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African Security in the Post Cold War Era: An Examination of Multinational vs Private Security Forces

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Abstract

The paper examines two models in conflict management and prevention: multinational regional forces represented by the ECOMOG, and private security firms represented by the Executive Outcomes. It argues, on the one hand, that the ECOMOG experience proves that greater political acceptance, knowledge of the conflict, etc., are not automatic advantages for a regional multinational force. On the other hand, the Executive Outcomes' professionalism and quick successes contrast sharply with ECOMOG's prolongation of the Liberian conflict: EO could provide stability in Angola and Sierra Leone by swiftly repulsing two threatening insurgencies. The paper concludes that the proliferation of private security firms is a reflection of the endemic instability on the African continent; an indication that they provide a service which most African national armies and multinational forces are unable to provide; and that this trend might continue until Africa gains the resources and the political will to cope with its internal conflicts.

Introduction

The end of the cold war has produced conflicting effects upon African security. As Frances Deng observes, the cold war removed the "aggravating external factor", i.e. superpower influence, but it also removed the moderating role of these same superpowers (Deng, *et. al.*, 21). Decline in foreign patronage, along with other factors, has seen the post - cold war phenomenon of "collapsed states". This rising conflict in some parts of Africa has raised the question, how can African states defend themselves?

The demise of super-power rivalry aided the peace settlements in Ethiopia and South Africa. Yet some African states clearly are less secure than during the mid-1980s. The withdrawal of superpower patronage; increased "conditionalities" of

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1980s. The withdrawal of superpower patronage; increased "conditionalities" of democratisation and structural adjustment imposed upon governments, and the availability of weaponry to insurgent forces have made a number of African states increasingly vulnerable. Collapsed states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the former Zaire have suffered serious loss of life and destruction of economic infrastructure. Furthermore, some African states are redefining "sovereignty" to justify their intervention in hostile countries. The co-operation of some seven African states in overthrowing Mobutu and the role of Angola in toppling the Congo-Brazzaville government offer recent examples of this possibly growing trend.

How can African states defend themselves? National militaries sometimes have proved to be more of a problem than solution, serving less as integrative agents of state nationalism and more as enforcers of narrow political or ethnic aims. An often overlooked deficiency is the unprofessionalism of numerous African militaries. Samuel Huntington and others cite three components of professionalism: military expertise, political responsibility and corporate identity (Huntington 1964). The reasons for the lack of professionalism are varied and include pervasive national differences, e.g. ethnicity, the lack of an African officer corps at independence, the desire of coup-fearing rulers to emasculate their forces, and the politicisation of the military by using it for domestic partisan purposes.

Some states could previously count on intervention by certain West or former East European countries. But three factors – the end of the cold war, the "Somalia Syndrome" and France's gradual disengagement from Africa – indicate that such intervention will be increasingly rare.

Lacking West European military support or effective national militaries of their own, what recourse to security do African states have? This article examines two structural possibilities: multinational regional forces and private security. ECOMOG was a West African regional force that served in Liberia in the early 1990s and has been in Sierra Leone since 1997. Executive Outcomes (EO), a private South African defence force, fought in Angola (1993-1996) and Sierra Leone (1995-1997). The success of EO contrasts with the more limited achievements of ECOMOG. Yet, EO's successes are *sui generis* and do not herald the approach of future "mercenary" armies. Private security companies will help African security as they increasingly provide specialised services to multinational forces.

Regional Military Groupings: ECOMOG in Liberia

The Background

A regional military force has several possible advantages over a non-African intervention: greater political acceptance, more knowledge of the conflict, more

relevant military capabilities for ending the struggle (Howe, 1997). Additionally, Africa can take pride in controlling its own security whereas the west can feel relief about avoiding "another Somalia". Liberia proves an interesting test case. This American quasi-colony had become a collapsed state by mid-1990. Charles Taylor's NPFL (which then comprised about one hundred men) had invaded Liberia in late December 1989 and the resulting civil war had rapidly spread throughout the country. Both the NPFL and an NPFL splinter insurgent forces were converging upon Monrovia by August 1990. The war had cost about 60,000 lives and widespread destruction. The United States administration under President Bush, following a heated internal debate, declined to intervene. Several West African states feared that the violence could spread across national boundaries and, with strong Nigerian leadership, decided to send a multinational peacekeeping force.

