

Fixing a Hole: Contemporary Security Issues in Africa

by Zachary Hadley

In the twenty-first century, complex and dynamic challenges within Africa are often borderless. With the ability to scale exponentially, localized conflicts can quickly destabilize regions. Since the early 2000s, scholarly efforts to explicate transnational challenges has led to a growing body of literature dedicated to the African continent. While promising, the corpora of secondary literatures often lack conceptual rigor and depth—requiring students, researchers, and scholars to thread coherent narratives across diverse sets of government records, media reports, and firsthand accounts.

Contemporary Security Issues in Africa by William A. Taylor attempts to fill this void by serving as a primer for students, researchers, and policymakers on Sub-Saharan Africa. Spanning three decades across 16 case studies, the work aims to “Explore the nexus of culture, politics and security at the national, regional and international level.”¹ Taylor contends that this is necessary to parse out the roots of the continent’s growing relevance in global affairs. To accomplish this goal in a 241-page volume requires a Herculean effort. The resulting contribution is promising in terms of both scope and depth.

Within a framework of eight broad categories, the case studies explore state fragility, ethno-religious conflict, food insecurity, violent extremism, maritime piracy, and extreme poverty as the primary drivers of regional insecurity. Methodologically, the research design is perhaps constrained by the lack of a structured case comparison. As a result, the work does not clearly advance a central thesis. A disciplined case selection could anchor the empirical evidence to an implicit assumption that addressing Africa’s transnational threats are crucial to international security.

Absent a baseline conceptual model, readers are required to infer regional implications from myriad facts, figures, and timelines. They must also assume that the evidence presented is most germane to the case studies at hand. The upshot is that the results do not support a set of conditions

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valid across contingent cases. How do historical facts inform solutions to future challenges? Emerging transnational threats require new models, focused on enabling the African Union, regional economic communities, and foreign partners to circumvent pitfalls on the path to cooperation.²

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Categorical Imperatives: Defining Transnational Security

Since Aristotle's *Organon*, humankind has systematized observable phenomena in order to make sense of the physical world. To accomplish this task, we employ concepts—tools to apprehend the world around us. Facts distilled through concepts provide meaning. To define transnationalism, we must categorize its features. In a literal sense, transnational threats emerge in one territory and spill over into another. However, recent technological advancements provide new pathways to contagion across multiple spectrums including cyber, financial, trade, and environmental sectors. Domestic threats can emerge from outside immediate regions. It is worth considering global institutions, foreign state, and non-state actors, which also foment regional unrest.

Recognizing that a degree of simplification is always necessary, any research project must address the key metric of measure validity. Broad categorization can obscure meaningful distinctions across cases. An explanation for framing the case studies against these eight categories would be beneficial. A canvas of relevant literature highlights tenuous political alliances, ethno-religious violence, weak institutions, and socio-economic conditions as key factors of insecurity. Domestic, regional, and geopolitical dimensions are all equally plausible. Yet, competing explanations are unreconciled.

The Case Studies

The introductory cases explore “ungoverned spaces” within the Central African Republic and Mali as primary drivers of insecurity. Defined as “...the absence of central government control over a region and its people and challenges to the state’s authority by one or more groups,”³ the concept of ungoverned spaces provides a thread traceable throughout subsequent chapters.

State fragility is a source through which “neighborhood effects” flow. Yet, a survey of relevant literature reveals a lack of consensus on the definition, making measurement difficult. Political violence and a lack of basic services are two common features of fragile states.⁴ In the absence of credible institutions, ungoverned spaces become sanctuaries for transnational threats. Economic development, credible security, and political stability are essential to asserting state authority.⁵ Yet, the first case studies frame instability in terms of political corruption only.

