

Decline of Westphalia in West Africa:

How Decentralized Power in West Africa Can be a Rebirth of African Identity

by Matthew D. Pride, Bryan C. Smith and Harmonie Foster

The day might soon arrive where responsible sub-state and non-state actors may rotate seats on the United Nations Security Council as non-voting members. It seems implausible today that a non-state actor would have the latitude to act officially within the existing framework of global institutions like the United Nations and the European Union, institutions exclusively built on a foundation of state actors and liberal governance. Still, the modern-day rise of non-state actors wielding power and influence is unprecedented in world history. Despite potential negative aspects of rising non-state actors, this article argues the potential for state advancement through effective cooperation with sub-state and non-state actors within the existing order. In West Africa, powerful and responsible non-state and sub-state actors, who leverage globalization and political decentralization to secure “political goods”—what scholars consider “critical ingredients of good governance”¹—that advance stability and security may be the critical factor missing from the region to allow African nation-states to flourish and thrive.

The world’s larger sub-state and non-state actors (i.e., nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations [IGOs], and terrorist

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groups) employ hundreds of thousands of people from dozens of countries and frequently deliver on political goods more effectively than smaller governments. Large multinational corporations (e.g., Walmart) often provide their employees with benefits and entitlements that small governments struggle to provide, such as educational and development opportunities, access to health services, commercial and communication infrastructure, and safe work environments. Unfortunately, the news is not all good. Many transnational criminal and terrorist organizations (e.g., Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) threaten the existing order and international or regional stability like never before.

Within this environment, weak nation-states risk becoming failed states as their national institutions struggle to function alongside non-state and sub-state actors. Throughout history and in modern times, corruption precedes and favors failure. Professor Robert I. Rotberg, Founding Director of Harvard Kennedy School's Program on Intrastate Conflict, argued in a recent essay that of the "193 nation-states, at any one time upward of a dozen are failed or failing," while another "three dozen are weak and intrinsically in danger of slipping into failure."²

Rotberg, like many other scholars, paints a rather grim picture for the future of weak and failed states:

Unless the United Nations or the big powers develop an effective series of mechanisms to forestall failure by diplomatic, technical, or military means—a highly unlikely proposition in the modern era—the phenomenon of nation-state failure remain for years and decades, and the peoples of those deprived and depraved polities will continue to suffer at the hands of avaricious rulers.³

This article explores ways that the U.S. and other world powers can interact with West

African nation-states classified as weak to avoid such fates as the Côte d'Ivoire, a once relatively stable country rocked by division and civil war in 2011.

First, we examine how the strategic context of globalization impacts the current international system. Second, we focus more narrowly on West African nation-states classified as weak and the processes of decentralization that might allow for greater prosperity for more Africans.

This article utilizes a comparative analysis between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire as a springboard into a broader discussion on how the U.S. might utilize a policy building on globalization and decentralization to bolster weak West African governments through local self-governance.

Nation-state boundaries in West Africa are an unnatural imposition—a legacy of European colonialism built upon the Westphalian nation-state model...

Nation-state boundaries in West Africa are an unnatural imposition—a legacy of European colonialism built upon the Westphalian nation-state model—codified by the Montevideo Convention of 1933 and indirectly solidified by the Atlantic Charter in 1941.

This article proposes ways to vitalize weak nation-states in West Africa, leveraging globalization and decentralization to harness national identities, particularly in countries where weak central governments find it difficult to capitalize on political goods.

Through U.S. leadership, the globalized world can find ways to cooperate with sub-state and non-state actors to strengthen weak West African governments, helping them emerge onto the global stage as stable partners for future economic growth and prosperity.