In early August 1990, a meeting of ECOWAS states authorised ECOMOG to enter Liberia as peacekeepers. Several weeks later a force of 2,000 soldiers from five states landed in Monrovia. These peacekeepers expected little opposition from the three armed factions and thus were lightly armed. Two of the factions, Prince Johnson's INPFL and Samuel Doe's AFL welcomed ECOMOG as peacekeepers. Charles Taylor, whose NPFL had expected the imminent capture of Monrovia, viewed ECOMOG as depriving him of victory. His artillery opened fire upon ECOMOG's forces.

For some five years, Taylor's NPFL and the multinational ECOMOG were military opponents in a destructive stalemate. By late 1995 Taylor and Nigeria had agreed on a peaceful settlement and new elections. Several other armed factions, especially those aligned with Doe's Krahn ethnic group, violently protested and April 1996 saw a serious outbreak of violence again. Elections were eventually held in July 1997, with Charles Taylor winning a landslide majority.

Analysis

ECOMOG proved that the four possible advantages of multinational forces – greater political acceptance, knowledge of the conflict, more relevant military capabilities, and stronger political commitment – are not automatic for a multinational force. While the ECOMOG states richly deserve credit for attempting to bring peace when the west turned away, ECOMOG probably prolonged Liberia's agony.

Being African did not confer automatic acceptance. Taylor's shelling of ECOMOG's landing and his two major attempts, in 1990 and 1992, to oust ECOMOG from Monrovia indicate his anger towards the all-African force. The 1996 outburst by other factions against ECOMOG also indicates that any intervention force in a still unsettled conflict may face physical attack. Regional intervention forces will reflect some of the existing regional differences. Nigeria's

underpinning of ECOMOG aroused suspicion of possible Nigerian hegemony especially amongst some Francophone states.

ECOMOG, and its contributing nations, lacked a basic understanding of the conflict and its leaders. ECOMOG assumed that it could enter as a peacekeeping force; subsequent learning from incoming artillery fire became a painful lesson. ECOMOG reportedly had no road map of Monrovia when it landed. Few if any of the ECOMOG soldiers spoke Liberian dialects or knew local customs.

ECOMOG was not a credible fighting force, especially during its first years. While its Order of Battle clearly was superior to the NPFL's, ECOMOG suffered several major difficulties common to many multinational forces. ECOMOG was an *ad hoc* force, comprising five national military contingents, most of whom had not had much/any joint training or field exercises. Equipment was sometimes incompatible. ECOMOG suffered from a problem of corporate unity: a basic tension between national and regional priorities. ECOMOG required a strong unified command. The commanders of each of the contingents felt that they had primary responsibility for their troops' safety and actions. ECOMOG sometimes lacked political responsibility: officers within several of the contingents engaged in widespread crime. (The resolve of the force commander appears especially important: General Victor Malu, who served during the critical period leading up to elections gained widespread praise. Some of his predecessors received far more criticism for not stopping criminal acts).

The operational capabilities of most of the contingents – and therefore of ECOMOG as a fighting force – were suspect. Few of the officers and troops had ever seen combat and the force had inadequate logistics: in mid-1995 ECOMOG had only one helicopter which was for the force commander's personal travel.

The question of commitment is especially important. On one hand, the five initial contributors to ECOMOG deserve strong praise for remaining in the Liberian quagmire. Many non-African states would have left within the first year and after a handful of casualties. Nigeria claims that the war cost it over four billion dollars and up to 400 deaths. Yet, Nigeria and the other initial interveners remained. ECOMOG's stay probably depended on its delegating of authority to Liberians. It reasoned that several of the possible advantages for a multinational force, e.g. greater military capabilities, tactical knowledge, and stronger commitment, were even truer for the anti-Taylor factions. ECOMOG thus supported the anti-Taylor factions with weaponry, intelligence, and free transit. These factions often bore the brunt of the fighting; but ECOMOG was spared high battle casualties and exorbitant operational costs.