In 1991, Mali successfully transitioned to a democracy following the end of the Traoré regime. The country soon became a major recipient of foreign aid from international organizations and bilateral partners. Since the late 1990s, Mali received an estimated \$1.8 billion in U.S. foreign aid alone. Yet, the inflow of aid papered over what were fundamentally weak and decentralized institutions incapable of responding to crises. In 2012, Mali experienced a renewed Tuareg rebellion in the north and a successful military coup in the capital of Bamako. By 2013, a growing insurgency fueled by elements of Al-Qaeda in Maghreb and Ansar Dine effectively controlled its remote northern regions. Figure 1 compares Mali and the Central African Republic’s corruption scores to their regional neighbors.

The results suggest that the levels of corruption in both Mali and the Central African Republic track the median values for their

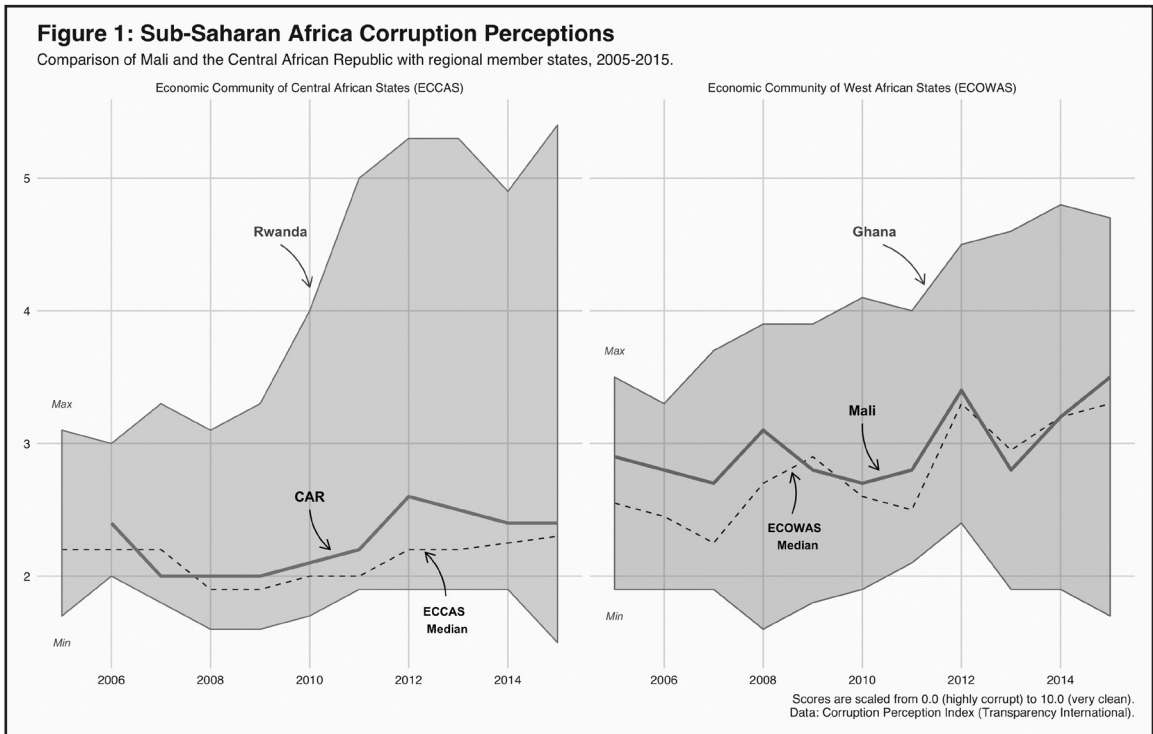


Figure 1. Sub-Saharan Africa Corruption Perceptions.
Comparison of Mali and the Central African Republic with regional member states, 2005-2015.

respective regional economic communities. Accounting for outliers including Rwanda and Ghana, which have made significant strides in promoting government transparency, the majority of Central and West African states remain mired in corruption. Clearly then, corruption alone cannot account for the dramatic reversal in Mali’s fortunes. Equally plausible, a vicious circle of poor governance, moribund economies and weak security apparatus were key factors in undermining security across the Sahel region. Although corruption can undermine public trust in domestic institutions and fracture national unity, greater context is required. A tendency to focus on corruption perhaps belies the multiple challenges facing Mali and the Central African Republic.

