Africa in the Wider World

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Time for a Change in Doctrine?

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Africa's robust economic growth will be a cause for celebration at the U.S.-Africa Leaders' summit in August. Only East and South Asia have grown faster than sub-Saharan Africa since 2002. Surging commodity prices, new resource discoveries, long-overdue improvements in infrastructure, a telecoms boom, and the emergence of new, consumption-minded middle classes have sparked unprecedented investor interest in the continent. During a visit to Africa last May, Secretary of State John Kerry hailed this progress and promised the United States would be a "catalyst in this continued transformation."

Yet there is darker side to Africa's economic modernization, and one of its most worrisome features is an escalation of political violence. While big wars causing huge civilian losses are rarer in Africa today than before, smaller conflicts involving rebels, insurgents, and jihadists have proliferated in recent years. Alongside Africa's older, seemingly intractable conflicts in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan/South Sudan, newer armed movements are generating insecurity even in Africa's most democratic and prosperous states.

A short list of Africa's most pressing conflict situations today includes:

- South Sudan, where the government fractured in December 2013 along ethnic lines, leading to an ongoing civil war with heavy humanitarian costs.
- The Central African Republic, whose feeble government collapsed in 2013 under attacks from rebel and mercenary bands and where exceptionally violent sectarian fighting has ensued, creating another major humanitarian crisis.
- The Democratic Republic of Congo, whose eastern provinces remain largely ungoverned and where civilians remain prey to roving militias and ill-disciplined government forces.
- Mali, where a weak government supported by French forces has been struggling to wrest control of half the country from Islamist and separatist militants.
- Somalia, where Al-Shabaab insurgents have retreated from population centers but remain a potent terrorist threat for an ineffective government and for neighboring states.
- Kenya, one of Africa's stronger and more prosperous democracies, where a wave of Al-Shabaab terrorist attacks have triggered heavy-handed, and largely ineffective, security force responses that many predict will only further radicalize Muslim youth.

- Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, where the Boko Haram insurgency has killed perhaps 5,000 and displaced 300,000 civilians since 2009, turning northeastern Nigeria into a virtual war zone bereft of functioning government institutions. Nigerian forces have both failed to contain the rebellion and alienated many communities with their scorched-earth counterinsurgency tactics.

One troubling conclusion from these conflicts is that violent nonstate actors are increasingly better armed, more mobile, more motivated, and at least as well networked internationally as the government forces opposing them. A spectacular example was the quick defeat in 2012 of Mali's Western-trained army by fast-moving, well-equipped, and multinational Tuareg rebels and Islamist forces. Likewise, the battle of relatively wealthy and well-armed states like Nigeria and Kenya to contain rapidly metastasizing terrorist threats on their territory shows violent nonstate actors are evolving the capacity to disrupt and terrorize faster than states are learning to defend their territory and populations.

Alarmed by the spread of insurgencies and government breakdowns, the African Union (AU) has redoubled its call for Africa to develop its own intervention capabilities. And while AU military forces have performed well in Somalia, the overall record of member states responding to AU calls for concerted action is not promising. The AU is years behind its original 2010 target date for creating regional intervention brigades to address crises such as those in Mali and the Central African Republic, where only France's intervention prevented outright state collapse.

Building Africa's defensive capacities is a longstanding U.S. priority. President Obama's June 2012 Africa strategy again highlighted this goal, noting that the United States would "expand efforts to build African military capabilities through low-cost and small-footprint operations." From its base in Djibouti and through stepped-up, brief visits by Special Forces personnel, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has made training of African militaries the centerpiece of its strategy. In addition, the State Department has funded and the Department of Defense has executed military support operations in Africa ranging from training, equipping, and paying the salaries of AU forces in Somalia, to airlifting African troops to crisis zones such as the Central African Republic and Mali, to sharing with African and European partners intelligence on hostile forces such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). A small contingent of U.S. Special Forces has supported Ugandan and other forces attempting to hunt down the remnants of the Lord's Resistance Army.

President Obama's recent promise at West Point to add another $5 billion to worldwide counterterrorism partnerships means the United States will likely be further ramping up military support programs in Africa. What will not change, however, is the fundamental principle of keeping U.S. forces out of direct combat roles in Africa except for infrequent, brief interventions where U.S. lives or vital interests are at stake.

Regardless of how much security assistance is poured into Africa, near-term prospects for containing rebel and insurgent violence are uncertain at best. Across Africa, the critical missing ingredient is not a lack of funding, training, or equipment. Of course, many African militaries (and police forces) are chronically under-resourced and staffed by underpaid and demoralized personnel. But these shortages are symptoms of a deeper

flaw, which is the reluctance of many African governments to undertake urgently needed reforms of their security forces.

Whether it is tight budgets, or high-level corruption, or institutional fears of powerful armies, or just official indifference, far too many African governments have for years dodged the need to align their security forces with the actual threats their nations face. Thus most African military and police forces continue to focus exclusively on regime protection and maintenance of public order. Protecting civilian populations—against armed gangs, insurgents, or even ordinary criminals—is a secondary mission, and one few African security forces perform well.

This is why Nigeria's military, for years considered one of Africa's strongest, has been completely outmatched by an elusive and ruthless Boko Haram. Embattled civilians in northern Nigeria have come to fear the indiscriminate rampages of Nigerian troops almost as much as the attacks of Boko Haram. Kenya's police forces, for whom the Kenya public has low regard, lack the capacity to investigate even ordinary crime, much less comprehend and counter growing terrorist attacks inside Kenya. The Democratic Republic of the Congo's armed forces, despite years of training by Western militaries, are rightly viewed by Congolese civilians as ill-disciplined predators, not protectors.

Where publics distrust governments, fear security forces, and are reluctant to cooperate with authorities, rebellions and insurgencies take root more easily. For historically "strong" African states like Nigeria and Kenya this is a painful discovery in a time of crises.

At the August summit American officials are not likely to lecture their African guests on their shortcomings as security providers. However, the urgency of Security Sector Reform, especially in those states facing acute crises, is worth more than just a passing mention. Without changes in doctrine to make civilian protection their highest security priority, many African states will be hard pressed to counter violence from increasingly sophisticated and determined nonstate actors.