"SECURITY IS LIKE OXYGEN"

A Regional Security Mechanism for West Africa

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Since the end of the Cold War, the geostrategic significance of Africa to the United States has markedly declined, resulting in the treatment of Africa as a "backwater" in official U.S. policy making in recent years.[1] The derogation of African issues in U.S. foreign relations became evident as early as 1989, when war broke out in Liberia, a country hitherto regarded as having a long-standing special relationship with the United States.[2] But Africa's, even Liberia's, low priority in the dawning era failed to draw U.S. military intervention "to nip the civil war in the bud."[3] This prompted the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to form and insert an ad hoc military force—the ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group, or ECOMOG—into Liberia in 1990.[4] Initially designed for a brief operation in Liberia, ECOMOG has since deployed in two other states as well, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone. Given the current chaotic, even hopeless, situation in Sierra Leone, and the less serious but still nebulous state of affairs in Liberia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau, subregional leaders have been under pressure to transform ECOMOG into a permanent regional force within a general ECOWAS security framework.[5] To give effect to that dream, in October 1998 the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States and Governments endorsed the establishment of a collective security regime known as the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security. (In this article, "West African subregion" refers, unless otherwise specified, to the ECOWAS community of nations.)

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Though some outside observers see these regional initiatives as offering opportunities for African countries and their external partners, the new security arrangement poses many challenges. The West African subregion may not yet have the political, military, or economic means to accomplish the strategic objectives it has set for itself.[6] In fact, this is a tall order; to imagine that ECOWAS can shoulder the burden alone would be a strategic miscalculation. If the security mechanism is to take off at all, let alone have any real chance of success, external support from the United States and other Western countries is crucial. Therefore, the United States and the international community may have to rethink their policies, reorienting them toward Africa in a way that reflects the current security dynamics in the region.

Gambia

This article begins by defining the concept of security within the context of the volatile African environment. It then offers insight into the framework of the ECOWAS security architecture, as envisaged by its current leaders. Against the background of the political, socioeconomic, and military realities in the subregion, the article makes a case for strong external support to help bring about the desired dividends of the security mechanism.

Any critical analysis of the security paradigm in Africa requires a firm grasp of the unique African concept of security. For Africans, "emancipation is the freeing of the people (as individuals and groups) from the physical and human constraints which stop them [from] carrying out what they would freely choose to do. . . . Security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security. Emancipation, theoretically, is security."[7]

Thus, African security encompasses the whole range of dimensions of a state's existence, including some that are already assured in developed countries. Generally, but especially in some states, such issues as internal disorder, the danger of food shortages, human-rights abuses, unequal opportunity, tribal imbalance in government and military institutions, insufficient social development, economic dislocation, colonial and neocolonial cleavages (mind-sets), and threats to freedom of speech constitute security problems in Africa.

ECOWAS AND THE SECURITY FRAMEWORK

Founded in 1975 as a forum for economic promotion and development, social and cultural matters, and the general progress of the continent, ECOWAS has emerged from the Liberian civil war as Africa's foremost economic, political, and security grouping.[8] ECOWAS adopted security-related protocols in 1978 and 1981, but none had been implemented at the time of the Liberian conflict.[9]

Thus, the conflict served as a wake-up call for the community to fashion its own security agenda. This conflict threatens the stability of the subregion—it has spilled over to neighboring Sierra Leone, and it poses serious threats of rebel attacks at the borders of Guinea.[10] Guinea-Bissau's recent political turbulence may also be linked to the war. It was, then, to contain and manage the current crisis, and to build a degree of security and confidence in the subregion, that ECOWAS endorsed a new security mechanism for West Africa.

