

REVIEW ARTICLE

Disarming not defending Africa

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L. du Plessis and M Hough, editors, *Protecting Sub-Saharan Africa: The Military Challenge*, Human Science Research Council, Pretoria, 1999, pp. 278, p/back. Price not given.

Most sub-Saharan states cannot protect themselves from major military threats, especially extra-continental ones. From the perspective of the big international players the question is: *should* Africa be protected? In this collection of essays, the impact of Africa's global marginalisation is duly noted. This fundamental facet of Africa's security dilemma, however, is not analysed in any meaningful way. True, the usual malaises, including 'ethnic nationalism', are paraded, but there is no mention of the current debate on how Africa's 'ethnic' wars are interpreted by the international media, and its assumed impact on humanitarian and military intervention. If they have not done so already, the editors should read Tim Allen and Jean Seaton's new book, *The Media of Conflict*. Here the implications of the so-called second scramble for Africa, including the role of aid agencies and the International Monetary Fund, are scrutinised. Seaton and Allen reject the notion of mindless, primordial violence in Africa, and instead examine the repercussions of foreign intervention (most egregiously French meddling in Rwanda) as well as the rational economic motivations of the assorted warlords.

Mention 'warlords' and the next word that often springs to mind is 'mercenaries'. Hough and du Plessis skirt another key issue: the privatisation of international intervention. Although the book does not contain an index, this reviewer counted barely a handful of passing references to the privateers who have played dramatic roles in recent African conflicts. Such an omission from South African authors is odd, bearing in mind that Executive Outcomes pioneered the revival of freebooting. Then associated British companies, such as Sandline, took up the baton to intervene, for example, in West Africa.

Perhaps the essayists regard Sandline *et al* as a temporary throwback to the bad old days of Colonel Mike Hoare. If so, in the African context, they may be correct, because the real issue is whether anyone outside Africa really cares about the bits below the Arab north. Professor Edward Luttwak has recently stirred the pot by suggesting that warmongers in developing regions such as Africa should be left to fight themselves into some kind of resolution. Intervention is costly, both to locals and to the major powers, and often freezes, delays and exacerbates conflict termination.

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Critics accused the apartheid regime of disporting a Ptolemaic view of the universe: that the cold war revolved around Pretoria. Remnants of this blinkered approach still linger in the new South Africa. To adapt Rhett Butler: Frankly the developed world couldn't give a damn. With marginal exceptions such as Nigeria's oil and niggles about South Africa's stability (partly due to fears about the expense of absorbing tens of thousands of white refugees with European Union passports), 'black' Africa has slid off the strategic map. The United Nations' debacles in Somalia and Rwanda killed of what remained of any interest in formal military intervention.

Perhaps the real danger for Africa is the possibility that it may be ring-fenced by foreign strategists and left almost totally to its own devices, apart from some commerce and half-hearted humanitarian forays to alleviate the usual litany of catastrophes. If this is so, then the old war-horses of imperialism and the current neo-imperialism can be fully tested. Left strategically stranded, can the region, especially southern Africa, really kick-start the much-vaunted, but so far rhetorical, renaissance?

Perhaps the authors of *Protecting Sub-Saharan Africa* take Western policies of benign neglect as a given. Indeed, a *leitmotif* of the book is the ideal of African self-sufficiency (except in advanced weaponry) to be acquired by mutual cooperation. An introductory chapter, however, on the changing Western attitudes to intervention in Africa would have been useful.

Nonetheless, du Plessis's chapter on maritime defence is useful in that it outlines some of the extra-continental threats such as piracy, predatory fishing fleets, and oil pollution. But, with the exceptions of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, African maritime capability is very limited, with the majority of sub-Saharan states possessing token or no navies. When it comes to air power, with the partial exception of South Africa, the sub-continent has to rely upon foreign imports. Michael Hough suggests that only Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe and, surprisingly, Sudan have 'relatively modern air forces, although he questions the serviceability of much of their aircraft. In conventional war fighting, few states, even South Africa, could sustain a co-ordinated large-scale campaign. Clearly the emphasis is more on 'police armies' and counter-insurgency. Again, more could have been made of this, especially in view of South Africa's extensive experience of joint police-army operations.

There is little that is new in this collection, but the tabulation of data is informative, as is the analysis of military intervention in politics. Du Plessis notes that 'there have been three successful coups *per annum* during the past quarter-century'. (Lists of recent exceptions to coups are likely to have a short shelf life: the Ivory Coast being the most recent example of a breakdown in civil-military relations.) Du Plessis adds the interesting rider that for every successful coup, there have been at least two unsuccessful ones. By 1996 there had been 79 violent changes of government in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. 'In all but two cases, the governments were overthrown by military officers, and military rule occurred in both single-party and multi-party states.' Du Plessis elaborates by explaining how coups have taken place in *all* types of African states, regardless of size, wealth or ethnic homogeneity. Coups usually involve a tiny proportion of the armed forces, just a few hundred men, irrespective of the

military capabilities of whatever army or air force participates. No wonder leaders such as Robert Mugabe are so sensitive about media comments on potential coups.

Historically, African militaries have been more concerned with maintaining internal power and personal privileges. The biggest danger to most states is their own men on horseback. So major inter-state conflicts have been far less frequent than the suppression of domestic revolt. But the pattern of warfare in the 1990s, most notably in the Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone and, most dangerously, in the region of the Great Lakes, has transformed internal fighting into (limited) multi-state conflict.

The final sections of the book examine joint African reactions to these wars. Despite the relative success of recent joint training exercises, the various crisis response initiatives encouraged by France, Britain, the USA and the Organisation of African Unity have not taken off. The Nigerian-led interventions in West Africa, and the Southern African Development Community's forays into the civil wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo are hardly models of peace enforcement. Arguably, the SADC states' involvement made matters much worse. And the South African-led intervention in Lesotho was a complete disaster.

Ultimately, what is Africa defending itself against? Major foreign intervention is highly unlikely; further *large-scale* interstate wars may also be unlikely. African forces should perhaps concentrate on what they can do best: countering/fostering subversion and deposing/defending corrupt regimes. Let them aspire, then, to be no more than police-armies or super gendarmeries, but with enough logistical tail and air support for limited but joint peace enforcement operations. The rest is redundant, even for South Africa.

In his conclusion, du Plessis bemoans the state of Africa's defences: 'At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many sub-Saharan states will be hardly capable of defending themselves.' This may be a fortunate circumstance. In the past, Africa has ruined itself by excessive arms expenditure. If nuclear weapons can be eschewed, why not also jettison pretensions of fully-fledged conventional defence? As du Plessis wisely observes in his introduction: 'The ironic fact is that the cost of arming a threatened state to defend its economic interests may be greater than the benefits that such a defence practice may provide.' Grasping this simple truth may well be a prerequisite for a genuine African renaissance.