

Introduction

**PHASES OF CONFLICT
IN AFRICA**

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Introduction

This volume is based on a workshop on “War and Peace in Contemporary Africa” organized and hosted by the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania on January 31, 2003. At this workshop, there were panels dedicated to conflict in central, west, and the horn of Africa, along with a keynote address on “Africa in the War on Terrorism” that stimulated substantial (and contentious) debate. The contributions included in this collection revolve around the central and west African regional conflict zones discussed at the workshop, along with two essays that provide divergent perspectives on Africa’s role in the “war on terrorism” emanating from the September 11, 2003 attacks in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania.¹ The articles are organized chronologically by phase, thus providing insights into the complexities of conflict processes that follow similar trajectories, but that vary in time and space.

Phases of Conflict

Given the diversity of approaches to “conflict”² that have emerged over the years, there is a need to identify an inclusive definition that conceptually embraces the contributions in this special issue.³ According to Avruch (1998):

Conflict occurs when two related parties—individuals, groups, communities, or nation-states—find themselves divided by perceived incompatible interests or goals or in competition for control of scarce resources. (Pp. 24-25)

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With this definition, Avruch explicitly bridges the gap between two approaches to understanding conflict: one based on the idea of scarcity (see Coser 1956) and the other related to perception/belief (see Pruitt and Rubin 1985).⁴

It is also necessary to build on Avruch's definition by recognizing that conflicts between two or more parties are not static, time-bound events, but rather ongoing processes that vary in intensity, scope, and duration. Sriram and Wermester (2003:21-27) depict this fluid process in terms of the five discernable phases presented in Table 1 below. Rothchild (2003) contends that this approach "allows us to think more constructively about what resources and tools are available [to resolve a given conflict] and when they need to be employed" (p.44).

Table 1. Phases of Conflict

<p>Potential Conflict The presence of underlying conditions of stress due to absolute deprivation and poverty, relative deprivation of resources based on ethnic, religious or racial differences, weak state capacity to manage tensions, and power inequalities or other differential status levels based on ethnic, religious or racial differences.</p> <p>Gestation of Conflict The increasing salience of factors mobilizing some actors toward conflict and by the occurrence of low-intensity violence or repression.</p> <p>Trigger/Mobilization of Conflict A high degree of tension and confrontation between conflicting parties, and some use or threatened use of force (for example, coups, electoral fraud and clashes, governmental repression, and clashes between ethnic or other groups).</p> <p>Conflict/Escalation Significant armed violence or its spread, generating not only direct casualties but also human rights abuses, humanitarian crises, refugees, and internally displaced persons.</p> <p>Postconflict A cessation of hostilities, but a high risk of conflict reemerging.</p> <p><i>Source:</i> Adapted from Sriram and Wermester (2003).</p>
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The analytic roadmap presented in Table 1 is particularly useful for this volume, since it serves to situate different cases in a common context, while providing the conceptual space for divergent methodological approaches and ideological assumptions. The goal here is not to rigidly locate a particular conflict situation in a chronologically defined and predetermined phase, but rather to reinforce that conflicts are complex processes that need to be understood and ultimately resolved based on their scope and content. Phase-based analysis helps us to achieve this goal.

Africa After 9/11: Strategic Opportunism vs. Progressive Partnership

The first two essays provide a global context to a global problem: the oft cited but marginally understood “war on terrorism” that began shortly after the infamous events of September 11, 2001. These essays elucidate how ideological predisposition impacts the conceptualization of conflict, and the tools and strategies that are chosen and employed to prevent the conflict process from proceeding to subsequent, and more violent phases. On a global scale, this “war on terrorism” is in the gestation phase, with the “increasing salience of factors mobilizing some actors toward conflict.” However, when moving from transnational to national levels of analysis, it is apparent that there are particular locations/countries that have already experienced intense conflict and that are now chronologically located in postconflict situations. Outside of Africa (in Afghanistan and Iraq, specifically), large-scale conflicts have already been waged in this “war on terrorism,” despite a global context where intense periods of violence have been more sporadic, localized and shorter in duration. It remains to be seen if the localized incidences of violence that have characterized sub-Saharan Africa (such as the December 2002 attack of the tourist hotel in Mombasa, Kenya) are precursors to larger scale conflicts.