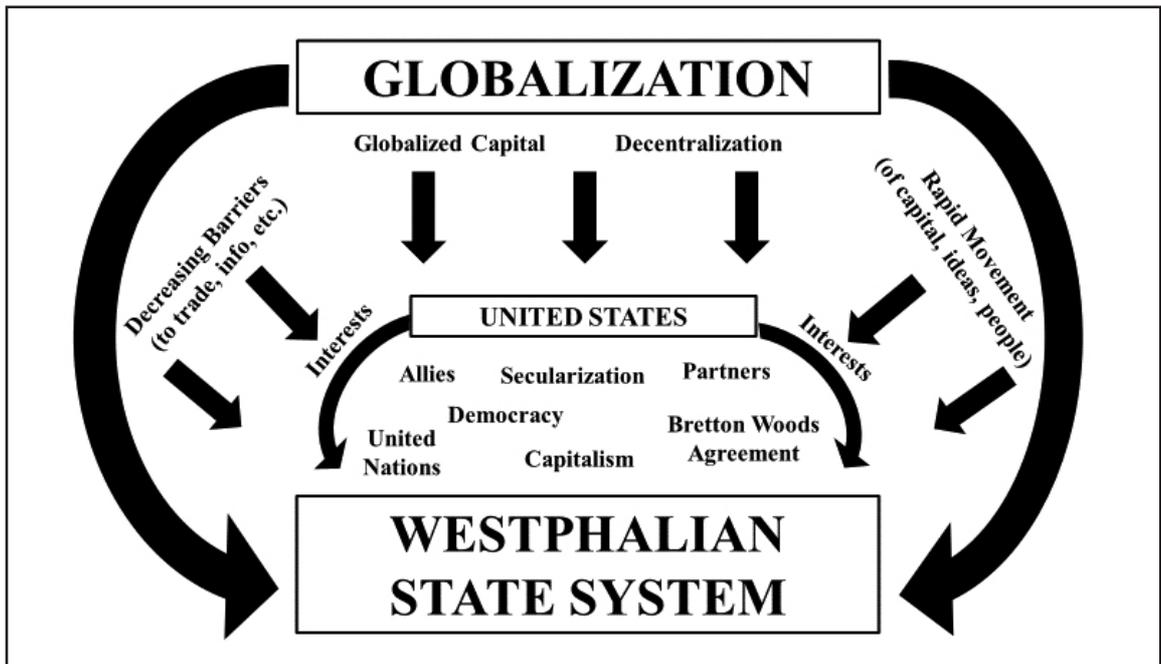


Figure 1. Effects of Globalization on the current International System.
Source: Created by the authors.

Background

Following World War II, the U.S. sought to unite cooperative nations using international institutions built on a foundation of liberal philosophical governance (see Figure 1). Certainly, U.S. administrations in the post-war era viewed foreign policy through philosophically realist lenses; nonetheless, the global world order was a liberal order. Through U.S. leadership, international democratization flourished as U.S. economic and military strength staved off the Soviet’s international Communist system. As historian Robert Kagan noted, “International order is not an evolution; it is an imposition. It is the domination of one vision over others—in this case, the domination of liberal principles of economics, domestic politics, and international relations over other, non-liberal principles.”⁴ Even with the emergence of the current international order, the nation-state remained the primary actor on the international stage.

September 11, 2001, changed the

international order in a way few at the time realized. After that horrific day, the emergence of non-state power gained international recognition. In the wake of that tragedy, President George W. Bush faced an enemy different from any that his predecessors previously confronted. Rather extraordinarily, for the first time in human history, the government of a nation-state formally proclaimed as public law that its executive branch could direct the instruments of national power to wield military force against “persons” responsible for what President Bush called “acts of war.” On September 14, 2001, the American Congress passed Public Law 107-40, which authorized President Bush:

...to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United

States by such nations, organizations or persons.⁵

Fast-forward to 2015; President Barack Obama's Administration incorporated this new normal of state military engagement against non-state actors into the 2015 *National Security Strategy* (NSS). Moreover, the document highlights the expanding influence and role of non-state and sub-state actors on the international stage. The term "non-state" appears five different times in the 2015 NSS. According to the strategy, the U.S. intends to cooperate with NGOs and IGOs, key regional organizations, and international financial institutions to confront global problems impacting an interconnected world.

The Obama Administration stressed that these non-state "partnerships can deliver essential capacity to share the burdens of maintaining global security and prosperity and to uphold the norms that govern responsible international behavior."⁶ In this light, it recognized that power existed outside nation-states. President Obama contended that "governments once able to operate with few checks and balances are increasingly expected to be more accountable to sub-state and non-state actors."⁷ Globalization is the force within the global environment that bends financial, social, and political institutions down to the sub-state and non-state actor levels, giving both governments and peoples in some instances unfettered access to systems once exclusively reserved for states.

Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* journalist and leading proponent of globalization, argues globalization is "the integration of markets, finance, technology, and telecommunications" throughout the world.⁸ The crumbling of barriers to trade and information represents a major characteristic of globalization, allowing sub-state and non-state actors greater access to instruments of power once reserved for nation-states.⁹ Instead of centralized state power, globalization focuses

on decentralizing power to multiple actors, ranging from multinational corporations to individuals.¹⁰ Friedman argues that as barriers to capital fall, an "electronic herd" emerges, which allows capital to move instantaneously around the world.¹¹ To take advantage of this electronic herd, participants must conform to globalized standards of privatization and decentralization.¹² Beneficial to states as well, this condition allows non-state actors to sustain and operate globally in a way not previously possible.

Friedman viewed the electronic herd as a force for good, arguing, "the electronic herd punishes states for going to war."¹³ Instability to the global order creates negative conditions impacting global capital investment. Under these conditions, nation-states will pursue negotiation over other forms of political discourse, such as violence and conflict, to prevent instability. Because of its potential to improve the lives of people throughout the world as well as increase stability and security in the world, Friedman advocates increasing globalization.

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The privatization and decentralization of economic interaction that characterizes globalization are similar to the process of political decentralization that West African nations have struggled with since the 1960s. West African nation-states have long sought ways to decentralize responsibility and power, sometimes incrementally and other times suddenly, to allow greater participation of their people in the political process. Since the 1960s and early 1970s, African countries underwent a sweeping revitalization, coming off the heels of

colonial rule and moving rapidly toward self-governance. Researchers Stephen N. Ndegwa and Brian Levy, in a 2003 World Bank analysis noted:

In a recent World Bank study, thirteen of 30 countries surveyed showed high or moderate levels of decentralization as measured by a composite index of political, administrative, and fiscal devolution indicators. Another thirteen showed at least some degree of decentralization, with several in the process of change. Although not all countries have fully revived local governance, the study also indicated no country in Africa today propounds a preference for centralized state.¹⁴

...globalization may also drive a wider wedge between income inequalities, sowing the seeds of political and civil unrest and societal instability.

Ndegwa and Levy indicate decentralization and dramatic political reforms derive from donor pressure and programs, or as part of what they called “evolutionary administrative change.”¹⁵ In other words, with increased opportunity afforded to local communities to gain access to global markets, financial institutions, advanced technology, and telecommunications around the world, globalization provides the right context to allow West African local communities to thrive—a condition not previously existent.

University of Texas (Austin) Professor Catherine Boone noted in a 2003 *Comparative Political Studies* journal that the “shrinking of the state has not produced ‘politically unstructured’ local arenas.”¹⁶ A bit counterintuitively, decentralization enables more rural elites—chiefs, local leaders, big merchants, other notables—to participate in political life, often

in better ways. Boone argues that within decentralized West African “politically and economically strategic rural zones, rural administration remains in place...” and “political society at the local level is structured by informal institutions that define community hierarchy, cohesion, and control over access to local resources and to the state.” In other words, decentralized West African nation-states embrace local participation of rural notables and the communities they represent in political life. There is great potential for these local leaders to enhance their influence through globalization to maximize their participation and finally break through decades of stagnant regional activity. However, globalization and decentralization do not exist without drawbacks.