The absence of discussion on growing Russian involvement in the Central African Republic is a missed opportunity to anchor regional challenges to international security. At the recent 2019 Russia-Africa Summit,

Central African President Faustin-Archange Touadéra requested that the Russian government “intervene” politically to overturn international arms embargos on the country.⁶ Between 2014 and 2018, Africa received 17 percent of all major Russian weapon exports—second only to Asia. Evidence of private military contractors across Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates a significant renewal of Russian strategic interests in the region. Russia will seek to leverage its economic and political ties in the absence of sustained Western engagement.

The United States must encourage good governance and accountability while strengthening regional security institutions. Sub-Saharan Africa represents one of the few regions where new opportunities for partnerships and cooperation are still possible. At the same time, the United States must find ways to impose costs on its near-peer competitors while mitigating collateral damage to its African partners. The balancing act will become a defining challenge

for the United States during the next global power competition. Relationships still matter.

A case study on the Lord's Resistance Army highlights the ethno-religious dimension to security. What began as a Ugandan rebel group in the 1990s soon metastasized into a violent extremist organization responsible for widespread human rights violations throughout the Great Lakes region.⁷ Curiously, however, the case studies do not anchor ethno-religious conflict to the early discussion of corruption and state fragility. Examples abound where political leaders have exploited the patchwork of ethnic and religious demographics for ballot-box advantages with predictably violent outcomes. The complex interplay of socio-economic and tribal dimensions within the Great Lakes region provides fertile ground for insecurity. Can we extrapolate the case study insights to other regions?

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The work turns towards a discussion of the “resource curse” theory, which argues that developing states with significant natural resources are often plagued by instability and corruption. In particular, the work highlights predatory lending and resource extraction in Angola. As foreign direct investment lags, China's willingness to provide loans and investment has proven difficult for many African states to resist. However, the growing perception that such deals represent significant debt traps for African states may present an opportunity for investment alternatives. The United States can display the flag without a military uniform.

Case studies on Malawi and Ethiopia explore linkages between food insecurity, poverty and

conflict. Defined by food availability, access, stability and utilization, food insecurity affects the lives of nearly 257 million individuals within Africa.⁸ Despite years of improvement, recent declines in annual food production have been exacerbated by climate change and poverty. Malawi's population growth rate is double that of its food production, requiring significant levels of importation—particularly during the dry season. Its urban-rural divide further affects economic development due to the lack of infrastructure, basic social services and employment opportunities in many rural communities.⁹

The relationship between food security, poverty, and conflict is well-represented within security studies literature, if poorly tested. Until recently, the lack of empirical evidence and concerns for endogeneity have made it difficult to establish causal relationships. For example, we have observed conditions where food insecurity has triggered social unrest in Malawi.¹⁰ Conversely, conflict has also fueled food insecurity in Ethiopia.¹¹ A vicious circle of food insecurity, poverty, and conflict emerges. Across the case studies, bi-directional relationships between socio-economic conditions create durable challenges to regional security. A theoretical framework to unpack the underlying linkages remains absent.

Implications for International Security

The final chapters highlight geopolitical implications for Africa in terms of the emerging multipolar system. The work contends that U.S. interests grew in earnest upon the creation of U.S. Africa Command in 2007. In effect, this has led to the militarization of U.S. foreign policy in Africa. “The United States has amplified relations with Africa over the past three decades, most visibly with the creation in 2007 of U.S. Africa Command.”¹²