The security system is to have as its highest decision-making body a Mediation and Security Council.[11] The council may convene "as often as necessary" in the performance of its five primary functions: authorizing political as well as military interventions; determining mandates and terms of reference for such interventions; reviewing such determinations periodically; appointing such authorities as the special representative of the executive secretary and the force commander, upon the executive secretary's recommendation; and informing the United Nations and Organization of African Unity of its decisions.[12]

The council will operate through three committees. The Committee of Ambassadors will meet regularly and submit reports on regional peace and security issues to all council members, as well as affected states. Secondly, the Committee of Foreign Ministers, Defense, and Internal Affairs has the mandate to discuss the general political and security situation quarterly, or more frequently as necessary, and report to the council's third committee, the Committee of Heads of State.[13] In a provision characteristic of African organizations, an appointed Council of Elders would arbitrate, reconcile, and mediate during conflict.[14] The executive secretary will maintain a database of qualified and competent individuals who can serve on the Council of Elders. The executive secretary individually has been given an especially important role in conflict prevention and management—even to the point, innovatively, of deploying fact-finding and mediation missions on his or her own initiative. (The secretary will, however, be required to report any findings to the Mediation and Security Council.)[15]

Ghana

Another major innovation is a subregional Peace Observation System to provide ECOWAS early warning, and thereby opportunities for early action, to help the organization prevent situations from degenerating into violent crises.[16] The idea emerged from the caucus of French-speaking African states that opposed and frustrated ECOMOG activities in the early 1990s;[17] apparently there has been a change of heart and attitude among the francophone states—a cause for cautious optimism.

At the operational level, it is envisaged that a brigade-sized formation, to be called the ECOWAS Peace Monitoring Group (ECOMOG, as before), would

be set up as a permanent peacekeeping force.[18] This "bank of rapid reaction force" (that is, a reserve of rapid-reaction capability) will comprise contingents from member states—earmarked, trained together, and organized for deployment at short notice.[19] Of course, to train a force of this size will require a sizable and reliable logistical capability. As would be expected in an army-dominated organization, the organizers seem to have been oblivious to the invaluable role played by naval and air forces in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and to their future utility. This is a grave omission; naval forces from Nigeria and Ghana have been organic to ECOMOG since its inception and have proved themselves indispensable.[20]

Patterned to some extent after the Nato security structure, this collective-security mechanism will require enormous amounts of administrative support (staff and offices), logistics, military resources, and funding, all of which would be difficult to obtain from Africa. Funding from the international community will therefore be crucial to this security project. However, to show its commitment, ECOWAS has proposed a community levy to fund its activities: each member state would be assessed 0.5 percent of the value of its imports from outside the subregion.[21] The levy's main rationale is easing the financial burden that contributing states would face during military operations.[22]

U.S. POLICY TOWARD AFRICA

A prominent Western analyst has argued, "Africa is poorly understood by U.S. policymakers, [who] completely ignore the continent until some sort of politico-military crisis grabs their attention."[23] This encapsulates the nature of the attention that African issues have received from the United States, and from its major partners as well, in recent years. U.S. engagement in Africa lacks clarity and sense of purpose. Indeed, ever since the Berlin Wall came down it has been axiomatic for the United States, its Western allies, and the international community to pursue African policies that merely respond to crises rather than attempt to shape desirable outcomes.

Consequently, the amount of U.S. assistance to Africa has declined dramatically. From fiscal year 1985 to 1994, military assistance declined from $279.2 million to $3.8 million, and economic support funding from $452 million to fifteen million.[24] For the same period, the total aid flow to Africa declined from roughly 10.3 percent ($1.87 billion) of an overall foreign-aid budget of $18.13 billion in fiscal 1985 to 7.6 percent ($1.36 billion) of $17.99 billion spent on foreign aid in fiscal 1994. This trend continued through the Clinton administration, which restructured the aid package according to four new general categories: sustainable development, humanitarian assistance, building democracy, and promoting peace.

