Transnational Security and African States

(A DRAFT: Comments are welcome)

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Introduction

This presentation sets out to do three things. It addresses itself to an analysis of the responses of African States and organizations to the changing nature of the security challenges facing the continent since the end of the Cold war. Central to this exploration is the issue of the capacity and will of African states and regional organizations operating largely in changing domestic, regional and global contexts to respond to emerging transnational threats that exist beneath, beyond and across states. Issues of African initiative, response, capacity, resources and political will are key to an understanding of Africa’s agency in responding to non-state cross-boundary threats in a rapidly globalizing and inter-connected world.

Secondly, the paper also critically examines the place of Africa in the hegemonic global security discourses that define the continent as an object of security, perhaps fuelled by perspectives that define the African ‘space’ as a source or nest of threats capable of ‘migrating’ to, or adversely affecting the more prosperous and stable parts of the world. Such views are further reinforced by the quest of the world’s established and emerging powers to gain access to the vast natural and energy resources of the continent.

In the post-9/11 era, Africa has also become writ large in global security concerns about its “vast ungoverned spaces,” “weak or failing states,” and Muslim populations that could act as incubators for mobile threats that could strike at Western targets. Apart from this, some strategic thinkers have drawn attention to the risks that failed/failing African states pose in terms of their inability to “effectively police” their borders, paving the way for transnational or cross-border criminal networks, dealing in drugs, human trafficking, arms, stolen oil, and internet-based fraud to operate, posing threats to national and international security.

Such perspectives also draw attention to the ways Africa’s vulnerability to diseases, climate change and violent conflict pose threats to other parts of the world. Also relevant are those that view ‘illegal migrants’ from Africa across the Atlantic ocean or the Mediterranean sea to the soft southern underbelly of Europe as mobile threats to the continent’s more prosperous and stable neighbour. Such views that seek to ‘objectify’ and ‘securitize’ Africa call for an interrogation of both the role of hegemonic global discourses in defining the place of the

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continent, and a critical examination of the assumptions that underpin international security cooperation/partnership with African states.

Thirdly, it critically examines the basis of the security concerns within Africa, and about Africa in the emerging post-Cold war order characterized by the undisputed United States military might, and increasing multi-polarity in the economic sphere where emerging powers like China, India, Brazil and Russia are beginning to project themselves as contenders for global power. Thus, it is not out of place to start a discussion about how the security concerns of hegemonic global powers, relate to those of Africa in an inter-dependent world. This presentation calls for an increased focus on the ways African state and non-state actors connect, or engage the ‘international’ at various levels to address emerging transnational challenges requiring coordinated policies and actions.

In this regard certain questions are relevant. Is it possible that in the pursuit of policies and partnerships aimed at curbing threats and risks seen to emanate from Africa, that the world’s powers inadvertently nurture new threats to African peoples? What do partnerships between hegemonic powers and African states mean for African agency and initiatives aimed at addressing transnational risks and challenges? What are the roles of African regional organizations and states in this regard? Is there adequate space for African agency in the emerging post-Cold war international relations?

**Transnational Security and Africa: An Overview**

During the Cold war, security discourses in Africa were largely geared toward regime or state security built around the sovereignty and sanctity of colonially-inherited borders and territorial integrity, reinforced by the ‘non-interference’ clause of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Since the end of the Cold war, it is possible to see a formal shift from state-centric and militarist perspectives to security and peace based on non-intervention to regional approaches and intervention in the management of regional threats and conflicts.

Increased attention has also been given regional approaches to non-state and trans-border threats. This can be gleaned from the protocols and declarations of the African Union (AU) and African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), of which the focus in this presentation will be on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It could also be seen in the norms and cultures underpinning African security, which were largely the product of the continent’s history, pan-Africanism, the struggles against colonialism and apartheid, the politics of the Cold and post-Cold war eras, including to some extent, the ‘localization’ of some universal norms.

In some regard, the AU did anticipate and take concrete steps to address transnational threats before they assumed centre-stage in the global security agenda. An example is that of the adoption of the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Algiers in July 1999, which Ewi and Aning (2006: 36) described as the “first continental legislative instrument on preventing and combating terrorism in Africa which provided an African definition of terrorism.” This convention which followed at the heels of terrorist bombings in
Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, and was also shaped by Africa’s historical experiences that ensured that struggles for self-determination was differentiated from acts of terrorism.

However in spite of the changes in Africa’s conception and response to security threats and the increased adoption of regionally coordinated approaches in dealing with such threats, there is still the tendency to view transnational risks through the lens of the state which remains the main unit of regional organizations, although civil society groups are increasingly influencing the debates within such organizations.

