The Evolution
of African Armies:
A Perspective in 2010

Mayank S Bubna*

African militaries have only recently emerged from colonial rule and several decades of Cold War gaming by superpowers. As the continent continues to be riddled with wars, these armies have been an essential part of the problem and the solution. Their evolution over the time has occurred in waves of progress and arrest. While it is impossible to generalize about the entire continent's military apparatus, this paper highlights some of the larger trends that have emerged out of this evolutionary process. African armies have become more international in their approach with greater involvement in peacekeeping and collective security efforts, yet they continue to have embarrassing traits of corruption, failed procurements and being a source of domestic turbulence.

Wars and the agony often accompanying them continue to plague Africa towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In light of Africa's enduring social, political and economic predicaments it is unlikely that these conflicts will abate any time soon. In dealing with these wars, African armies have, over the decades, been part of the problem and also helped control some of the conflict. Their involvement in dealing with their region's security has been a work in progress – an evolution that saw its inception towards the beginnings of colonization and that continues to develop under the context of modern day conflicts. Most of these armies are still in their infancy. Many have changed structurally due to external and internal influences. While it is impossible to make sweeping statements about the evolution of these armies, one can safely identify certain key trends that make African armies important players in the continent's security needs.

Today's African militaries are a mixed story of hope and hopelessness. They are beset with problems of procurement, professionalism and organization. Yet, on the other hand, they have also become more international as is evident in their greater participation in peacekeeping operations in the continent and in the creation of regional security arrangements. Most of the weaknesses and strengths of contemporary African armies can be traced to past military legacies. Briefly, the history of African militaries can be divided into two

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* Mayank S Bubna is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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different time segments – the period from the end of colonization leading up to the end of the Cold War, and the period following the end of the Cold War. The armed forces that exist today are very much a result of upheavals and transformations that occurred in these phases.

Phase 1: From De-Colonization to the End of the Cold War

Historians who have documented or analyzed colonial texts trace the beginnings of African militaries to early colonial periods. Large swaths of West Africa for instance, including Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Mauritania remained out of the hands of colonial powers for two decades or more, largely due to the efforts of tribal groups who skillfully resisted colonialism. In other areas, Western Sudan remained out of French control for two years; the British and Germans faced the onslaught of the Shona and Ndebele uprisings in Southern Rhodesia, and the Maji Maji uprising in Taganyika. African backlash against European contingents was extremely stiff as tribal groups demonstrated a military competency that the outside powers did not anticipate.[1]

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Most of these groups were not organized militaries since the continent was divided up into small kingdoms controlled by tribal chiefs. Yet, colonizing powers ultimately managed to defeat them because of technological superiority and better tactical strategy. They took advantage of the fact that local armies had to strategize first for the threat posed by their traditional enemies, and then re-strategize to deal with the simultaneous menace of the European invasion.[2] It was also very difficult for African armies to procure modern weapons. Africa became the dumping ground for discarded European [weapons] models, which could give them immense advantage over African rivals who did not possess them, but left them, with the rapid development of gun technology at the end of the nineteenth century, often several jumps behind the European invading forces.[3] This custom of making Africa the second-hand weapons market of the world is one that continues till today.

Over time, as colonial powers strengthened their dominance and hold over the continent, military adventurism took a back step giving way to the establishment of administrative units that kept themselves busy with economic exploitation of natural resources. Post WWII, when most of Europe was ravaged, colonial powers slowly slackened their control, yielding to state formation and independence – but not before leaving behind weak political institutions. Colonial policy of divide and rule and biased treatment towards locals ensured that these elements always remained too feeble for self-sustenance.[4] Nationalist elements jumped on the opportunity to install and enforce the European model of the nation state, a phenomenon not lacking in irony, considering most big leaders of the time like Kwane Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Sekou Toure rose to power on a ticket of disengagement with the West.

