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Africa's Sore Spot: Regional Conflicts Across the Middle and the Horn

Africa has been climbing up the international policy agenda for some time now, but not fast enough.

By An Jacobs for ISN

Despite positive messages of democratization and economic growth, sub-Saharan Africa remains afflicted by severe conflicts. The Middle and the Horn host the most widespread and intense of them. Resources and ethno-religious differences are often part of the equation, but the core problem rests with bad governance. Political elites use underlying frictions to fight regional wars, all too often fuelled by third-party resource grabs. Until regional dynamics are better understood and addressed through conflict management and trade harmonisation, Africa will continue to seriously suffer.

Despite the newspaper headlines across the globe heralding a new era of democratisation and economic growth, a closer look at the regional dynamics on the continent paints a very different picture. No one can deny that sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed more elections over the course of the last three decades, but these have been short-term 'ballot box' exercises rather than structural democratic practices of good governance. Elections, invariably labeled 'free and fair', have been little more than a show of pretense to guarantee a next term for those in office. In Africa, corruption continues to rule.

The same holds for economic progress. Emerging markets — busy investing in African infrastructure and resources — consider those investments increasingly vital to guarantee their own growth. But the BRICs are not building an economically and politically more solid Africa. Foreign direct investment has increased — both in volume and in geographical spread — but as a result, volatile commodity prices are becoming increasingly difficult for Africa to manage. Equity deals seeking direct control of African resources has been the BRIC response, many of which have admittedly laid the foundations for growth in telecommunications, business services, sales, and manufacturing sectors. But if Africa is to create meaningful wealth from its resources, then credible and appropriate government policies are urgently needed. Filling labor gaps, enhancing market growth, and providing a desirable investment infrastructure is not easy, and points to the core problem ahead: African resources are vast, the growth potential enormous, but neither can match the persistent political risk and regional instability sweeping across the continent.

Large parts of sub-Saharan Africa have indeed been almost unremittingly subject to conflicts, preventing an African 'take-off' anything close to what we have seen in Asia. What is worse, such conflicts have invariably grown regional tentacles, making any effective resolution to them

increasingly difficult. Such a point might seem obvious, but regional thinking has not sunk in on a political level in Africa, nor with the international actors involved in conflict resolution. Until regional dynamics are better understood and better addressed, Africa is unlikely to make the kind of advancement that international headlines would have us believe. Regional problems require regional and international solutions if Africa is to progress.

The 'numbers' are revealing. About two-third of the world's fragile states are located in Africa, with the most deadly and most persistent conflict hub in Central and Eastern Africa. This region, stretching from Kinshasa to Djibouti and from Khartoum to Lubumbashi, hosts some of the major regional hotbeds of conflict below the Sahara. Large territories across the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), (South) Sudan, Somalia, and adjoining countries have seen chronic regional instability as the day-to-day trend; without major remedial action, it will be the defining feature for decades to come.

In geopolitical terms, this region is closely watched across the globe to monitor political risk for resource extraction and foreign direct investment. The Middle and the Horn share a shaken recent history, and both face a bumpy road ahead. 2011 was critical, and the outlook for 2012 does not look much better. Turbulent Congolese presidential elections have attracted international headlines in November last year. Discontent with electoral practices and outcomes now continues to endanger stability in the DRC, and with Tshisekedi's supporters seemingly unwilling to accept Kabila's second term, post-electoral developments remain unsure at this stage. South Sudan became the youngest country in the world in July 2011, and as is often the case with young age, there is a lot to learn. Independence has so far only brought more conflict in terms of demarcating borders and securing oil revenues. But internal issues have also cropped up; inter-ethnic conflict is widespread, as are battles between the brand-new government and local militias. The country currently faces violent uprisings across its territory, with the real risk of becoming a failed state less than a year after being born.

Elections in Somalia — planned for August 2012 — are another event to watch. Western support for the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Mogadishu hopes for a popular and legal TFG mandate to govern after the elections, but confidence remains remarkably low that this will happen. Somalia is easily the best (or indeed worst) African example of a collapsed state, particularly with different gradations of Islamist extremism thriving within and beyond its borders. It appears the Kenyan Defence Forces are better prepared for the 2012 elections than they were in 2007, a year which marked widespread violence on the streets of Nairobi. It would be a serious setback for East Africa if this situation repeated itself. But beyond trying to hold their 'electoral nerves', many of these states still have to cope with the brutal violence of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Having originated in Uganda, Kony's men are now active across the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan. These are just a few examples indicating the dismal conditions in Central and Eastern Africa. And amongst these struggles rest persistent Western concerns that Chinese (and other BRIC) activities in sub-Saharan Africa have everything to do with resource grabs, and little with sustainable development.

Matters in theatre are, of course, much more multifaceted and perhaps even ungraspable. But too many analysts still look at conflicts around the Great Lakes with single-faceted narratives: underplaying certain aspects (resources and Chinese involvement), while overplaying others (ethnicity) and largely overlooking regional dynamics. Grouping countries into sub-regional conflict zones is intricate, with a complex web of conflicting parties overlapping on various levels and across regions. Delineating conflicts from each other and drawing clear-cut lines as to where one war zone stops and another starts is close to impossible, but that should not weaken the key point here: Major conflicts in the Middle and the Horn of Africa are largely regional and demand regional solutions.

To read the full report, please visit the [Strategic Trends Analysis](#) website.

Dr. An Jacobs is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, specializing in European politics and international affairs. She has lectured and studied at the University of Maastricht (NL) and the Manchester Metropolitan University (UK). She was previously at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Germany, and the Swedish National Defence College, having also served for the Delegation of the European Commission in Trinidad & Tobago.

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