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The US Military in Africa: Enhancing Security and Development?

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It can be stated that the US defense establishment rediscovered the African continent after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington DC. The end of the Cold War changed the dynamic between the United States and many African countries as US foreign engagement with the continent retrenched. Whereas, the United States had provided substantial military and economic support to allied countries in an effort to counter the Soviet Union's presence on the continent, the Cold War's conclusion ended the need for those arrangements. In addition, the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone that began in 1989 and 1991 respectively coupled with the loss of US servicemen in Somalia and the genocide in Rwanda gave credence to Robert Kaplan's controversial exposition entitled "The Coming Anarchy." Kaplan's article had a profound effect on the US foreign policy establishment judging that President Bill Clinton ordered the US State Department to disseminate it to all US embassies. It could be argued that sentiments such as these contributed to the reluctance of the United States to engage substantially with Africa after the Berlin Wall fell. Sounding the alarm on what he perceived as the dawn of unparalleled instability and chaos in the global south, Kaplan invoked stereotypes of Africa as the dark continent. His imagery of sub-Saharan Africa depicted a savage and dangerous place where notions of "civilization" had collapsed.¹

The United States' reluctance to commit to large and sustained, military, economic and political engagement in Africa pre-9/11 changed after Al Qaeda launched its attacks on the US homeland from its base in Afghanistan. The hijacking and destruction that followed reoriented the nature of US-Africa engagement. September 11th demonstrated the value of failed states as safe havens for terrorist organizations, creating the impetus to deny terrorist groups sanctuary in other parts of the world. Failed states and those experiencing internal turmoil were identified as potential places where terrorist organizations could regroup and plan future operations. Africa with a large land mass consisting of fifty-four countries became a major concern for US policy makers. To that end, the Pentagon, at the direction of President George W. Bush, created the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 as the lead military initiative to deny terrorist groups a home in Africa. Recognizing how the governance deficit, endemic corruption, large scale unemployment and natural disasters were weakening African states, AFRICOM sought to reverse this trend through an assortment of development initiatives designed to "professionalize" African armies, enhance security and promote good governance. From the beginning, questions have been raised regarding the appropriateness of engaging the US military in development projects or to promote governance across Africa. Jessica Piombo's edited volume entitled *The US Military in Africa* assesses the US military's role in development and security initiatives across Africa after September 11th, 2001.

This book is the result of a workshop funded by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency's Advanced Systems and Concepts Office. It is the collaborative effort of experts with specific knowledge on the various aspects of the Pentagon's and US foreign policy establishment's engagement with African countries after 9/11. The organizations examined are AFRICOM, the US Department of Defense, the US Department of State and USAID. The general format used by the authors is to provide an overview of their chapter, state the problem and then analyze the US's engagement with the specific challenge while

identifying the pros and cons of such action. Thematically, the authors address four main topics: can the US military facilitate development, “professionalize” African armies, be an effective partner in cross-agency coordination and facilitate good governance? Some of the authors have based their analysis on participant observations as is the case with the chapter by Maureen Farrell and Jessica Lee. Farrell and Lee have used the insight that they gained on field studies in Kenya and Tanzania to frame their analysis on interagency collaboration. Like Farrell and Lee, G. William Anderson focuses his study on interagency cooperation. However, his is a more detailed account on the technical, mechanical and procedural aspects of interagency interaction. His contribution is essential to the book because it provides the context with which to understand the principles guiding interagency collaboration. Furthermore, he provides the framework with which to evaluate the effectiveness of interagency cooperation or the lack thereof. The volume’s strongest contributions are the chapters by Andrea Talentino, Dustin Sharp, Andrea M. Walther-Puri and Piombo. Their command of the nuances and dynamics of African security issues are at a very advanced level. Talentino leads with a sober examination of the theoretical framework of the book, i.e. whether development in sub-Saharan Africa can be securitized through militarization. She debates the prospect of the militarization of development while discussing the feasibility of the opposite. In the process, she studies the logic driving the creation of AFRICOM and how the command’s mandate was developed and implemented. Talentino’s work stands out because of her extensive knowledge of development implementation. She is clearly an expert in this area and uses her understanding of development work to examine AFRICOM’s process in it. Her contribution along with those of Sharp and Piombo are arguably the most impactful studies in the book.