Although U.S. military presence has

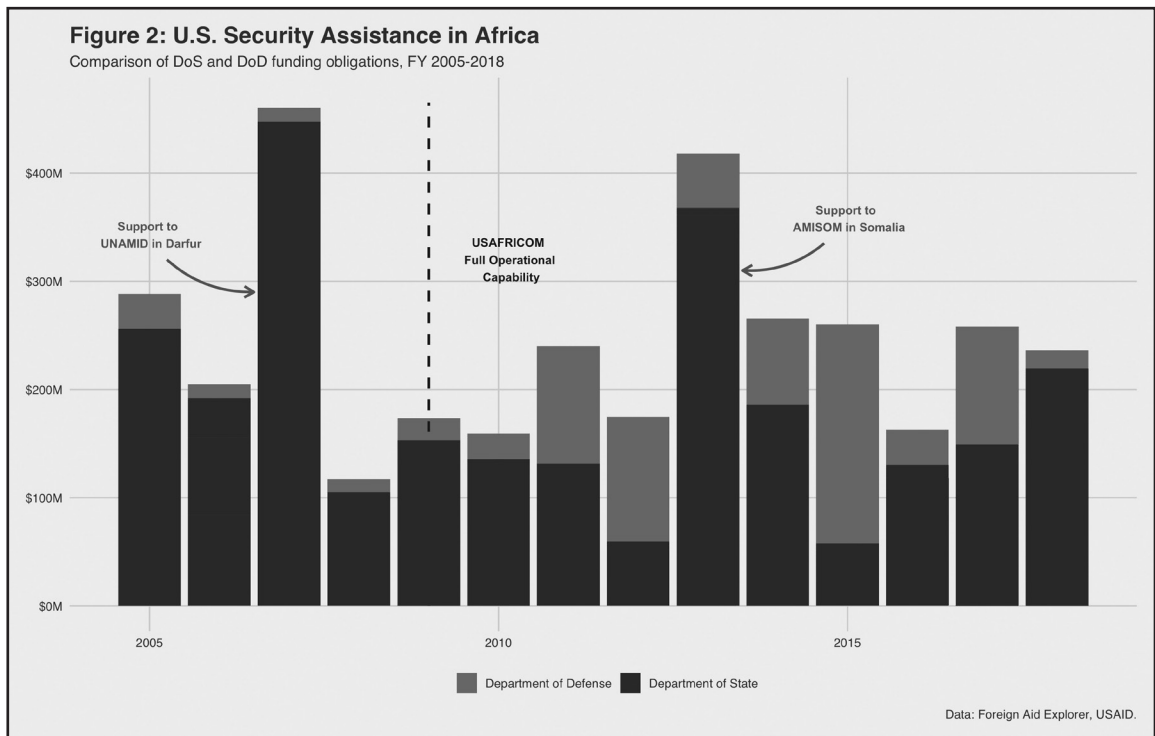


Figure 2. U.S. Security Assistance in Africa. Comparison of Department of State and Department of Defense funding obligations FY2005-18.

increased during the past two decades, it is unclear if this has unbalanced U.S. foreign policy. Traditionally, foreign policy is thought to derive its power from a trifecta of statecraft tools including diplomacy, persuasion, and coercive force.¹³ How can we test the militarization claim? An expedient approach might look for evidence of “mission creep” where Department of Defense security assistance has duplicated State Department efforts. Figure 2 compares U.S. security assistance within Sub-Saharan Africa since 2005.

Although the methodology employed is only exploratory, the data highlights meaningful trends. A cursory inspection of U.S. security assistance funding suggests that the militarization of U.S. foreign policy *vis-à-vis* U.S. Africa Command is likely specious. As evidenced by recent peacekeeping missions in Sudan and Somalia, State Department funding has traditionally outweighed other forms of security assistance to Africa. We observe that

Department of Defense funding obligations increased following the establishment of U.S. Africa Command, but overall security assistance levels remained between \$150 and \$250 million annually. Regardless, it is difficult to parse evidence of “mission creep” through funding and appropriations alone.