Friedman acknowledges that globalization may also drive a wider wedge between income inequalities, sowing the seeds of political and civil unrest and societal instability.¹⁷ He admits those unable to adjust to globalization may resort to violence and crime more readily.¹⁸ In a similar vein, in 2010, when reflecting on decentralization, Sten Hagberg, Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Uppsala University, expressed concern that transferring a centralized power to peripheral administrative and political powers assumes such peripheral powers are both competent and capable. He argued “the transfer of power away from a center to a periphery involves the construction of such a periphery in the first place! In order to make the transfer of competencies to local governments, the latter must already exist as an administrative entity.”¹⁹ Institutional devolution occurs in nation-states where competent or capable localities are non-existent or where they are weak and ineffective. Acclaimed travel writer Robert Kaplan described this downside of globalization and decentralization through his reporting on West Africa. He argued that as barriers continue to fall, globalization and decentralization lead to resource scarcity, increased disease, unsecured

borders, weakened states, increased crime, and illegal private armies.²⁰

Kaplan described how intrastate conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone sparked massive refugee flows throughout West Africa, as weak governments failed to maintain control of their borders.²¹ Because securing the territory of a nation-state represents the most important function in providing political goods for its citizens, failing to do so sets conditions for these states to fail. Nation-states should be able to control their borders and reduce domestic threats to bolster human and community security.²² Under globalization, however, a flood of individuals moved from disadvantaged regions to developed, industrialized regions, prompting commodity prices to fall and higher unemployment rates among the immigrant labor.²³ As economic conditions deteriorated and barriers to movement fell, disease grew more rampant in underdeveloped and disadvantaged regions.²⁴ Kaplan criticized the economic benefits that Friedman extolled, as these heighten tensions between warring sub-state factions.²⁵

As economies of developing nations in West Africa stagnate and the economies of developed nations outpace them, regional instability may explode into large-scale humanitarian crises or international security threats. Rotberg argued:

In the post-9/11 world . . . failed and collapsing states bear watching because their very insecurity could potentially create havens for al Qaeda (as in Sudan and Afghanistan in the 1990s) or harbor terrorist cells capable of regrouping, training, and preparing bombing operations (as in Somalia before the car bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 and before the missile attacks at the Mombasa airport in 2002).²⁶

The future trends analysis of the U.S. Department of Defense Joint Staff's Joint Operational Environment (JOE) 2035

emphasizes this, pointing to a “continuing internal collapse of weak states.” It describes the tendency for some central governments to find it increasingly more difficult to maintain power and control as groups object to human rights abuses. The governments will have to either reform or lash out against their populations, which further leads to instability. They argue: “While some disenfranchised sub-state actors will have legitimate grievances, other groups

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will exploit failures by the central government as a justification to seize more power, important resources, or strategic territory.”²⁷ Finally, they summarize their overarching concerns, echoing Kaplan and Rotberg:

As states erode and fail, the danger is not simply the potential for adverse effects at the local level, but more importantly for the United States, what their collapse does to the broader world. Failing states create dangerous, transregional ripples with other, long-term global consequences. For example, non-state actors may acquire and employ chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons in unexpected and unrestrained ways designed to inflict the greatest damage possible against the United States and its allies. Furthermore, the inability of weak states to effectively respond to epidemics may require external intervention in order to contain and prevent the global spread of infectious diseases.²⁸

Despite the negative potential for instability under globalization, this report sees opportunity to revitalize West African nations struggling to find an identity with the Westphalian nation-

state model of centralized national power and arbitrary state-boundaries. The Westphalian system of international order dates to the end of the Thirty Year's War in 1648, when European powers established sovereign nation-states' rights and a system by which external powers did not interfere with the internal affairs of others.²⁹ Each state would determine and control its own institutions and domestic matters.³⁰ The Montevideo Convention of 1933 further clarified what constituted a state by defining it as having "a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and capacity to enter into relations with other states."³¹

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In applying the Westphalian nation-state model in West Africa, foreign powers did not address the unique identities of local populations. The nation-states on the African continent do not represent self-governance and organic organization but rather an artificial creation by European colonialists.³² Globalization, however, may provide the right opportunity for external powers and, more importantly, African people to challenge the status quo. Rather than continually force a system over grassroots efforts, decentralization of rule offers citizens of African nation-states a chance to secure their own destiny and identity. Local governing powers now have an unprecedented opportunity to direct their own fate through globalization.