**ECOWAS and Transnational Security threats in West Africa**

West Africa, once referred to as Africa’s conflict belt in the 1990s, as far back as 1993 had taken a new turn, which included tackling conflicts and threats to international security through regional cooperation, as a necessary part of its project of West African economic integration. In this regard, the 1993 revised Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) treaty prepared the ground for a regional response to emerging transnational security threats. In this regard, it is important to note that, Article 3 (d) of the Objectives of the 1999 ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, clearly states that it seeks to, “strengthen cooperation in areas of conflict prevention, early warning, peace-keeping operations, the control of cross-border crime, international terrorism and the proliferation of small arms and anti-personal mines” and “formulate and implement policies on anti-corruption, money laundering and the illegal circulation of small arms.” The Mechanism was followed up in 2001 by the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which sought among others to extend the reach of the Mechanism by providing a framework of democracy, accountability and good governance for the ECOWAS member states. As I noted elsewhere, it was based on the “belief that peace, security and development can only endure if there is a strong democratic foundation in ECOWAS states.”

Apart from the Protocols and Mechanisms framed by ECOWAS, it is also possible to identify other initiatives that underscore its efforts at addressing transnational threats. These include 2001 declaration against human trafficking, the establishment of the Intergovernmental Action Group Against Money Laundering (GIABA) by ECOWAS in 2000, and the signing of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials in 2006, indicate the regional policy thrust towards meeting transnational security challenges.

ECOWAS member-states, have also sought to align national legislation and institutions with ECOWAS and international protocols dealing with transnational security threats. Most of the focus has been placed on transnational crimes. For example, Nigeria created a National Committee on the Proliferation and Illicit Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons in 1999. In the same regard, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons was established in 2003. With regard to fraud and cross border crimes there were several regional initiatives to which Nigeria signed on to. However, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was created by a 2004 Act to “prevent, investigate, prosecute and penalize economic and financial crimes.” An overview of Nigeria’s efforts at addressing
transnational security threats within its borders indicate limited success in curbing transnational crimes in some respects. In the case of Ghana, Aning (2007: 210-212), noting the difference in the capacities of West African states to tackle transnational crimes, concludes that Ghana Police Service (GPS) and the Customs, Excise and Preventive Services (CEPS) are under-resourced and too weak to effectively deal with the threats and challenges posed by the operations of transnational networks in Ghana.

In spite of ECOWAS’s head-start in responding to transnational security threats by setting up an institutional framework for addressing them, the process of its implementation within the individual states has been rather painstakingly slow with some question marks on its effectiveness. This point has been made by several authors, including Mazzitelli who noted that with regard to the activities of transnational criminal networks in the region (2007: 1088-1089), “the response of West African governments to the serious challenges posed by transnational organized crime has so far been limited to updating national legislation and legal frameworks to bring them into line with the requirements of the UN and other international and regional conventions and protocols.”

While this to some extent may be the case, it is also necessary to deal with providing some explanations for the states weaknesses that underpin partial or limited implementation of measures designed to curb transnational crimes. Citing Shaw (2001), Aning (2007: 196), connects “the origins of criminal networks in West Africa to economic mismanagement, a failed structural adjustment programme, continuous political contestation and on-going and harsh periods of military rule.” In more ways than one, the state crises in the region are partly linked to the effect of ‘maladjustment’ resulting from measures promoted by the forces of economic globalization and market fundamentalism.

**The African Union and Transnational Threats in Africa**

Much like the ECOWAS, the African Union has shown some initiative in addressing transnational security threats. This has largely been embedded in its articles relating to security and defence, zero-tolerance for the unconstitutional change of governments, non-indifference and humanitarian intervention. The fact of the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU) has been underpinned by a new approach to transnational security threats. Although as Williams has noted, the AU has refrained from the use of the term ‘transnational’, its 2004 Solemn Declaration on a Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP), lists external, cross-border and non-state threats as constituting major challenges. Other challenges identified in AU documents include, pandemics, HIV/AIDS, insurgencies, arms proliferation, criminal networks, and more recently, climate change.

As noted earlier, the African Union took early steps to address the threat of international terrorism. While its predecessor enacted the 1999 Algiers convention, the AU took the process forward and in line with its Plan of Action, it established the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) “as a structure of the AU Commission and the Peace and Security Council” (Ewi and Aning 2006: 39). The AU Commission, through its Plan of Action and Article 5 of the Protocol had provisions for tacking terrorism, while the
Peace and Security Council also had provisions for coordinating its activities with those of the RECs.

