge in comparison to the resources of these societies or any conceivable regional intervention force. The UN's Sierra Leone mission, for example, cost \$2.8 billion over five years to 2005, not much less than the country's entire GDP during that time.

These missions have been supplemented with copious aid through international institutions, bilateral assistance programs, and private humanitarian organizations that overshadows official state budgets and amounts to major state-building operations. For Liberia, foreign aid for 2010–11 was about \$433 million, well in excess of the entire government budget. Debt relief amounted to about \$2.8 billion in the first five years after Taylor's departure. Foreign advisers drove the reform of Liberia's judiciary, police, and army, and foreign firms stepped in to monitor government revenue collection and expenditures.

This cooperation is beneficial in terms of addressing the immediate consequences of conflict and limiting further turmoil. The consequences for the politics of participating countries are more ambiguous. Arguably, the problem with politics in many African countries is a dearth of state authority, which is also a root cause of conflict. Strengthening the capacities of states to provide security and maintain order can convince citizens that their governments really can protect them and improve their prospects.

On the other hand, strengthened authority and resources from abroad may end up as sources of patronage that presidents can distribute to supporters, while foreigners step in to support the critical agencies of the state and provide social services so that the government does not have to do so. There is evidence for each of these outcomes, highlighting the extent to which regional cooperation and wider international support contribute to the diverse domestic strategies and fortunes of states in Africa. ■