However, the emphasis placed on democratic and economic development tends to exclude security factors, which are not only of vital importance to Africans but critical to their survival in the twenty-first century.[25] As Joseph Nye has put the point, "Security is like oxygen—you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs there is nothing else that you think about."[26] Regrettably, such oxygen is ever in short supply in West Africa. To make even a start at reversing this trend, ECOWAS, in cooperation with external players, needs to optimize all the major components of state making. The three main components with respect to security—political, socioeconomic, and military—are so linked, interdependent, and intertwined that they can be regarded as a "trinity": a weakening of one part drags them all down (although the triad is not a zero-sum game—increasing the importance of one factor does not decrement that of the others). It is no accident that more than three decades ago, Robert McNamara (who had just left office as the U.S. secretary of defense) expressed similar sentiments about security in developing nations: "As development progresses, [and] security progresses[,] . . . [the people's] resistance to disorder and violence will enormously increase."[27]

ENGAGING THE UNITED STATES

The essential threats to the viability of third-world states today have been described in a vivid fashion:

> The most important . . . are the lack of internal cohesion, in terms of both great economic and social disparities and major ethnic and regional fissures; lack of unconditional legitimacy of state boundaries, state institutions, and governing elite; easy susceptibility to internal and interstate conflicts; distorted and dependent development, both economically and socially; marginalization, especially in relation to dominant international security and economic concerns; and easy permeability by external actors, be they more developed states, international institutions, or transnational corporations.[28]

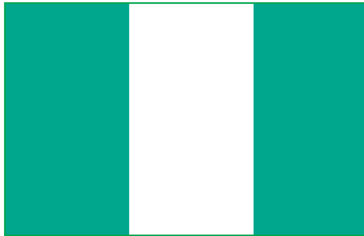
This indeed is the predicament of West African states.[29] Many factors contribute to this situation, which is characteristic of nearly all the countries in the ECOWAS group.

The Political Factor: Statecraft in Africa

One set of problems includes the incomplete stage of state making at which these nations find themselves; another involves the timing of their entry into an established international system. A third concerns their collective colonial heritage: "Rather than encourage integration, the colonial administrators fostered fragmented loyalties and ethnic particularism as part of their mechanism for ensuring effective control of these colonies." [30] Together, these three kinds of

problems have produced African states that are weak, vulnerable, and insecure. Many ECOWAS members have therefore become candidates for "failed state" status, which has already claimed Sierra Leone and Liberia.[31]

The United States and other international donor countries have for the past two decades invested in what they perceive as viable West African democratic institutions, but the subregion still remains politically volatile.[32] Nevertheless, in spite of this goodwill, a contradiction exists in U.S. policy making: "African countries, even if they do adopt political reforms, are unlikely to receive greater amounts of resources from a shrinking foreign aid budget."[33] Since recipient nations possess weak economies and no credible military might, the least armed resistance by a disgruntled politician or soldier causes their fragile political institutions to tumble.


Nigeria

Socioeconomic Considerations

Current statistics on the economic performance of sub-Saharan Africa reveal a dire situation, one that has the potential to degrade even further. The debt burden remains insurmountable and unsustainable. The region's external debt in the 1990s averaged U.S. $204 billion, a per capita external debt of $359 for its estimated population of about 628 million (1998).[34] External debt payments, which for Africa as a whole peaked at thirty-three billion dollars in 1997 (eight billion more than in 1995) represent more than 17 percent of the continent's earnings from exports.[35] The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, observes that "this reflects a catastrophic fall in personal incomes on a scale seen by no other region since the Great Depression of the 1930s."[36] Perhaps it is time for Africa to have its own Marshall Plan.[37]

Whilst this could be a long-term goal, the short and medium-term economic-aid objectives of the United States, other donor states, and international institutions need be synchronized and focused on specific critical areas. To that end, ECOWAS should be assisted to pursue and sustain collective prosperity through feasible economic reforms, macroeconomic coordination, and free-market practices.[38] This would give ECOWAS a fair chance of survival as an economic entity, with a reasonable prospect of achieving the ambitious security architecture it has proposed for itself.