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance adopted at the 2007 AU summit underscored the adoption and localization of universal democratic values at the continental level. It gave the AU the right to reject unconstitutional change of governments and promote development, and to intervene in a member-state “under serious threat” when mandated to do so by the Peace and Security Council. This position marked by a normative shift to non-indifference was linked to provisions in Article 4(h) of the Act, just as the commitment to development was linked to the AU’s New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Article 4(h) also underscored an African variant of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) which provided a sound framework for non-indifference to crimes against humanity or mass atrocities.

The African Charter marked an important step in Africa’s response to threats from violent conflicts that could be linked to the lack of political participation, injustice, corruption and the lack of development. There were several OAU and AU conventions dealing with illicit proliferation and trafficking in small arms (2000), illicit drug trafficking (1996), and corruption (2003), indicating some ‘long-term’ engagement of the African community with emerging transnational threats.

However, in spite of the normative shift that underpinned the AU response to changes in the post-Cold war international order, including emerging transnational threats, the new principles “have been unevenly applied to states that have fallen foul of them” (Aning 2007: 8). As highlighted in the case of ECOWAS (and other African RECs), problems of the lack of political will, poor levels of resourcing and capacity, continue to hobble the attempts of the AU is effectively meeting the challenges posed by emerging transnational threats. While it to clear that policy makers recognize the importance of the democracy-peace-development-security nexus, and do make the right declarations, the distance between rhetoric and reality remains wide, complicating the conditions within the continent, and creating a policy vacuum that global hegemonic forces seek to exploit to influence the continents security agenda.

It is important to note that in the cases of the RECs and AU, the international community/donors have been engaged in providing resources for institution and capacity-building at one level, and leveraging influence over these institutions. Given the poor resourcing of these institutions in general, donor support plays an important role in the international engagement with Africa, but it is important to ensure that such resources are effectively used, and monitored by African civil society groups and citizens of African countries.

**The Global Securitization of Africa**

From a position of relative marginality in the immediate post-Cold war period, Africa has become a prominent ‘space’ of attention in global security discourses and strategies. This shift received further impetus after 9/11 and the declaration of the global war on terror. It was further reinforced by Africa’s increased strategic profile as a major source of oil and gas,
upon which the Western Powers were clearly dependent for their energy security. Another aspect of the securitization of Africa related to the concern that illegal migration from the continent could constitute a threat to the stability and well-being of prosperous Western countries. Also of note was the existence of large numbers of Muslims in the Sahelian belt of Africa, which could be a site for the propagation of radical political Islam and possible anti-western terrorist activities. The construction of threats coming from Africa in the form of terrorists incubating in failed/failing states and moving across poorly policed borders, African Criminal Networks (ACN) using African ports and airports as hubs for trans-shipment of drugs to Europe and the United States, trafficking people, small arms and ammunitions across porous borders is directly tied to the securitization of the continent. This echoes the securitization thesis of the Copenhagen School, which regards politically constructed phenomena as threats requiring urgent and comprehensive action (Buzan and Weaver 1997). It also refers referring to such threats through a ‘speech act’ that necessitates using any means necessary to block or neutralize the threat. As Abrahamsen has argued, “securitization’s defining feature is the ability to place an issue above the normal rules of liberal democratic politics and hence justify emergency action to do whatever is necessary to remedy the situation” (2005: 59).

Several western scholars, leaders and policy makers have alluded to the securitization of Africa as a source of threats. A good summary of this view in contained in the National Security Report of the US, which notes among other things that, “in Africa, promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war, and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States—preserving human dignity—and our strategic priority—combating terror.” In this regard, several connections have been drawn between state failure and transnational threats emanating from Africa.

The concern with combating terror and the quest for oil underpin the west’s increasing securitization of Africa. This has led to the securitization of specific regions of Africa: West Africa: oil, illegal migrants and criminal networks, Horn of Africa and East Africa: terrorist threats, failed states and criminal networks, North Africa: terrorist threats, oil and illegal migrants. This form of securitization has strongly influenced engagement with Africa in the fields of aid, trade, development and security cooperation. Some scholars have even pointed to the increased militarization and securitization of relations with Africa. They have pointed to the ways in which security concerns have been writ large in the support to African militaries and regional security institutions. As a former US assistant secretary of state noted with regard to US engagement with Africa, “security is overtaking development as Washington’s top policy priority” (Cohen 2008: 88-95).