These led to several unintended consequences. Liberians paid a major price — prolongation of suffering – for such commitment. These factions had little command and control over untrained "soldiers" some of whom were as young as eight years old (perhaps 6,000 of Liberia's combatants were under 15 years of age).

civilians.

These eventual "Frankenstein's monsters" turned against their benefactor in April 1996 when they realised that ECOMOG had abandoned them in favor of elections. Several of these groups hailed from Doe's ethnic group, the Krahn, which comprised only four percent of the population and had no hope of electoral victory. Their clashes with ECOMOG in early 1996 may have caused over one hundred ECOMOG deaths. Regional instability was another unintended consequence. Sierra Leonean junior officers angry about conditions in ECOMOG took control of their government in April 1992. The Liberian conflict had inadvertently spread into Sierra Leone when Charles Taylor helped create the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgent force. The RUF, comprised dissident Sierra Leoneans. They placed strong pressure upon the Sierra Leonean government to stop the country from serving as ECOMOG's forward staging area (RUF and elements of the national military eventually seized power for a disastrous eight months beginning in May, 1997). Dissident ECOMOG soldiers from The Gambia also staged a coup d'état against the Jawara government in July 1994. Finally, the war triggered large refugee flows into neighbouring countries, especially Côte d'Ivoire.

In summary, ECOMOG did not disprove the possible advantages of multinational forces but it clearly did not live up to them. ECOMOG's operations revealed the lack of professional standards within some African armies. Among the more specific lessons offered by ECOMOG are:

1. There is the need for any potential intervener to have an ongoing political and military knowledge of possible conflicts and to judge whether its expertise is equal to the proposed task. Temporary coalitions, such as ECOMOG, should probably limit their mandate to peacekeeping. Peace enforcements, the use of combat troops to restore peace between currently hostile parties, involves far greater expense and risk than does peacekeeping.

2. There is need to prepare for possible future multinational operations by increasing regional military cooperation. An established force could provide far greater corporate unity. Neighbouring countries could work towards greater standardisation of equipment and more co-operation through joint training and exercises. ECOMOG's *ad hoc* nature proved a major problem.

3. There is need to greatly improve the force's "logistical tail", or support system. Poor maintenance helped to ground most of ECOMOG's available aircraft. (In 1995, ECOMOG had only one serviceable but unarmed helicopter for use in Liberia). More efficient administrative procedures are clearly required – some soldiers who had not been paid in several month, were forced to steal from Liberia's civilian population.

Private Security: The Case of Executive Outcomes

Private Security: The Case of Executive Outcomes

The Background

A very different military force was operating in Angola and Sierra Leone during roughly the same time that ECOMOG was engaged in Liberia. The success of Executive Outcomes offers several important lessons to future African multinational forces. Retired South African Defence Force (SADF) personnel comprise EO's leadership, and most of the company's personnel fought in the frontlines of the apartheid regime's counter-insurgency campaigns, both in South Africa and in neighbouring states. Despite CEO Nic Van den Bergh's assurances that his company is merely "providing a professional military advising service", EO is in fact "the only incorporated private mercenary army on earth that will contract to move in and wage full-scale war on behalf of its clients' (Whitelaw,1997: 46 and Rubin,1997: 1). Assembling only when a sovereign government grants it a contract, EO is a "shadow" force with a data base of 2,000 mostly South African personnel (about 70% of its combat soldiers are black). The firm is able to offer its services at bargain prices, thanks to this situational hiring and by leasing much of its hardware.

EO's military expertise is unquestioned. It is the only private company that has fielded an integrated, battalion-size force. Its soldiers share the same language, training, and extensive combat experience. As a result of having fought together for up to twenty years, EO's operators possess valuable knowledge, trust and interoperability.