Harvey Glickman begins the discussion with an assessment of “Africa in the War on Terrorism.” Informed by Cold War assumptions, Glickman reflects on contemporary limitations and opportunities that African leaders currently face. He depicts the emerging order of power relations in the international system in the context of the post-Second World War bi-polar world. The poles of political and economic power, along with the ideological content of bi-polar struggle, were controlled by the United States and the former Soviet Union during this period. For the most part, state agency was limited to the whims of the “great powers.” Europe was divided into east and west, and the rest of the world was up for grabs (see Issa-Salwe 2000; Schelling 1960). African leaders, benefiting from the wave of independence movements that swept across the continent in the late 1950s and early 1960s, were forced to choose between two models of political organization and social control rhetorically bounded in economic terms by communism versus capitalism, and politically by totalitarianism versus authoritarianism.⁵ The choices were clear, and the repercussions of their decisions tangible. A middle ground was forged in the non-aligned movement. However, even those attempting to balance in the middle were often forced to respond to Cold War pronouncements emanating from Moscow and Washington, D.C. With the fall and disintegration of the Soviet Union and subsequent unification of Europe on the eve of a new millennium, African governments were initially faced with an ideological vacuum until a “New World Order” emerged. The United States unilaterally, but with varying degrees of implicit and explicit support from its allies both old and new, crafted an agenda based on the assumed need for political and economic reform in a post-Cold War era. This emerging paradigm was subsequently redirected in response to the events of September 11.

Glickman challenges the reader to contextualize the emerging, post-9/11 paradigm in this historical continuum; Africa's reactive posture to Cold War rivalries should now be seen in terms of the preeminent U.S. foreign policy priority to reduce the threat of terrorism against American interests at home and abroad. Similar to the Cold War scenario, Glickman asserts that there are opportunities for and costs to African governments and people in this new arrangement. However, it is clear that Africa remains in a reactive posture, responding to American anti-terror initiatives given the unequal (unipolar?) distribution of power in the international system.

Adebajo's article approaches this issue from a very different starting point. In lieu of embracing the modalities of the current distribution of power in the international system and determining ways that Africans can respond, he focuses on the challenges that Africans face at the dawn of the new millennium. For Adebajo, the defining characteristic of the international system is the unequal distribution of scarce resources and limited opportunities of development—with African countries severely disadvantaged by American dominance. Adebajo's focus on America's role in setting the international agenda since the end of the Second World War serves to highlight how marginalized regions such as Africa have suffered. In lieu of Glickman's challenge to African governments to adapt and exploit current realities, Adebajo calls for a more "enlightened" U.S. foreign policy that focuses on partnership instead of "treating Africa as a theatre for changing regimes and waging a terror war" (see Adebajo in this volume). With method and discipline constant across both studies, the discerning variable is ideology, with the normative assumptions of understanding Africa's role in the increasingly globalized war on terror as the main point of contention.

The Historical and Cultural Contexts of Potential Conflict

In order to appropriately assess the impact of group-based resource deprivation, weak state capacity, or power inequalities on the potential for conflict, there is a need to accommodate historical and cultural contexts that are often unique in time and space. The article by Talton is an empirical examples of this.

Throughout much of the 1980s and the early 1990s, in the eastern half of northern Ghana, there was a protracted conflict between the decentralized Konkomba ethnic group and several neighboring groups that have historically been centralized and politically dominant in the region. Over 15,000 people died in violent clashes during this period—in a country that most associate with peace and stability. Talton's case study of these conflicts clearly demonstrates that colonial legacy remains an enduring characteristic of contemporary conflict. Successful resolution of these long-standing disputes such as this one requires a deep understanding of this historical context. According to Talton, the violence that began in 1981 was an extension of long-standing tension and conflict that emerged during the late colonial period, when the British marginalized some groups at the expense of others in the region.

The relevance of traditional and colonial legacies to African conflict situations varies on a case-by-case basis. However, the contribution by Talton shows that artificially limiting the historical and cultural parameters of contemporary conflict can seriously undermine the identification and implementation of viable conflict resolution strategies.

Networks and the Movement of Refugees: Factors that Trigger and Mobilize Conflict

The region's human settlement, its agricultural and pastoral practices, and its dialectics reflect a long period of development in a part of Africa where human movements and various influences crossed. (Chretien 2003:347)

The two articles in this volume dedicated to central Africa provide contemporary nuance to the regional dimensions of current conflict in the region, and they also provide some cautionary evidence regarding the factors that trigger and mobilize these kinds of conflicts. Carayannis and Whitaker provide insights, both empirical and theoretical, that transcend national borders.

