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Understanding the security environment

Long isolated from the rest of the world and more often than not neglected and deemed irrelevant, Africa with its fragile governments and institutions, abject poverty amid great resource endowments, and legacy of incessant violent conflict has become increasingly integrated into the global security architecture and its future security a rising concern for the United States and the international community. And while the continent has long been a setting for great power rivalries and has been highly susceptible to the political machinations of outside forces, it is now also viewed as a caldron and incubator of global instability and insecurity. Once ignored as strategically irrelevant, the Africa of the twenty-first century now, more than ever, matters to the rest of the world. Simply ignoring it is no longer an option, because in a globalizing world, insecurity anywhere is a threat to security everywhere. For the cost of failing to adequately address African security problems in the coming decades of this new century will come at a price, which African countries are increasingly incapable of paying, and the international community unwilling to shoulder.

The setting: a continent without equal

The African security environment of today is a dynamic one, characterized by a volatile mix of conflict, instability, and state weakness. It is also beset by a broad spectrum of traditional and non-traditional threats on the one hand, and yet home to an emerging regional* and international

* For the purpose of this book (and as it is commonly used in writing about Africa), the term “region” or “regional” generally refers to the *entire African continent*. The African Union is thus a “regional organization.” It should be noted, however, that the word “region” can also be used to mean a specific geographic area or part of a country; for example, “the Ogaden region” of Ethiopia. The terms “sub-region” or “sub-regional” are used in this book to refer to various *geographic subdivisions of the African continent* or to geographically based organizations.

security consciousness and activism on the other. Meanwhile, the historical legacies of colonialism, authoritarianism, and the Cold War have left many African countries politically and economically underdeveloped and poorly equipped to meet the multitude of problems facing them. Specifically a chronic shortage of resources and institutional capacity have helped produce a security capacity gap—one of the most severe in the world—that is further exacerbated by endemic corruption and poor governance, thus making Africa one of the most singularly perplexing and challenging regions in the world today. It is the nature and wide range of these security challenges, as well as Africa's extreme vulnerability to them that undoubtedly caused the US National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2025* report to label the region as the one "most vulnerable to economic disruption, population stress, civil conflict, and political instability."¹

While all regions of the world are by definition "unique" in their own right, the unequalled combination of Africa's geography, demography, historical development, and sheer magnitude of its political, economic, and social diversity place the continent and its people in a league of their own. At nearly 12 million square miles Africa's land mass is greater in size than the United States, China, Western Europe, India and Argentina and it is home to some of the largest countries in the world: The former Sudan, prior to the creation of South Sudan in 2011 and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), when combined would equal one-half the size of the United States. With currently more than one billion people, composed of thousands of ethnic groups (there are some 450 alone in Nigeria and the DRC) speaking some 2,000 languages, Africa is not only among the most populous region in the world, but it is certainly one of the most diverse, fastest growing, and youngest.² According to UN and CIA statistical estimates, Africa's projected population growth of more than 2 percent over the next five years will easily outstrip second place Asia by more than 2:1.³ Of the fastest growing populations in the world today, 17 of 20 are now found in Africa and the continent's largest city, Lagos, Nigeria with more than 21 million people, is likely to become one of the five largest cities in the world by 2020.⁴ These demographic trends will increase the continent's "youth bulge" (40 percent of the population is currently estimated to be under the age of 15) at a time when economic development in Africa threatens to fall even further behind other developing regions of the globe.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), for instance, is a "sub-regional organization."

The continent is also home to many of the poorest countries on earth, many of which are the largest recipients of international development and humanitarian aid. Poverty is widespread and economies are struggling; half of all African countries have annual gross domestic products (GDP) under \$12 billion—an amount about equal to the annual GDP of Mongolia—and fall in the bottom one-third of all global economies.⁵ Of the 28 countries suffering from burdensome international debt that have fully qualified for assistance under the International Monetary Fund's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, 22 are found in Africa.⁶ Infant mortality rates, which can be attributable to the high levels of poverty and inadequate health care in Africa, are also the highest in the world; 34 of the continent's 54 countries rank at the very bottom of the United Nation's under-five mortality rankings.⁷ Despite the provision of some \$25 billion annually in official development assistance from G-8 countries since 2009,⁸ the situation shows little sign of improvement as ill-conceived programs, mismanagement, and rampant corruption undermine development efforts.