EO entered Angola in early 1993 to assist the beleaguered Angolan government against the resurgent UNITA guerrilla movement. Acting as a powerful force-multiplier, EO provided the FAA (Armed Forces of Angola) with services which Angola's previous patrons, Cuba and the USSR, did not furnish e.g. quick-strike, and night time capability. Within sixteen months EO trained about five thousand government troops and 30 pilots in skills such as motorised infantry, artillery, engineering, signals, and reconnaissance. The combined might of EO and the FAA forced UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi to agree to a cease-fire. Since the signing of the Lusaka Protocol in November 1994, Angola has enjoyed relative peace. EO fought in 1995 and 1996 on the side of the Sierra Leonean government against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). As in Angola, EO did not win the war by itself. It relied extensively upon the Kamajors, a group of locally-based hunters who strongly resented the RUF's spreading power. EO and the Kamajors provided sufficient stability for democratic elections and forced the once-ascendant RUF to sign a peace accord in November 1996.

Analysis

EO's professionalism and quick successes contrast sharply with ECOMOG's

prolongation of the Liberian conflict. EO provided stability to Angola and Sierra Leone by quickly repulsing two threatening insurgencies. EO countered the mercenary stereotype by behaving correctly with the civilian population (in large part to gain acceptance and tactical intelligence) and by not interfering in domestic politics.

Yet, EO's background, lack of accountability, and its ties to multinational corporations have rung a number of alarm bells for advocates of African self-determination. "Mercenary" and the connotations of untrustworthiness and brutality will remain an odious reminder to most people. "Not a mercenary in any shape or form. Just no. It's totally and absolutely unacceptable", says Ezekiel Pajibo of the Africa Faith and Justice Network (Pajibo, 1997). Many Africans see mercenaries as a neo-colonialist method of continuing white racist influence. EO's soldiers were among the pitbulls of apartheid and some observers refuse to countenance a white-officered, ex-apartheid mercenary group as defenders of political stability in Africa.

EO's military victories paradoxically may backfire upon the organisation. Governments disinclined to democratisation could use the highly effective mercenary group against their own people. "Pressed governments could turn to EO, rather than to peaceful negotiations to answer insurgents" demands ... and this may lead to a situation where any government in a difficult position can hire mercenaries to stay in power (Independent, 1997) These worries will increase if EO gains strength. Princeton Lyman, ambassador to South Africa during EO's Angolan campaign, believes that EO could become a victim of its own success: "a serious political backlash [could occur] if the growth became extensive" (Lyman, 1996).

EO's apartheid background and its military successes augment existing worries about its accountability. "There is no question of accountability when UN peacekeepers are deployed", says Shawshe Torour, Executive Assistant to the UN Secretary-General. "Right now you know that if a soldier misbehaves the ultimate sanction is [that] you send him back home and his government deals with him. What do you do with a private mercenary?" (Cooper and Edwards, 1997) James Woods, a former high-ranking US official dealing with African security issues, states that "secrecy is one of the worst things [about EO]. Exactly what are they doing? What is their mandate? ... There should be as much transparency as possible" (Woods, 1997).

EO, at least until recently, enjoyed exceptionally close ties with the Branch Group, a British multinational firm that includes Branch Minerals. Branch has mineral and oil concessions in various African countries, e.g. Angola, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Its ability through EO to provide security to both its mineral operations *and* to governments undoubtedly helped Branch secure favorable mineral concessions. The concession agreements could have included stretched

tax holidays and customs exemptions. Accordingly, critics see EO as a possible two-fisted – economic and military – threat to weak African states. Elizabeth Rubin states that "EO has acted as something of a recolonising agent for British and South African corporate interests ..." (Rubin,1997: 6). E. J. Hogendoorn of Human Rights Watch/Africa asks, "When you have EO in control of the principal source of export revenue of a country and they basically have the guns and expertise to control that, who's in charge of that country?" (Hogendoorn, 1997). EO officials respond that the sovereign government of Sierra Leone and Angola hired them and that when these governments asked EO to leave, they did.

Available evidence suggests that Branch has not gained undue control in either Angola or Sierra Leone. EO left the two countries when requested by the governments to do so. Branch's possible reach exceeds its grasp. Other powerful actors can counter-balance Branch/EO influence. The Sierra Leonean government depended upon EO's security during 1995 and 1996 but rejected Branch's attempts to gain through a non-competitive bidding process the country's petroleum parastatal and a maritime surveillance contract. Other groups, most notably the World Bank and the IMF, successfully pressed for a transparent and competitive bidding process. As a result, Branch gained neither concession.