Decentralization in West Africa

To understand decentralization better, and how it might work in West Africa, this article presents a short comparative analysis between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. In vitalizing African

communities, governments in the 1980s and 1990s began to strategize ways to decentralize control while retaining influence and power. In fact, "Decentralization became one central element of democratization processes, making some refer to [it] as 'democratic decentralization.'"³³ Hagberg highlighted that decentralization has the following four positive effects in West Africa:

1. It changes the politico-administrative stakes in local arenas across West Africa.
2. It recasts the primacy of urbanity and modern education.
3. It attempts to marry legality and legitimacy and has often been interpreted as the return of traditional chieftaincy; it is a political fact that discourses of autochthony, whereby family decent and ethnic belonging are made criteria for defining legitimate political actors, are increasingly ventured in local political arenas
4. It reinvents the local to be able to mobilize it; from a top-down and highly authoritarian State with its colonial legacy, [there is a] process that at least holds promises of a possible change because, despite manipulations, frauds, and deviations, democracy provides the framework for present-day local politics in West Africa.

A closer look at the decentralization within two French West African countries, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, provides insight factors leading to stability vis-à-vis instability (see Figures 2 and 3).

Of the world's developing nations, Mali stands among the lowest in terms of economic vibrancy, industrial capacity, and agricultural productivity. The World Food Programme (WFP) reports: "Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. It ranked 174th out of 177 in 2002, according to United Nations Development

Quick Reference: Mali



Flag



Population: 17,467,108

Size: 1,241,278 Sq. Km

Neighbors: Niger, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso

Capitol City: Bamako

Government: Semi-Presidential Republic

Economy: \$38.09 billion (Purchasing Power Parity) (2016)

GDP Ranking: 118/230 Rankings (2016)

Urbanization: 39.9% of total population (2015)

Military: 2.43% of GDP (2015) military expenditures

Figure 2. Quick Reference Sheet: Mali.

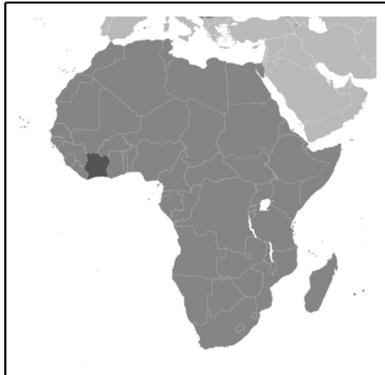
Source: CIA World Factbook.

Programme (UNDP) and is very dependent on external aid, which comprised 15% to 25% of the GDP in the 1990s.” In the same report, experts noted that according to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, “poverty affected close to 64% of the total population in 1998, almost a third of which lived in extreme poverty.”

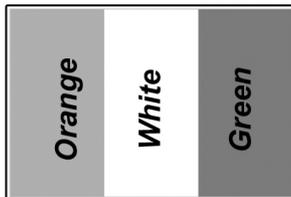
As early as the 1990s, the Mali government attempted ways to implement political decentralization to fight poverty, to support the donor community and foreign aid constituents, and to meet civil society’s demand for the government to undertake a process of

decentralization. “Popular uprisings eventually led the government to adopt laws instituting the creation of three sub-national levels in 1995 and 1996.”³⁴ This political reality allowed the Mali government to delegate the heavy responsibilities of service provision to local authorities while maintaining political power. The Mali government divided its territory into eight regions, forty-nine *cercles* and seven hundred and three communes. Within this framework, the WFP and other organizations found ways to supply aid directly to the most impoverished people. The government supported

Quick Reference: Cote d'Ivoire



Flag



Population: 23,740,424

Size: 322,460 Sq. Km

Neighbors: Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana

Capitol City: Yamoussoukro

Government: Presidential Republic

Economy: \$87.12 billion (Purchasing Power Parity) (2016)

GDP Ranking: 88/230 Rankings (2016)

Urbanization: 54.2% of total population (2015)

Military: 1.47% of GDP (2015) military expenditures

Figure 3. Quick Reference Sheet: Côte d'Ivoire.

Source: CIA World Factbook.