The militaries that African states inherited from colonial powers after independence were rudimentary at best. Many of them were divided along tribal or ethnic lines with practically no concept of patriotic loyalty towards the state. Post-colonial authoritarian regimes furthered the civil-military disconnect by encouraging incompetent armies. This was a phenomenon that arose primarily out of the fear these leaders felt from the might of their armies. Hence, they made every effort to win the loyalty of their soldiers. As a result, they institutionalized a process that stressed what Herbert Howe describes as "the armed forces' allegiance at the expense of operational effectiveness".[5] A general predisposition towards ephemeral perpetuation of the regime over durable political maturation was accomplished with five strategies: carrying forward the colonial legacy of hiring soldiers based on ethnicity, encouraging rampant corruption by starting wars with politico-economic interests, creating armies of loyalist soldiers that stood in parallel to the national forces, continuing reliance on external forces for protection and utilizing troops to settle domestic political conflicts.[6]

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Dominance of the military in African political life led to waves of armed takeovers in the post-independence period. In the two decades following decolonization, almost 90% of the 45 newly independent states underwent a coup d'etat, attempted coups or plots. The reasons for these coups were numerous and varied from region to region. Yet in all cases, there was some level of mass frustration with the quality of political leadership inherited in the post-independence era. Military coups were the only way to either preserve strong leaders in power, or remove authoritarians and replace them with

others who were more widely accepted. Yet, these very militaries could do little to change the root causes of the lack of African political acceptance by the masses – corruption, development crisis and unemployment.

An often overlooked and perhaps even unusual reason for the weak military inheritance in the post-colonial era was simply the lack of inter-state wars in Africa during the time. Princeton University Professor, Jeffrey Herbst, elucidates this point by saying that, "Since independence, in most African countries, there has been no 'relevant other' to oppose, so it has been extremely difficult to create nation-wide symbols of identity".[7] Unlike wars in Europe which forged nationalist unified sentiments, and allowed states to organize themselves into a capable war-fighting machine (and in turn, improving administrative tasks such as tax collection), state creation in Africa post-colonization was a superficial affair. This accompanied with the constant threats of internal strife and unwillingness on the part of leaders to change pre-existing corrupt practices and fiscal systems, only served to weaken African armies further.

The Cold War era further reinforced the civil-military divide by giving incentives to client-patron style ruling elites without injecting the professionalism desperately needed in Africa's armies. Soviet and US funding was based around ideological ties and self-interest, and only served to buttress individual loyalties.[8] During this time, the US supplied more than $1.5 billion worth of arms alongside training, political and financial support, to various countries in Africa. Some American patrons included Liberia, Somalia, Sudan and the DRC, which are today some of the worst war torn regions in the world.[9] The Soviets were equally aggressive in their aim to spread communism across the continent. Some of the countries which received direct or indirect diplomatic and military support from the Soviets included Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Congo, Egypt, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda and Benin. Many regimes regularly switched sides in order to benefit from both parties. Yet, the Americans and the Soviets, while always keeping the cauldron bubbling, did not allow it to overflow, fearing that an all-out war on the continent might lead to actual war between the superpowers.

Nevertheless, Africa became the dumping ground for Soviet and American arms. Between 1966 and 1981, the number of countries with tanks in sub-Saharan Africa escalated from two to eighteen, in large part as arms transfers from the superpower blocs to the third world. Countries possessing field artillery went from seven to thirty-six; light armor possessing national contingents rose from thirteen to thirty-six, and countries having jet aircraft went from six to thirty-one.[10] These arms were largely flooded into the African market as a money-making endeavor. Little consideration was given to the existing volatile climate, the disorganization of the armed forces in Africa, and whether these additional capabilities really enhanced national security in the

African context. Human rights and military training were erratic and underdeveloped, contributing to further indiscipline amongst the gendarmeries.

As a result of this, when the Cold War ended and funding dried up, there was a dramatic increase in violent conflicts around Africa, as big men scrambled for control while battling off other unscrupulous power-hungry groups. The 90's experienced some of the bloodiest battles in African history, with the genocide in Rwanda, breakdown of law and order in Somalia and the fight over control of West Africa's natural resources in Liberia and Sierra Leone, amongst other raging civil wars.

Post Cold War Era

The confusion that followed with the collapse of the Soviet empire had positive and negative repercussions for Africa. New forms of threats such as state collapse and terrorism emerged alongside the old ones. And new solutions were discovered to deal with these threats. Gone was the Great Power competition; what emerged rather was the involvement of other international actors – military and economic assistance coming from US, Europe, China, Arabs and Indians. Africa, during the 90's and leading up to modern day, emerged as the continent with the highest number of peacekeeping missions.