All of this in spite of Africa's abundance of natural resources. Recent oil and gas discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea and off the east coast of Africa, for instance, hold out the promise of significant economic development and an improved quality of life in some of the continent's poorest countries. However, lingering issues of corruption, mismanagement, and an equitable division of revenues often mean that this new found wealth will likely be squandered too and few lives improved. The prospects for overcoming these obstacles are not bright, however, as some of Africa's most historically resource endowed states—Angola, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, and Sudan—have been some of the most poorly governed, corrupt, and divided countries on the continent. For example, Nigeria is believed to have lost over half the \$600 billion it has earned from oil since the 1960s⁹ and for all its national wealth, more than 80 percent of Nigerians survive on less than \$2 per day.¹⁰

Africa's colonial past, with its tainted legacy of exploitation, elitism, and repression, has also helped contribute to the political, economic, and social fragmentation of the continent, thereby complicating efforts to address the continent's security challenges. Ill-suited and imposed colonial borders split communities and undermined cultural, social, and political cohesiveness. European divide-and-rule strategies inflamed ethnic, religious, and geographic tensions, as did prolonged violent anti-colonial struggles. This situation gave rise at independence to many artificial "nation-states" that tended to lack economic viability or any sense of nationhood, and were riven by societal conflict and/or were dominated by self-aggrandizing leaders and self-serving political parties

that were largely unaccountable to the people they sought to govern. Heavy-handed attempts by central governments in the 1960s and 1970s at nation building in these fragmented societies too often backfired. The result was a steep upsurge in secessionist or irredentist movements, massive human rights abuses, violent repression, and civil conflict, as well as frequent international military interventions. Coups and counter-coups “in the name of saving the country” became a defining characteristic of the immediate post-independence period. The result is a political culture of authoritarianism and military rule that still simmers just below the surface even today.

Likewise, the continent’s serving as a surrogate venue for super-power competition during the Cold War further disrupted and distorted Africa’s political and economic development, as both Washington and Moscow pursued their own foreign policy and security agendas without regard to the seeds of instability that they sowed across the continent. Both sides’ unquestioned support for “their” African dictators, escalating arms sales, and the use of African surrogates to fight proxy wars not only turned the continent into a superpower battlefield for decades, but further militarized and polarized African societies by fanning the flames of existing problems. From Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia in the Horn of Africa, across much of Central Africa and into Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe in the south, the legacy of the Cold War still resonates today. Sadly it seems that there may well be a repetition of this Cold War dynamic with Beijing and Washington vying for influence.

Chronic conflict and instability

From domestic power struggles and clashes over national resources to competing territorial claims and irredentist and separatist movements, violent conflict is a constant and seemingly unavoidable feature of the African landscape. Despite recent strides in resolving some longstanding problems and an overall decline in violence since the end of the Cold War, violent conflict remains at the heart of Africa’s security challenges and the continent is still home to most of the world’s armed conflicts. According to the Human Security Centre, “at the turn of the twenty-first century more people were being killed in wars in this region than in the rest of the world combined.”¹¹ A conservative estimate of Africans killed as a result of major conflicts since the early 1990s would probably exceed 5 million, with tens of millions more having been displaced from their homes and livelihoods. Maybe even more telling beyond Africa’s high profile conflicts in Darfur, the eastern DRC, or Somalia are the tens of millions of people affected by the constant low-level violence that is a part of their everyday life. Whether it is conflict over

water and grazing rights in northeastern Uganda, communal violence in central Nigeria, press-ganged children in the tantalum mines of the DRC or drug-fueled violence on the streets of Johannesburg, the resulting high levels of fear and insecurity across the continent are surely the ultimate indication of African governments' inability to provide security for its citizens.