The Global Train and Equip program, which helps foreign partners strengthen their security capacity, accounted for approximately \$768 million of reported Department of Defense obligations to Sub-Saharan Africa from 2010 to 2018. Compared to U.S. economic assistance, which obligated \$11.4 billion in 2018 alone, U.S. Africa Command provides an economy of force footprint with potential long-term strategic advantages in terms of the global power competition. Further analysis of military deployments, interagency coordination, and funding authorities is warranted.¹⁴ I have included a link to my replication code and data sets in the end notes.¹⁵

The focus on U.S. security assistance provides a clear contrast to China's economic engagement with Africa. Sino-Africa relations are "one of the most critical developments in international affairs" during the past decade.¹⁶ Sino-African relations have varied according to economic conditions within each region during the past three decades. Seeking to improve its terms of trade, China balances its needs for raw materials with the export of surplus labor and commodities to African markets. Financial and economic linkages are conditions based—but not according to democratic norms or mores. Business first and politics later still holds mostly true. Whereas the United States has often conditioned aid on democratic commitments, China leverages its economic power to extract natural resources for trade and investment.

China's strategic objective to upend the existing global order will require broad African political support to achieve in international organizations.

During the past two decades, China has become a top peacekeeping contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations with 80 percent of its troops deployed to Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite escalating violence towards peacekeepers in South Sudan and Mali, China continues to bolster its boots-on-ground presence within Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, Chinese peacekeeping contributions averaged more than 2,500 uniformed personnel annually. As of 2019, China is the second largest contributor to the United Nations peacekeeping budget (15.2 percent)—second only to the United States (27.8 percent).¹⁷

China's strategic interests in the Gulf of Aden led to the establishment of its first naval base in Djibouti in 2017. As an entry point to East Africa, the base supports China's power projection and soft power diplomacy goals.¹⁸

However, strengthening its military ties may force compromises on its traditional preference for ideological neutrality in Africa. China's strategic objective to upend the existing global order will require broad African political support to achieve in international organizations. The center of gravity for the maritime expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative to the Mediterranean lies through East Africa.¹⁹

Notably absent from the preceding canvas is a discussion of the roles of the United Nations, the African Union, and the regional economic communities. In 2016, the African Union published the *African Peace and Security Architecture 2016 Roadmap*. It was the first attempt by the regional body to define a strategic vision for addressing Africa's peace and security challenges. It provides measurable objectives to meet its ambitious targets laid out in *Agenda 2063*. Likewise, regional efforts to address insecurity have led to recent deployments in Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia. The African Union's Continental Early Warning System, operationalized in 2009, has made incremental progress towards increasing collaboration among member states, international organizations, and nongovernment organizations to prevent future conflict. However, policy harmonization, political will, and resource constraints remain significant impediments to future progress.

Fixing a Hole: Final Thoughts

The work correctly identifies many of Africa's regional security challenges. However, the tacit assumption that the symptoms are causal leaves the substratum of political, socio-economic, and institutional variables intact. The reality is more complicated. A transnational security model that provides a conceptual framework to untangle these complexities is required. Future scholarly contributions must take up that effort.

The work offers a broad overview of

emerging security challenges on the African continent, but does not explore the causal linkages between them. This is not without value, but the potential market will remain niche. While students may reap benefits from a one-source encyclopedia as such compiled, it is likely that researchers require a more robust theoretical framework for exploring the underlying issues. Regardless, the author's effort to address a clear gap in the African security literature is both admirable and critically required.

Where there are challenges, there are opportunities. U.S. foreign policy requires a whole-of-government approach to integrate agency efforts in the promotion of good governance, regional security, and economic investment. International and regional partnerships that leverage comparative advantages limit the duplication of efforts. Targeted security assistance will support the implementation of the African Union's strategic security objectives. U.S. interagency efforts that promote policy harmonization and subsidiarity at the member state, regional, and institutional levels provide purpose and direction. Bridging the gap between political will and *action* is key. "African solutions to African problems" are achievable, if at present, aspirational. **IAJ**

Notes:

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