Whitaker specifically focuses on the impact of refugees on stability in central Africa. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that assumes that the presence of refugees in a country is necessarily synonymous with instability, Whitaker's comparative study of refugee settlement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Tanzania nuances this assumption. Specifically, she examines the conditions that have enabled Tanzania to maintain political stability despite hosting large refugee influxes from Burundi, compared to how the flow of refugees into DRC has exacerbated instability in the sprawling and increasingly balkanized, central African country. This comparison adds to our understanding of the role that refugees play in triggering conflict.

Caryannis also expands her analysis beyond the confines of the nation-state in her examination of Africa's "first world war" that is currently being waged in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She systematically explores the complex array of cross-border networks that have exacerbated the conflict and confounded local, regional, and international attempts to mediate and ultimately resolve the deadly conflict. Clearly, the networks in place have provided capital, resources, and information necessary to mobilize and further escalate the conflict to "world war" proportions.

Both studies provide regional, and to a lesser extent, global context to the onset of conflict in a given country. The seemingly uncontrollable, "human movements" across borders, and the complex networks that facilitate and respond to this process, confound simplistic notions of spatially-bounded, "local" conflict.

The first five contributions to this volume, when taken as a whole, challenge the reader to embrace historical, regional, and global factors when tracing

the advent of conflict in Africa and beyond. Whitaker carefully documents the degree to which the presence of refugees becomes a trigger to conflict, while Caryannis' work details how regional networks serve to escalate, and indeed exacerbate conflict. Glickman and Adebayo globalize the notion of conflict, requiring us to recognize the importance of ideological predisposition, and embrace the idea that conflict can be a multi-level process that embodies different phases simultaneously.

Strategies for Conflict Resolution in Postconflict Situations

Peace Agreements and Self-Interest

In Bekoe's article on the conflict in Liberia, she seeks to "understand the incremental steps and interactive strategies between the parties and how the signatories re-negotiate and calibrate their responses to changing balances of power" (see Bekoe in this volume). Her research on the succession of agreements to end the protracted conflict in Liberia demonstrates that political solutions to a civil conflict that is both national and regional in nature needs to be approached as an evolving process that changes over time. Single agreements at specific points in time are rarely endpoints in the quest for peace, but rather stages in a seemingly unpredictable trajectory. The Spring/Summer 2003 violence, followed by yet another ceasefire between the government and rebels amplifies the validity of Bekoe's findings. Clearly, when the vulnerability of Taylor's unpopular regime and the rebels seeking to overthrow the government increased during the recent spike in violence, opportunities emerged for a negotiated settlement with the military backing of ECOWAS and the United States.

For Bekoe, this unpredictability of peace agreement success can be minimized if we pay close attention to the vulnerabilities that each party brings to negotiating table. Her use of contract theory is especially insightful in this regard, serving as a theoretical anchor that helps us to transform unpredictable acts to rational behavior patterns based on identifiable conceptions of self-interest. Bekoe's work leads us to explore more seriously the relevance of game theoretic approaches to understanding and ultimately resolving conflict (see also Axelrod 1984). Over the years, game theory has emerged as a powerful tool for analyzing societal conflicts, with the modeling process attempting to faithfully reproduce "the natural psychological activity that occurs when thinking about a conflict" (Fraser and Hipel 1984:7). Two-player games such as prisoner's dilemma and chicken have been used to explain (and arguably predict) behavior patterns in contemporary conflicts in the international system, including behaviors associated with the Cold War arms race and strategies of nuclear deterrence (see Rapoport 1966; Rapoport and Chammah 1965).

Fearon and Laitin (1996) employ a game theoretic approach to understand why cooperation in interethnic relations is more common than escalating violence

in this context. The authors conclude that: “[d]ue to the costs of persistent violence and the various benefits of peaceful inter-ethnic relations, decentralized institutional arrangements are likely to arise to moderate problems of inter-ethnic opportunism” (p.730). This conclusion is based on the assumption of “the absence of state authority,” although the authors do contend that “the central state appears in the background” (p.730) of many of the empirical examples they cite in their provocative study.