Military Power

The current military capabilities of the ECOWAS member states are inadequate to counter contemporary challenges and threats in the subregion. Even Nigeria, the subregional power, has struggled to maintain its presence in Liberia/Sierra Leone. As retired commodore Olutunde Oladimeji of the Nigerian Navy has

observed, "Nigeria has been operating with inadequate equipment [and] . . . budgets and [under] logistics constraints."[39] For this reason the new security mechanism envisages the pooling together of military strengths, in the form of an ECOMOG standing force that will be trained, equipped, and prepared to intervene in crisis areas. To this end, assistance in the form of equipment, funding, and training from the United States and other Western allies is critical. It would also be encouraging to see Nato initiate a dialogue with ECOWAS to share its invaluable experience in institutional arrangements and assist where necessary with equipment, military accoutrements, and technical cooperation.

Already, cooperative security arrangements exist between certain members of Nato and some of the ECOWAS states. The United States has initiated an African Crisis Response Force, training personnel in selected countries so that indigenous forces can deploy into crisis areas.[40] Also, in 1996 ECOMOG enjoyed some $30.4 million in assistance from the United States.[41] Britain and France are also pursuing similar but parallel initiatives in the region. It would be prudent to coordinate and synchronize all these efforts, if their full potentials are to be realized. This is very important, because, as one unofficial but authoritative study of U.S. government policy states, "unilateral U.S. peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations in Africa are not anticipated."[42]

WHY SHOULD AMERICA BOTHER?

It has been argued that for the United States, allowing African peace forces to resolve regional conflicts would be both a "load-decreas[ing]" and a "dollar-saving" opportunity.[43] Therefore, investing in an indigenous rapid reaction force in Africa will reduce significantly the demands upon American forces for intervention in Africa, and therefore, in due course, upon its operating budget.

Moreover, the current U.S. "low-priority," risk-averse policy on Africa may ignore longer-term risks to its existing "investment." During the early 1990s, for instance, the U.S. failure to intervene in Liberia (where more than 150,000 citizens were slaughtered) did not spare America the loss of facilities worth an estimated four hundred million dollars.[44]

There is also a significant moral and cultural impetus for the United States to rethink its African policy. It is currently estimated that more than thirty million members (12 percent) of the population of the United States claim African-American heritage.[45] These historical and cultural ties should be translated into viable political, economic, and military relationships in the new millennium. It will be interesting to watch whether the new American secretary of state, Colin Powell, allows Africa to be all but ignored in U.S. foreign policy.

Last but not least, Africa has over five hundred million people, as well as untapped natural resources. It is in the interest of the United States "to support

and preserve American values of freedom, individual rights, the rule of law, democratic institutions, and the principles of constitutional liberalism"[46] in the ECOWAS subregion. Regarding military aid, Washington has the "ability to influence African militaries to demobilize or downsize, reform and professionalize themselves, and engage more effectively in legitimate security and peacekeeping missions."[47]

In his 1998 report on Africa, the UN Secretary-General restated, in effect, Robert McNamara's 1968 observation (quoted above) on the relationships among development, security, and stability: "Peace and development," Kofi Annan declared, "remain inextricably linked—one feeding on the other, enabling the other and securing the other."[48] Development has eluded Africans for far too long, as a result of nearly permanent economic crisis; it is not hard to fathom the reason why peace has also proven to be elusive.

To address the threats to security in West Africa, ECOWAS envisages a Nato-type security organization that would have an overarching responsibility for the security of the subregion. This is an ambitious but important security mechanism; however, inadequate military resources, fragile political institutions, and weak economies forebode great difficulty in getting started. Increased assistance from the United States, other nations and international organizations, and private institutions, properly coordinated and synchronized with respect to the desired "end state," should be pursued in the new millennium. In West Africa, the three factors of development, stability, and security are so inextricably linked as to defy piecemeal solutions. A holistic and comprehensive approach—one that engages the trinity of security development—is the key to unlocking the subregion's security dilemma. In such a way, "the international community could help not only to support African governments and peoples, but also rekindle a sense of common purpose and shared humanity essential for planetary survival."[49]

NOTES

1. See Institute for National Strategic Studies [INSS], *Strategic Assessment 1995: U.S. Security Challenges in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ., 1995), p. 101. U.S. interests in and around the continent included, inter alia: protection of sea lines of communications, fending off real or imagined Soviet plans to capture Africa's strategic minerals, prying out Cuban surrogates, and preventing the establishment of Soviet bases and listening posts. See also Peter J. Schraeder, "Removing the Shackles: U.S. Foreign Policy toward Africa after the End of the Cold War," in *Africa in the New International Order,* ed. Edmond J. Keller and Donald Rothchild (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996), p. 188. Perhaps only South Africa now plays any role in the international and geostrategic

calculations of the United States regarding sub-Saharan Africa.