WFP and other non-state actors by establishing two mechanisms for decentralized control:

- A financial mechanism: Pursuant to an agreement with the government, Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales (ANICT), which has a directorate located in Bamako and regional directorates in each region, receives funds from certain partners earmarked for investment in decentralized communities. It asks for a financial contribution of 20 percent from communes on the various investments it manages.
- A technical mechanism: Based in each *cercle*, the Centre de Conseil Communal (CCC) [communal advisory center], is responsible for advisory and technical support to the communes. The CCC is entrusted to a local beneficiary (generally an NGO) established in the *cercle* that knows the development problems of the various communities.³⁵

Decentralization led to an awakening of sorts for the Bambara people of Mali, the national

citizens. Hagberg highlights how the Bambara people responded to the opportunity to direct their destiny through national decentralization. He wrote:

Two main terms in Bambara express power. While the term *mara* refers to the exercise of authority at all levels of society, the term *fanga* implies force, strength. The concept of Decentralization was translated into *mara ka ségi so*, that is, “the power returns home”³⁶

In contrast, Côte d’Ivoire has struggled to implement policies of decentralization, largely due to decades of internal civil unrest, instability, and violent regime change. Following independence from France in 1960s, cocoa production and foreign investment made Cote d’Ivoire one of the most prosperous West African nation-states. The government built nation-state institutions centralized and concentrated in the nation’s capital and completely ignored indigenous rural authorities.³⁷ Few local-level points of access to state power and resources existed. In December 1999, a military coup—the first ever in Cote d’Ivoire’s history—overthrew the government, launching a decade of civil unrest and eventually all-out civil war.

Boone argues that years of a military-style, administrative corps controlled directly from the center resulted in no viably-strong, well-structured, local constituency to emerge.³⁸ She notes that “social fragmentation, economic atomization of households, unstable economic relations among factions in ethnically heterogeneous villages, and the narrow scope of all forms of local political authority” created decentralization policies adopted in name only.³⁹ As such, Côte d’Ivoire’s indigenous rural authorities remained characteristically weak politically and economically.

In the southeast of the country, “commodity production and colonial rule developed in a way that weakened community coherence

and eroded the political and economic hold of indigenous political authorities.”⁴⁰ The practice of land pioneering created new, ethnically-heterogeneous, rural communities that lacked social cohesion and political strength among indigenous rural elites.⁴¹ As such, the post-colonial Côte d’Ivoire government maintained “minimal administrative presence at the local level and provided no institutional footholds or political resources that could have promoted the emergence of new, postcolonial generations of rural leaders.”⁴²

Way Ahead

In recent years, the U.S. intervened in the affairs of weak or corrupt governments posing a security threat to U.S. interests. Examples include Iraq, Syria, and Libya, three “bad” state actors that repeatedly underwent sanctions and other unilateral disciplinary measures. For each, the U.S. adopted a policy of either regime change (as in the case of Hussein’s Regime in Iraq) or support to rebel forces who sought regime change (as in the case of Kaddafi’s Regime in Libya and Assad’s Regime in Syria). The pattern of military intervention to support regime change that results in a failed state and further security threats in the region or to U.S. interests around the world is a model that must cease (see Figure 4).

The U.S. cannot wait for Boko Haram or some other transnational terrorist or criminal organization to seize power within a weak West African nation-state, materializing a military security threat to the U.S., before repeating the same bad model.

The frailty to the Westphalian model of statehood in West Africa necessitates that U.S. assistance strengthens weak governments using globalization and decentralization policies focused on the “good” sub-state and non-state actors in West Africa (see Figure 5).

This process will require work to balance empowering sub-state and non-state actors