Related methodologies that build on, but move beyond, the *quid pro quo* unilarity of many game theoretic approaches have been developed using advanced programming techniques. For example, sophisticated agent-based modeling studies have recently examined topics that range from the evolution of trading and military strategies (Rousseau and Cantor 2003) to secessionism and power sharing in multicultural states (Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson 2002).

When developing strategies to resolve conflict, such as the crafting and implementation of peace agreements, it is necessary to assess and respond to the short-, medium-, and long-term self-interests of the parties to the conflict. If, as Bekoe argues, parties in conflict are more prone to enter into peace agreements when they are mutually vulnerable, this provides useful insights into efficacy of a key element of the conflict resolution process.

Trauma Healing

Lamin argues that it is necessary to explicitly address the needs of victims of protracted violence in any attempt to resolve conflict and create an environment conducive for long-term peace and security. Specifically, there is a need to facilitate accountability, justice, and reconciliation in a way that addresses the core beliefs of individuals and collective worldviews that may operate to trigger or constrain violent struggles (Eidelson and Eidelson 2003:182).⁶ According to Lamin, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) *and* the Special Court in Sierra Leone have created some challenges to achieving this goal, given overlapping jurisdictions and mandates that have caused “institutional tensions” between the two bodies. For trauma healing in postconflict societies to be successful, Lamin’s conclusions challenge national governments recovering from violent conflict, in cooperation with the international community, to establish institutions that reinforce common goals and complement each other.

Bekoe and Lamin provide very different, yet equally valid, insights into postconflict, peacebuilding strategies. In addition to creating incentives for leaders to enter into, and seriously implement, peace agreements, there is also a need to address the psychological trauma that people experience during all phases of conflict. Peace agreements provide a roadmap for realigning formal political power relations. Institutions such as the TRC and Special Court confront those guilty of war atrocities, thus providing the opportunity for all who have suffered to begin a healing process absolutely necessary to rebuild a nation that is at peace with itself and its neighbors.

Conclusion

This collection demonstrates that “there is no blueprint or set of established procedures by which violent conflicts in and between societies can be resolved. However, any emergent principles can be enhanced in their effectiveness by being contextualised [sic] in a thorough knowledge of local circumstances and causes of violence therein” (Smyth 2001:4). The case studies included in this edited volume provide this “knowledge” of the circumstances and causes of violence in the west and central African conflict zones. The two articles on the war on terrorism also provide evidence that the global context of conflict remains salient in a post-cold war world. Regardless of ideological predisposition or methodological approach, the resolution of conflict and the facilitation of peace in sub-Saharan Africa requires scholars conducting research and practitioners devising specific strategies to develop the appropriate methods, based on sophisticated techniques that move beyond description and “philosophical analyses of the physical world” (Vasquez 1999:xix).

NOTES

- 1 Given the interest that this debate generated during the workshop, we asked keynote speaker Harvey Glickman and another workshop participant, Adekeye Adebajo, to provide their perspective on this topic.
- 2 For Africa-related conflict studies, see Aboagye (1999), Attah-Poku (1998), Kurimoto and Simonse (1998), Kieh and Mukenge (2002), Okoth and Ogot (2000) and Osaghae (1999).
- 3 There are a number of general approaches to the study of conflict and war that employ a variety of methods and that are informed by a variety of ideological assumptions. For example, see Axelrod (1984), Blainey (1973); Burton (1969, 1997); Burton and Dukes (1990); Francis (2002); Fraser and Hipel (1984); Galtung (1964, 1978, 1996); Lederbach (1995, 1997); Lederbach and Jenner (2002); Nicholson (1971, 1972); Paquette (2002); Pruitt and Rubin (1986); and Sandole and van der Marwe (1993).
- 4 The edited volume by Vasques and Henehan (1990) provide an excellent selection of seminal works that address the factors relevant to the onset, expansion, termination and impact of war, along with some contribution that address the global, institutional context of peace. For quantitative approaches to the study of conflict, see de Mesquita (1975, 1981); Cioffi-Revilla (1990); Gillespie and Nesvold (1971).

- 5 During the 1980s, Reagan administrations officials differentiated between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, with the former type of government acceptable to the U.S. given its potential for political and economic reform, and the latter untenable given the assumption that communism would be the result.
- 6 Based on a careful review of relevant research, Eidelson and Eidelson (2003) conclude that the five primary belief domains are superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. Their article on this topic has an extensive bibliography with references that address each of these belief domains.

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