Various institutions for tightened border controls in the Europe Union (FRONTEX) and the US have been set up to shut out unwanted African immigrants—seen as possible ‘mobile’ threats. In some cases, these institutions or states have reached agreements with African states or regional organizations to stop, or repatriate ‘illegal’ immigrants before or after they set foot on European soil. Pointing to various forms of US military engagement such as the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), East Africa Counter Terrorism Initiative (EACTI), the Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism Program (TSCTP), the Operation Enduring
Freedom-Trans Sahara (OEF-TS), African Coastal Border Security Programme, and the establishment of AFRICOM in 2007, it becomes clear that global hegemonic interests are intervening and using military partnership/support as a strategy for shaping Africa’s response to transnational threats. Also of note is the role of international organizations/donors in providing support for African institutions. It is however important to point out that in response to such external pressures and offers African states have adopted strategies that range from open, ambivalent to selective engagement with external powers. The presence of China and India as emerging powers competing for influence, resources and markets in Africa has more often than not provided African states with some leverage in dealing with western powers.

Some Tentative Conclusions

There is little doubt that at the regional and continental levels, Africa has adopted some comprehensive responses to transnational security threats. These however seems to be stronger in terms of rhetoric than actual implementation. The problems range from the lack of political will, to those of weak institutional capacities and poor resourcing. However, when it gets to the levels of the states, there is considerable unevenness and poor coordination in the implementation of decisions and policies. With the exception of a few aspiring regional hegemons within the continent, commitment to regional decisions and targets has been rather weak, but African states or better still, ruling regimes have sought to defend what they consider to be their core security values, even if there are some contradictions embedded in how they do so.

While global securitization discourses have often been very critical of African states, often labeled with all kind of epithets that point to its failings and shortcomings, suggesting that such states may not be reliable partners, nonetheless, partner with them. This hegemonic discourse while seeking to preserve its geo-political interests on the continent and stop threats emanating from it from reaching the “Western homelands”, ultimately seek the transformation of Africa along liberal lines. But this is not as unproblematic or simple as it sounds. Indeed, as the case of AFRICOM shows, partnerships with Africa for dealing with transnational security threats are so far based on asymmetrical relations. Some commentators have argued that the refusal of most African states to overtly host AFRICOM was because African states and civil society were not consulted during the process of the establishment of the organization, and therefore did not ‘buy in’ into its agenda for the continent. Given Africa’s historical experiences with colonialism and neocolonialism, and trend towards regionalism and continental unity (with all its difficulties), it ambivalence towards initiatives like AFRICOM is both reflective to its own weaknesses as well as some skepticism about AFRICOM’s real intentions towards the continent.

Africa’s evolving security culture and institutions do indicate some agency, but also indicate a gap between the means and ends for dealing with transnational security challenges. The global balance of power: political, strategic and economic, does not offer the continent much leverage, even though Africa’s place of geo-political significance remains high. It is clear that the continent cannot be ignored in the scheme of things anymore. Yet, the ways in which the
world’s powers are engaging Africa so far appear neither to touch the roots of the
transnational threats emanating from the continent, or the ways in which transnational actors
and policies from outside create, or exacerbate the conditions under which such threats
germinate and proliferate and cross borders. In some cases, excessive focus is placed on the
African aspect of transnational threats, without looking into the internal conditions and forces
from outside Africa that connect, and benefit from several transnational processes. When this
position is pursued further, it not only leads to the privileging of security over development by
global powers engaging with Africa, it constrains the space for African agency in meeting
emerging security challenges. While many scholars often point to the weakness of poorly
resourced African institutions, and give the impression that throwing money at the problem
would resolve it, the solution is often not straight-forward, considering that it often lies in a
mix of historical and fundamental socio-economic and political factors that need to be
addressed to set the basis for strong and effective institutions to emerge. A more nuanced
approach that balances increased resources alongside institutional and contextual
transformation is more likely to yield better results.

There is no doubt that African states and people have important roles to play in this regard.
Yet, the questions remains how these states can be transformed from their current forms into
strong developmental and democratic entities with empowered citizens holding leaders
accountable and actively participating in decision-making in ways that defend their dignity
and welfare. History teaches us that states cannot be built from the outside, just as the
building up of Africa militaries may not even guarantee regime security in the long term, nor
ensure the redistribution and development that is so important and needed in the continent.
Perhaps a more constructive option for the international community is to help nurture the
space for engaging and reinforcing African agency to better address the risks and threats
confronting the majority of African peoples, as a critical step towards addressing the broader
challenge of transnational security risks confronting the continent.