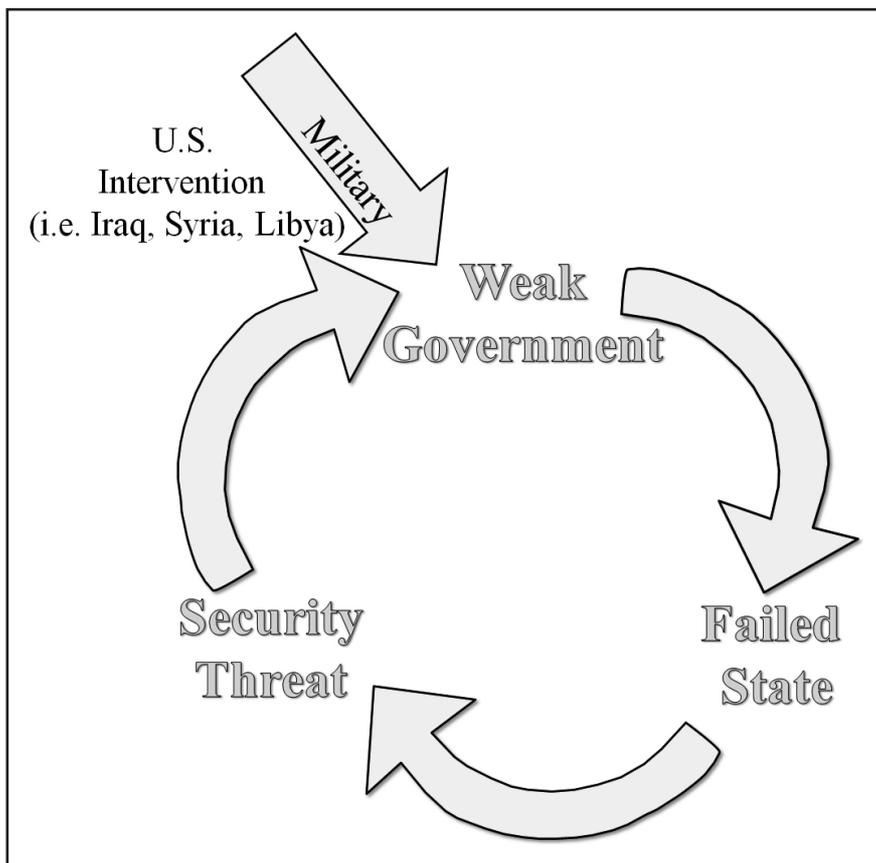


Figure 4. Military Intervention and Nation-State Failure: A Failed Model.
Source: Created by the authors.

and maintaining functioning and responsive central governments. To do so, the U.S. will need to condition assistance to these actors on their support for interacting with their central governments in peaceful and non-violent ways.

Simultaneously, the U.S. should acknowledge the role of large IGOs, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Originally established as the Organization of African Unity in 1963 to address political discord, the AU's revitalized purpose under globalization and decentralization is to focus on peace, unity, and broadened goals to incorporate economic and political integration within the African continent. The AU integrates executive, legislative, and judiciary components, in addition to advisory and financial bodies. Likewise,

the ECOWAS remains a pivotal role player in promoting economic integration within the fifteen regional states of West Africa.⁴³

By providing opportunities to benefit local institutions working within the rule of law, U.S. assistance may establish norms that hold central governments accountable. What is certain is that the old model of U.S. military intervention to prevent weak governments from becoming failed governments and a regional—or even international—security threat no longer remains a viable option. The U.S. will need to offer support to a broad range of activities that benefit more than one state to spread benefits across borders. This policy will create opportunities to establish frameworks for multinational communication, coordination, and cooperation as nations work together to ensure access to benefits common