2. See INSS, *Strategic Assessment 1997: Flashpoints and Force Structure* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ., 1997), p. 164.
3. Ibid.
4. Initially composed of contingents from Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Gambia.
5. Another reason for the establishment of the security mechanism was the tepid response of the United States and the United Nations to African crises.
6. See Eric G. Berman and Katie E. Sams, *Peacekeeping in Africa: Capabilities and Culpabilities* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000), p. 379. These authors argue that African countries largely possess the troops and the will to intervene, but not the material means.
7. See M. Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 10.
8. Berman and Sams, p. 79. The problems may be traced to several factors, including anglophone-francophone rivalry and suspicion that Nigeria harbors hegemonic ambitions.
9. Protocol on Non-Aggression, 1978; and Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance on Defense, 1981; and Berman and Sams, p. 82. Neither the Defense Council nor Defense Commission was established, and no member state earmarked forces for the allied armed forces of the community.
10. Sierra Leone's conflict has defied solution, rendering the country ungovernable. It is now a failed state.
11. The council will consist of nine members, to be elected for two-year terms. All decisions will require two-thirds majorities.
12. Berman and Sams, p. 141.
13. The Committee of Foreign Ministers, Defense, and Internal Affairs will comprise chiefs of staff, police chiefs, experts from ministries of foreign affairs, and representatives of immigration and customs services, border guards, and narcotics agencies. Its main function is to provide technical advice to the council. The Committee of Heads of State consists of the nine leaders of the member states of the council; it is to meet at least twice a year to deliberate on reports submitted to it.
14. The inclusion of the Council of Elders reflects a distinctive African value, whereby community elders are held in high esteem; they are the "reservoir of wisdom and knowledge" in dealing with difficult and sensitive matters.
15. Berman and Sams, p. 142.
16. This network would assess peace and security issues, including environmental, political, and social indicators. The subregion would be divided into three main zones: Ouagadougou (the capital of Burkina Faso), Monrovia (capital of Liberia), and Cotonou (in Benin).
17. For more information about the anglophone and francophone rivalry, see T. A. Imobighe, "Security in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Security of the Third World Countries,* ed. Jasjit Singh and Thomas Bernauer (London: Dartmouth, 1993), pp. 87–9; and Seth Appiah-Mensah, "Lessons from ECOMOG," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings,* March 2000, p. 68.
18. Each mission will have its own strength, standard operating procedures, and rules of engagement.
19. The phrase of Kofi Annan, quoted in Barbara Crossette, "UN Chief Faults Reluctance of U.S. to Help in Africa," *New York Times,* 13 May 2000, available on the World Wide Web: http://www.un.org/overview/SG/nytimes.html.
20. See Olutunde Oladimeji [Commodore, Nigerian Navy (Ret.)], "African Navies Need 'Born Again,' " U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings,* March 1998, pp. 44–6; and Appiah-Mensah, "Lessons from ECOMOG," for the utility of naval forces in West African peacekeeping efforts.
21. A special fund is also proposed, based on voluntary contributions from member states and other friendly states.
22. Nigeria alone spent over ten billion dollars during the last decade on peacekeeping in Liberia and Sierra Leone.
23. Peter Schraeder, in INSS, *1997*, p. 157.
24. The military-assistance figure does not include the roughly two billion dollars given to

Egypt annually. For economic support funds, see Schraeder, "Removing the Shackles," p. 194.