Alongside long-established sources of African conflict, such as ethnic or religious differences, or competition over scarce resources, a whole new set of globally driven forces outside the continent are also fueling the violence. For example, the worldwide proliferation of small arms and light weapons following the collapse of the Berlin Wall has made these the weapons of choice in civil conflicts, not only in Africa but across the globe. While these weapons are not in and of themselves the cause of conflict, their widespread availability, affordability, and lethality contributes to prolonging and intensifying violence. The mixture of old and new sources of conflict has created a continent seeped in violence, which by some estimates has cost African countries around \$18 billion per year and an estimated \$284 billion from 1990 to 2005—an amount equal to all the donor aid given over the same period.¹²

Another significant feature of African conflict is the increasing sub-regionalization of conflict, whereby domestic conflicts rarely remain so and thus spread from one country to the next, creating endemic zones of conflict. Factors such as transnational ethnicity, a common historical or cultural heritage, traditional migration patterns, and linked socio-economic development help facilitate the spread of domestic conflict across international borders. The Mano River Basin of West Africa, the Great Lakes region of Central Africa and Darfur's tri-border area with Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) are all examples of this sub-regionalization of conflict. This problem is further complicated by inadequate or ineffectual resolution mechanisms that fail to comprehensively address both the domestic and transnational dimensions of these conflicts. In addition, these situations are also highly susceptible to exploitation and intervention by those outside Africa. Al-Qaeda, for example, has sought repeatedly to advance its own global agenda by internationalizing the conflicts in Algeria, Darfur, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia, albeit with limited success. More recently, the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) has been trying to expand its reach and influence into parts of North Africa, most notably into conflict-ridden Libya.

Unlike some other regions of the world, what is characteristically not present in Africa is an abundance of inter-state conflict. With rare

exceptions, such as the Ethiopian–Eritrean border war of 1998–2000, African countries generally do not go to war with each other. When tensions do become seriously strained (as they often do), governments historically resort to the use of proxies or lend their support to armed opposition groups operating in the offending country, rather than rely on the direct use of conventional military power to solve their differences. This support can take the form of providing safe havens, granting freedom of movement within the hosting country, providing friendly media coverage, or increasing the provision of arms and equipment, intelligence support, or direct logistics assistance. The old maxim that the “enemy of my enemy, is my friend” certainly applies in Africa.

While this approach tends to defuse the likelihood of all-out inter-state war, it also usually leads to periods of protracted, low-intensity conflicts that can last for decades. Moreover, sponsoring governments can find it increasingly difficult to control and manage their surrogates over time as insurgent or opposition groups broaden their base of support and seek greater independence. The use of proxies as a foreign policy tool also complicates domestic conflict resolution efforts as it adds another external dimension (one commonly with a completely different set of priorities and objectives) to the original problem. Chadian–Sudanese relations over the years clearly reflect this trend, as Khartoum uses its support of anti-Chadian rebels to punish N’Djamena for its support of Darfur insurgents in a reinforcing cycle of violence in both countries. Proxy conflicts can also play out in third countries, as shown by both Ethiopia’s and Eritrea’s involvement in Somalia, where each side backs opposing Somali factions.

Finally, the problems of chronic conflict are further compounded by the existence across the continent of extremely weak governments and politically fragile, unstable states. This situation is partly the result of Africa’s historical heritage, but it is also the by-product of African leaders and elites recklessly seeking to hold on to power at all cost. The upshot for many countries has been the formation of highly centralized and authoritarian, but institutionally weak governments that are lacking accountability and any significant degree of popular support. The “failed state”—defined as “one in which the government does not have effective control of its territory, is not perceived as legitimate by a significant portion of its population, does not provide domestic security or basic public services to its citizens, and lacks a monopoly on the use of force”¹³—being the most extreme case of government implosion. Although Somalia has become the poster child for state collapse in Africa, The Fund for Peace identified six African countries (Somalia, South Sudan, the CAR, Sudan, Chad, and the DRC) in its top eight

countries in the world in 2016 as being the most vulnerable to instability and state failure.¹⁴