Piombo follows Talentino with a more historically based analysis on the US defense establishment’s purpose and its evolving role in stability and reconstruction operations in sub-Saharan Africa. To accomplish this, she focuses on the politics of development and humanitarian aid juxtaposed military led initiatives. Assessing her work, the strength of her argument is that it provides the intellectual foundation to form a big picture analysis of the US defense establishment’s development strategy in Africa. In this regard, it segues nicely into Sharp’s chapter. In his contribution, Sharp calls attention to the paradox with US military assistance to African countries. Mainly, is it advisable to train armies in countries where the leadership is authoritarian? Given the experience of US military assistance to Mobutu Sese Sekou’s Zaire or Samuel Doe’s Liberia, which in the end contributed to the destabilization of the region, will training Paul Biya’s (Cameroon) or Joseph Kabila’s (DR Congo) security forces lead to the same? He accurately states that in most African countries where the US is engaged in military partnerships, the concept of a social contract between the government and the governed does not exist. Sharp correctly identifies that without a social contract, the United States risks enabling regime protection. His concern is that training the defense forces of countries whose leadership have no sense of social welfare or accountability to their citizens leads to increased repression over time. While he does offer advice, mainly that before meaningful adjustments can be facilitated, political reform must come from the bottom up, he states that the status quo will have the unintended consequence of strengthening authoritarian regimes. Walther-Puri furthers the argument by implying that development initiatives driven by the US military risks destabilizing African countries. Her most compelling example is that the elite Malian troops trained by the United States eventually undermined democracy in Mali when they used their training to conduct a coup d’etat. She lists various reasons for the unintended results; however, the most compelling is that the United States lacks a historical connection to Africa. This by implication signifies that since Americans are generally unfamiliar with Africa, political and military expedient decisions are being taken irrespective of the nuances involved or the long-term effects of US military assistance. As a remedy, both Anderson and Walther-Puri suggest that the United States should exercise extreme caution in forming military partnerships in Africa.

In contrast, Clarence Bouchat offers the most spirited argument on the merits of a US military led development and security initiative in Africa. His over-reliance on Thomas Barnett, who he claims is an expert at global conflict forecasting undermines his case. While Barnett is an accomplished scholar, his

projections of future conflicts are not suited to Africa. It could be stated that Barnett's analysis lacks a clear understanding of the political realities of sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, Bouchet's suggestion that US personnel become proficient in economics leads one to wonder why he did not insist that the emphasis be placed on an understanding of African affairs instead.

While the authors present a thorough account of their respective areas, more historicizing would have been helpful to contextualize the challenges facing the Pentagon. We are reminded that Africa suffers from a democracy and governance deficit. We are also informed that African armies lack respect for civil authority, but the exact reasons for this are not explored at length. For example, to understand why there is a disconnect between civilian authority and the defense forces in sub-Saharan African countries, the traditions and post-colonial realities inherited by the military from its role as a colonial army needs to be understood. Mainly, that they were oriented inward, and second that in most instances post-colonial sub-Saharan African armies were not included in the democratization process at independence. In some cases, the military was not released from the colonial authority until the day of independence. As such, the army was not integrated into the national strategy. As a result, two opposing locales of power were manifested in post-colonial African states, the army and the government. Given that the role of the army was not defined and, furthermore, it was not included in the democratization process, the army followed its own corporatist agenda.² The result was that there have been over two-hundred coups and attempted coups since 1963.

An interesting aspect of this book is that we can weigh the relevance of the different analysis to the situation on the ground. This volume was published in 2015 and judging by the security situation in Togo, Cameroon, DR Congo, Somalia, Uganda, and Ethiopia it appears that those who had advocated strict conditions for the US partnerships have so far been validated. Presently, there appears to be a shift to enhanced regime protection as we witness crackdown on political and ethnic opposition in those countries.

The US Military in Africa is the most informative and comprehensive book on this subject. Simply put, it is the best thus far. Unlike Nick Turse's *Tomorrow's Battlefield: US Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa* and Helen Epstein's, *Another Fine Mess*, that could be considered polemic, *The US Military in Africa* offers a sober analytical assessment of the role of the Pentagon in development and security operations on the continent.

Piombo certainly has the experience and academic credentials to lead this project. Although her expertise is in security affairs and political activity in the southern African region, she displays a commanding knowledge of how these issues affect Africa continent-wide. She has conducted research in several African countries and was a visiting scholar at the University of Western Cape, the University of Cape Town in South Africa, Stanford University's Center for African Studies and George Mason University's Center for Conflict Resolution. This book should be required reading for all personnel in the US military and foreign policy establishment engaged with security and development operations in Africa.

Notes

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly* 273 (1994): 46, 72; Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

² Samuel Decalo, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).