A Fading Force?

EO will not continue to be in the vanguard of the private security industry. No major contracts have been awarded since EO left Sierra Leone in January 1997 (speculation about other EO activity is widespread but not verified). EO finds it especially difficult to gain political acceptance within the international community because of its apartheid background and its connections to transnational mineral interests. Furthermore, a foreign, physically-imposed peace settlement has not proved to be the best prescription for reconciliation. Four months after EO left Sierra Leone, a coup staged by dissident military elements and the RUF toppled the democratically-elected Kabbah government. Two other drawbacks. National militaries tend to resent EO's military expertise and its high salaries. This occurred in both Sierra Leone and Papua New Guinea and might caution other beleaguered rulers about contracting EO. EO will suffer from an ageing process. Apparently all of its members saw combat, mostly within the apartheid era SADF. But South Africa stopped regional destabilisation almost ten years ago and the manpower pool of combat veterans is not only shrinking but also getting older (South Africa's recent "Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance" will restrict but not eliminate many forms of private security transaction).

Conclusions

The proliferation of private security firms suggests that their involvement in Africa will continue. Private groups are probably more a reflection than a cause of African

instability and until Africa gains the resources and the political will to lessen internal divisions, these groups will continue to be in demand.

Private security firms offer several advantages over most national militaries or international organisations such as the UN. They can deploy quickly (EO reportedly could place a fully supported battalion within two weeks) and, at least in EO's case, all of their soldiers are combat veterans. They tend to be less expensive since their soldiers fight on a contract basis and the firms lease air and naval equipment. Unlike multinational forces, EO has a single chain of command, extensive experience in working together, both common language and equipment and similar training. Furthermore, in this post-Somalia world of intervention hesitancy, private firms can enter where governments fear to tread. Africa will increasingly be compelled to provide its own security in light of the West's reluctance to dispatch ground troops and the private security firm's lack of accountability.

Private security firms cannot be wished or legislated away. They can supplement regular African militaries by providing valuable and specialised skills, e.g. helicopter maintenance and signals intercepts. EO units assisted Nigerian ground forces in their joint struggle against Sierra Leone's RUF. An American company, Pacific Architects and Engineering, provided helicopter services to ECOMOG in Liberia. Sandline, a British firm with past connections to EO, provided logistical and advisory services to ECOMOG and the then-deposed Kabbah government in early 1998. Angola reportedly has some eighty private security companies which mostly provide security to mining companies. EO's army will prove to be an aberration. Other mercenary forces have not fared well in Africa; the recent group of 400 East Europeans was the latest example of incompetent mercenary operations. The above, and admittedly superficial, analysis of ECOMOG and EO suggests that Africa needs to improve its multinational capability. EO and a few other established private security companies performed well because of their military professionalism. They ensured that meritocracy – rather than ascriptive factors such as ethnicity – determined their military capabilities (firepower, manpower, logistics/signals, and intelligence). EO's ability to draw upon a single, fully inter-operable force strongly suggests that African countries should consider greater regional coordination and training. Established private companies' attention to the needs of the enlistees, e.g. regular pay and good medical services, is another valuable lesson.

How African militaries might achieve greater professionalism is an important subject that goes beyond the scope of this article. Political democratisation could facilitate greater transparency and accountability as well as foster meritocracy in selection and promotion. Various Western initiatives, most notably the African Crisis Response Initiative, contain some political problems but do aim at greater standardisation of training and equipment among African militaries.

Large sections of Africa will continue to face instability. Many national

militaries have failed to provide adequate security because they lack military professionalism. Regional or continental forces composed of these militaries may only compound basic problems, as was the case of ECOMOG in Liberia. Yet multinational militaries have more political credibility and manpower than do private combat forces. Private security firms – in a supplemental non-combat role – can assist African security by providing technical services to these multinational forces.

Notes

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