The shift away from one-party rule and the rise of democratic movements all across the continent in recent decades has been, without a doubt, one of the major watershed events since the end of the Cold War. In 2010 more than one-third of all African countries were electoral democracies in contrast to a mere handful ten years earlier and 62 percent were rated as “free” or “partly free,” according to Freedom House civil liberties indices.¹⁵ The 2011 people’s revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia underscore the power behind this trend that has still yet to fully run its course in Africa. Nonetheless, many of these emerging African democracies are extremely fragile and face an uphill struggle to cope with social and political upheaval as they transition to more open and inclusive societies. Freedom House, in fact, reports that there are “more countries seeing declines in overall freedom than gains” in recent years and several African countries showed a decline in political rights and civil liberties since 2007, reversing several years of positive improvements.¹⁶ Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya are cases in point, as they grapple to find the right balance of democracy and stability in their highly fragmented and conflict-prone societies.

The rise of non-traditional and transnational threats

A salient feature of the twenty-first-century African security environment has been the steady rise of a wide range of non-traditional and transnational threats, which mirrors a global trend in the evolving type and nature of threats facing the international community at large. The most alarming aspect of this new trend is the sheer volume and diversity of these emerging threats—that are in addition to more traditional threats already facing countries—and the added security burden it imposes. Nowhere is this truer than in Africa. Already poorly resourced and lacking the capacity to deal with most existing traditional security problems, African governments and institutions are on the verge of being overwhelmed with this new set of challenges. Nonetheless, it is in this new arena that Africans and the international community must focus their attention, for herein lie some of the most serious long-term threats to peace and stability.

The most prominent of these in Africa are:

- *Terrorism.* While terrorism has been a persistent feature of domestic conflicts in Africa for some time, the new danger lies in the growing internationalization of the threat across the continent or what some, like Jakkie Cilliers, see as “a melding of domestic and international

terrorism” to reshape the face of African terrorism.¹⁷ Beginning in the early 1990s in Algeria and arriving in full force in 1998 with the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Africa moved into the limelight as a venue for the emerging struggle between the West and international jihadists. Even more alarming is a rising fear that the continent’s facilitating environment—weak states, economic and political marginalization, deep societal divisions, and potentially sympathetic populations—is providing a fertile breeding ground for the growth and export of not just African, but also international, terrorism as well. The powerful rise since 2007 of both locally grown and international violent jihadist groups, such as Boko Haram, splinter groups of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or the Islamic State, are evidence of the seriousness of this evolution. The quickening pace of globalization clearly appears to be facilitating this trend, as Africa increasingly becomes part of the larger global security environment and its set of challenges.

- *Criminal trafficking in drugs and small arms.* Likewise, the rising tide of globalization and the associated diffusion of technology into the far corners of the world, including Africa, have stimulated an explosion in international criminal activity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in West Africa. Long known for its extensive sub-regional criminal networks, West Africa has now become a key global hub for drugs, arms, and human trafficking, as well as for money laundering and financial fraud, according to the United Nations.¹⁸ Other parts of the continent are affected too. The illicit Africa-wide trade in small arms is reported to be a \$1 billion-a-year business;¹⁹ localized conflicts, underdevelopment, and a climate of corruption that helps sustain non-state actors, particularly armed militia groups, has fueled the growth of criminal activity in recent years. Even more worrisome have been the growing links between criminal and terrorist organizations in parts of West and North Africa and the serious implications this has for security.²⁰
- *Pandemic disease.* Once simply categorized as health and quality of life issues, deadly pandemic diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, have come to the forefront of the non-traditional, transnational security challenges facing African countries today. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most severely affected HIV/AIDS region of the world, having nearly 70 percent of the worldwide total of 36.7 million people infected in 2015; 73 percent of AIDS-related deaths in 2015 were in Africa.²¹ Several million more Africans—many of them women and young children—also die each year from the combined impact of AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. Beyond the human

cost, the impact on economic development, societal relationships, and human security is profound, and contributes directly to reinforcing the cycle of poverty, social fragmentation, and government weaknesses.