25. The euphoria that greeted democratization in Africa in the 1990s has waned, because rapid democratization of Africa has not stopped intrastate conflict. Neither has the uncoordinated economic aid that trickles into the continent.

26. Joseph S. Nye, "The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs,* July–August 1995, p. 91.

27. Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 151.

28. Ayoob, p. 15.

29. Ken Booth, "Security and Emancipation," *Review of International Studies,* October 1991, p. 319.

30. Imobighe, p. 87.

31. For a detailed discussion of the concept of state collapse and some of its victims in Africa, see William I. Zartman, ed., *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), pp. 2–10, 91–108. For obtaining warning of, and possible U.S. reaction to, state failure, see Richard J. Norton and James F. Miskel, "Spotting Trouble: Identifying Faltering and Failing States," *Naval War College Review,* Spring 1997, pp. 79–91; and James F. Miskel, "Are We Learning the Right Lessons from Africa's Humanitarian Crises?" *Naval War College Review,* Summer 1999, pp. 136–47.

32. Funding and observers from U.S.-based democratic institutions have facilitated multiparty elections, provided assistance to fledgling democracies, and promoted short-term visits by groups of Africans to the United States and by U.S. citizens to Africa—all to strengthen elements of civil society in both regions. Other donor countries, such as Britain and Canada, complement American efforts in this direction.

33. Schraeder, "Removing the Shackles," p. 200.

34. World Bank, *African Development Indicators 2000* (Washington, D.C.: 1999), pp. 6, 176, 180.

35. Kofi Annan, "Report on Africa," press release SG/SM6524SC/6503, 16 April 1998, available on the World Wide Web: http://www.un.org/ecosodeve/geninfo/afrrec/sgreport/pressrel.html (25 August 2000).

36. Ibid. In addition, under the William J. Clinton administration the United States adopted an approach to conflict and humanitarian disaster in Africa intended to contribute to regional stability. One of its aspects was financial support of operations carried out by other nations and international organizations. The second comprised assistance to African states in developing capabilities for conflict resolution; for subregional, regional, and international peacekeeping; and for humanitarian relief.

37. From 1947 to 1952, the Marshall Plan (named for Secretary of State George C. Marshall) helped to reconstruct European economies shattered by World War II. Similarly, postwar Japan received enormous American aid, the effects of which eventually also spilled over to other Asian economies. However, Africa—which was dehumanized through slavery and colonialism, and made to suffer proxy wars during the Cold War and post–Cold War conflicts—has yet to receive such attention.

38. See Strategy and Force Planning Faculty, eds., *Strategy and Force Planning,* 3d ed. (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, National Security Decision Making Dept., 2000), p. 132.

39. See Oladimeji, p. 44. See also his "Democracy and Sea Power in Nigeria," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings,* March 2001, pp. 68–70.

40. INSS, *1997,* p. 68. See also Derek J. Christian [Capt., South African Navy], "The African Crisis Response Force: A Critical Issue for Africa," *Naval War College Review,* Summer 1998, pp. 70–81. The United States conducted a number of noncombatant evacuation operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone from 1990 to 1996. The forces are designed to establish safe havens for civilians; the United States would help train, fund, and equip them.

41. INSS, *1997.*

42. Ibid.

43. Alassane Fall, "Shaping Future African Peacekeeping Forces: Organization Design and Civil-Military Relations Lessons Learned from the West African Peace Force in Liberia" (master's thesis, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., June 1998), p. 8.

44. INSS, *1997,* p. 164.

45. Schraeder, "Removing the Shackles," p. 189.

46. Strategy and Force Planning Faculty, p. 129.
47. INSS, *1995*, p. 100.
48. Kofi Annan, press release, 16 April 1998. Available on the World Wide Web: http://www.un.org/ecosodeve/geninfo/afrrec/sgreport/pressrel.html (25 August 2000).
49. Ian G. Hopwood, "Africa: Crisis and Challenge," in *Statecraft and Security: The Cold War and Beyond,* ed. Ken Booth (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 265–6.