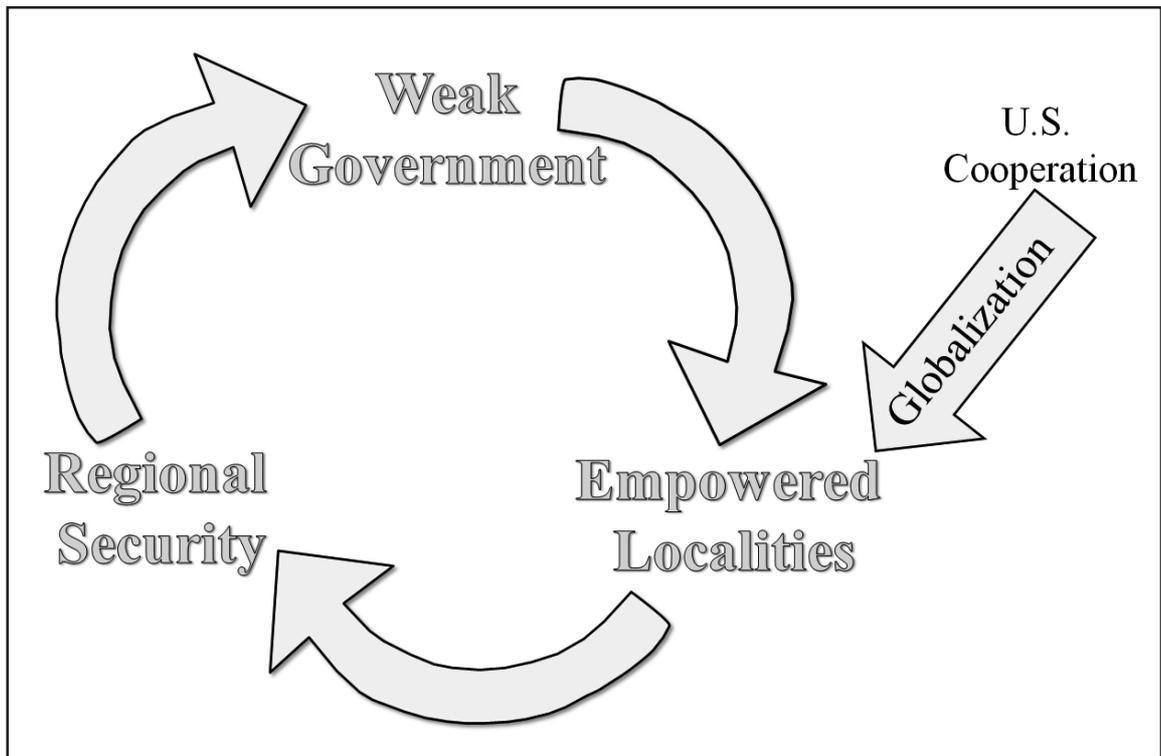


Figure 5. Cooperation Through Globalization: A New Approach.

Source: Created by the authors.

to all and is possible through empowering local non-state actors that may serve as impartial mediators in West African disputes.

The U.S. should look to strengthen non-state actors that have significant and constructive involvement in the region, specifically in the ECOWAS. The U.S. may work with these non-state actors in economic initiatives similar to the Trade Africa program established with states in East Africa by the Obama Administration.⁴⁴ Under Trade Africa, the U.S. seeks to increase trade between the region and the U.S., improve regional integration, and foster economic competitiveness.⁴⁵ A similar initiative focused on West Africa may also assist in building a broader economic base, increasing economic opportunities, and helping the local populations to improve their standards of living. This is certain to strengthen the ECOWAS's ability to impact the political decision-making of member states. By tying increased trade to

other important objectives, such as the rule of law and democracy promotion, the ECOWAS may provide another partner to pressure member states to perform so they may continue to benefit from the economic opportunities provided.

This approach may strengthen central governments as it allows pre-existing institutions a voice but also inputs into the development of the institutions governing the nation. By providing platforms in West African nations that access information centers, such as universities in other nations, the U.S. sets conditions to better educate greater numbers of West Africans. The U.S. may also use this as an opportunity to support brick-and-mortar, secondary-educational institutions in West Africa as centers of learning for the region. Founding advanced educational institutions in West Africa will create a foundation of educated individuals able to work the institutions necessary for the functioning of these states.

Globalization offers opportunities for potential solutions to help reform the current international system in West Africa through empowering traditional and organic power structures to bolster weak central governments. The decentralization of power created by globalization provides opportunities for these power structures to leverage their legitimacy with their people in greater ways than before. To enable them to do so while also supporting their central governments, however, will require reform. In doing so, reforms should acknowledge and address differences between groups to mitigate conflict. Reforms should seek sustainable approaches to economic development to prevent dependencies emerging, setting the conditions for another collapse. Increasing access to information may also allow for innovations to the educational systems in many West African nations.

As suggested by Figure 5, the U.S. and other world powers may find viable partners within local power centers below the state, enhanced and empowered through decentralization of power and globalization. Because of the inherent cultural power these entities have, the U.S. should work with these local leaders to help manifest the characteristics found in other civil institutions. Working with these entities may create conditions for more representative institutions and greater democracy within West African states, directly supporting overall regional and global security. **IAJ**

NOTES

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