- *Demographic and environmental pressure.* Whether through disruptions to Africa's fragile ecosystem, economic pressures, or unrelentingly conflict, millions of Africans have been forced to abandon their homes and seek safety and a better life elsewhere. These increasingly dramatic population shifts can be highly localized or felt several thousand miles away, but more worrisome is their increasing frequency. Conflict and the accompanying deprivations have historically been responsible in Africa for fueling refugee flows and displacing people; Sudan's conflicts over the years, for example, have produced some 1.5 million refugees and over 4 million internally displaced persons. But rising demographic pressures and an overly stressed ecosystem are increasingly becoming critical factors. While certainly significant from an economic development perspective, these uncontrolled—and largely unmonitored—population movements complicate efforts to address other linked security problems, such as terrorism, resource and civil conflict, criminal activity, and pandemic disease.

What is most striking about the above list is the sheer complexity and diversity of these new threats and the additional burden they place on African governments. The rapid pace of globalization has certainly been instrumental in driving these trends, as has the continent's evolving integration into the global security architecture. Both trends show no signs of abating. Some security problems, such as sub-regional conflict, small arms proliferation and drug trafficking, pose a clear and present danger to governments and their citizenry and thus require immediate attention. Other problems, such as those associated with health and the environment, present more of a long-term challenge to security. Unfortunately, the need to address both current needs and future threats will put a further strain on Africa's already limited security capability.

Africa is certainly in dire need of a fresh approach to its security challenges—one that moves away from an outdated, state-centric focus heavily dependent on centralized traditional security organs, such as the military, and to a broader based, bottom-up approach with an emphasis on improving governance, development and strengthening civil society. For the Africa of the twenty-first century to be secure, it will require new thinking to face up to the challenges of a new century.

Emerging twenty-first-century security trends

Without a doubt Africa is changing. The final decade of the twentieth century in retrospect will be seen as a major watershed for the continent because it set the stage for the transformation of Africa—for better or for worse. The ending of Cold War-fueled conflicts, the increasing pace and reach of globalization, the emergence of new non-Western economic and political centers of power, the rising tide of democratic reform, and the shifting nature of global conflict and competition are driving a vast international transformation. Nowhere is this more so than in Africa. These forces of change—when viewed in concert with the continent’s projected demographic explosion, a rising global dependence on African raw materials (and potential new markets) to help fuel future economic expansion, and the growing probability of the continent becoming an exporter of security problems and not simply a setting for chronic instability—are dramatically altering Africa’s place on the world stage.

Long seen as isolated and peripheral to the rest of the world, the continent is gaining new importance—and strategic relevance—as an integral part of the arising twenty-first-century global security architecture that cannot be ignored. While this realignment undoubtedly will have enormous impact on the governments and people of Africa, its more telling impact in the decades ahead is likely to be on those outside the continent—outsiders, who must be increasingly willing to acknowledge this new reality and be accepting of the need to take a fresh approach to helping Africans create a more peaceful and secure future. As such, the continent finds itself likely to become a laboratory for the security challenges of the twenty-first century, both in terms of spawning new problems and in testing new solutions. As Pliny the Elder observed long ago, “*Semper aliquid novi Africam adferre*”—Africa always brings us something new.²²

There are several emerging trends that merit watching, as they will almost certainly play a major role in both shaping the security challenges of tomorrow and in efforts to provide solutions today. These include:

- A decline in widespread, large-scale armed conflict, but other factors will continue to drive low-intensity conflicts across the continent. Despite an uptick in the death toll since 2013, there has, nonetheless, been a significant shift away from large-scale armed conflicts. Large-scale violence in 2017 is concentrated in a handful of countries—Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan—and frequently spills over into neighboring countries. Thus, as Jakkie Cilliers notes,

“Africa as a whole is much less violent and more stable now than at the end of the Cold War.”²³ The broader trend is toward low-level, festering conflicts that will be kept generally in check, but certainly have the potential to flare up into larger-scale violence and instability at any time.

- Non-traditional and transnational threats are growing and undoubtedly will replace large-scale violent conflict as the most persistent type of security challenge in the coming decades. These threats will run across the entire security threat spectrum from the high end of presenting an immediate threat, such as terrorism and drug trafficking, to the low end of being a longer-term threat, like pandemic disease and environmental degradation. Moreover, there is a high potential for some of these non-traditional threats to merge together over time into new, more powerful challenges to security.
- Traditional tools of state security, most notably the heavy reliance on militaries, are becoming increasingly ineffective and irrelevant for addressing the new security environment. This will mean a further diminishing of the role of the state and of the utility of force or coercion in addressing security concerns. An expansion of non-state and international actors in the African security sector is an inevitable result.
- The proliferation of threats is causing the security gap in Africa to widen and this will exert greater strain on national, regional, and international resources. Even with the inclusion of new actors and increased attention by the international community, resources are likely to prove inadequate to address all of Africa’s future security requirements. This will necessitate experimentation with radical new approaches to security at all levels of society.
- Africa’s steady integration into a globalized security architecture increases the possibility that the continent will shift from being an isolated and insulated security environment to playing a greater role in shaping future global security challenges. Events in Africa will, then, have more of a direct bearing on the rest of the world than ever before. Ignoring the continent will simply not be an option in the future.

While many of the continent’s current security problems are rooted in the past, others clearly reflect the direct impact of rising globalization and Africa’s greater integration into the world. All, however, pose a serious challenge to peace and security. As the old neo-colonial security model of control, repression, and state preeminence was ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst, Africans have clearly recognized

the need to develop a better—and different—model, one that addresses not only their old existing problems, but the looming challenges of the twenty-first century too. Without a fundamental reassessment of the meaning of security in the modern age and how this security is delivered, this cannot happen. This will require the development of a new security paradigm that is grounded in human security concepts, acknowledges Africa's role in international security, and uses multiple synergistic strategies in achieving its goals. The future of African security depends on the success or failure of this endeavor.

The harsh reality is that there will never be enough resources available in Africa to tackle all the continent's security problems. It is imperative that the international community becomes a real partner in building African security, not simply out of altruism or humanitarianism, but out of global necessity. This, however, needs to be done in a more coordinated and cooperative fashion and within the security framework that Africans are constructing. Merely doing more of the same by throwing more money and resources at problems or using outdated approaches will not only be ineffectual, but will invariably produce frustration and disillusionment at the inability to solve anything. The United States in particular must break free of its traditional security construct and not just talk the talk of human security but actually restructure its engagement in Africa to walk the walk. Despite all the US rhetoric about the need for enhancing human security and using a "3D approach" (defense, development, and diplomacy) in implementation, the American military remains at the forefront of US security engagement in Africa today. As Africans have learned, using old security tools to delivery human security in the new century will not work. Now the United States must learn, and more importantly embrace, this same lesson.

Lastly, without political reform and improving governance in Africa, none of the above is likely to happen. Efforts already underway across the continent—both at the government and popular level—to promote greater accountability and transparency need to be encouraged and pursued with unwavering political commitment. Africa's leaders and people know what should be done and now they need to move forward in putting their houses in order. It will undoubtedly be difficult. It will certainly be chaotic, but it will also be necessary. Political commitment will be required from the international community too. The road to internal reform in Africa and building security will be a long and arduous one that will require patience, persistence, and, most of all, a long-term outlook—things that are, unfortunately, often in short supply.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the broad spectrum of security threats and challenges—from civil conflict and failing states to issues of criminal trafficking, health, and the environment—this book paints a complex picture of the diverse African security landscape and the enormity of the task before African and global leaders. Not all 54 African countries or even the continent’s various sub-regions face the same challenges or face them to the same degree, but in all these places Africans are seeking to build more secure and stable societies. Only time will tell if they are successful. Although no one can predict the future with any degree of certainty, the future for Africa and its people will surely be one of both continuity and change. From colonialism to the Cold War and beyond, issues of security have dominated the continent’s development and determined its place in the world. So, too, are the opening decades of a new century giving rise to fresh challenges and unresolved problems where Africa will be at the forefront of discovering new solutions to what are increasingly becoming globalized challenges and threats.

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