These peacekeeping missions increasingly became the framework in which Africans began to internationalize and professionalize their own militaries.[11] "African solutions to African problems" became the mantra of the day, after an expose of the UN's ineffectiveness and failures in various parts of the world including Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and the Congo. In 1990, ECOMOG, a multinational military consortium of West African states, was established to handle the civil war crisis in Liberia. In an expanded effort, ECOMOG was also deployed to Sierra Leone in 1997 and Guinea-Bissau in 1999. In 1997, the Security Council also authorized an 800-member inter-African mission to the CAR to monitor the implementation of the Bangui agreements. The Organization of African Union (OAU) became the central point for harmonizing peacekeeping efforts among various African as well as non-African nations, including efforts to develop early warning mechanisms and conflict management.

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In order to make Africans the authors of their own military destinies, promote human rights, and encourage politico-economic solidarity, the OAU was converted into the African Union in 2002, an intergovernmental organization with a framework resembling that of the United Nations. Born out of the recognition that states can no longer solve their problems alone, it was a method to foster cooperation amongst member nations and bring them on board as equal members of the global community. Integrating Africa's defense forces under a pan-African Armed forces unit, the AU is meant to reduce the overall costs of individual armies. And in an effort to maintain peace and stability on the continent, the AU has authorized several peace support missions to respond to developing crises. Ongoing interventions include the AU Mission to Sudan to manage the Darfur conflict and the AU Mission in Somalia. In addition, the AU has had a supporting role in places like Burundi and the Ivory Coast.

Outside forces continue to participate actively in African military affairs. The US under former Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, started an initiative to deal with threats such as genocide and civil wars, and build capacity in weak states. Initially called the African Crisis Responsive Force, and later known as the African Crisis Response Initiative, it was meant to be an all-encompassing African program.[12] Military training and capacity building sessions were offered to Senegal, Uganda, Malawi, Mali, Ghana and Ethiopia. The US was later assisted by the UK and France in what is known as the P3 initiative to develop peacekeeping efforts among Africans to deal with African crises.

As of 2008, US involvement in the region has become more intense with the creation of Africom, a combatant command responsible for 53 African nations. The Africom initiative came about as a prediction by the US government that Africa would emerge in the 21st century as a safe haven for many international terrorist groups. It also perhaps signaled a shift in the US perspective of Africa, which earlier was viewed as a continent doomed to collapse with failing economies and pandemic corruption.

Some of the other players particularly in the African arms market include China, UK, France and Russia. China recently gave Senegal trucks, ambulances, communication and mining equipment worth $2.2 million. It has also provided military assistance to Rwanda, Malawi, Lesotho, DRC, and Chad among other countries. Russia continues to remain an important supplier as well – offering to improve Sudan's main battle tanks as well as upgrade other obsolete equipment.

Regionalism has also emerged as a way of certain African states exhibiting greater control over neighbours. The size and strength of African militaries today, vary considerably. Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia are examples of nations that can project their military force beyond their local area and into

foreign spaces, should it be required. As these countries augment their involvement in their respective regions, they have become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Interstate conflicts in Africa are a direct result of the political machinations within a state. While counterinsurgency operations are very difficult to manage for all African nations, it has allowed powerful states to intervene or realign their interests based on regional developments. A commonality of interests has meant that they can often draw upon "coalitions of the willing" to create African solutions to African problems. The African Union and greater participation in UN peacekeeping on the continent by African nations are direct offshoots of such planning and universality of their strategic thinking and interests.

Yet, while there has been greater international involvement in Africa's problems, its militaries continue to experience institutional weaknesses of a fundamental kind. As a result of this, its armies have not been able to fully utilize the advantages that come along with greater international participation. Among other issues, ethnic rivalries among members of the armed forces, domestic use of troops, disease, corruption, procurement and high "tooth-to-tail" ratios remain the biggest hurdles for any security sector reform in Africa.

Ethnic Rivalries – National armies continue to draw their base support and manpower from ethnic groups that already have political power or the largest groups within state boundaries. Minorities are either disbanded or declined for service in the armed forces. The emergence of a single larger-than-life leader or the domination of one political party creates rifts in societies because certain ethnic groups are given precedence over others. The promotion of one group (often at the expense of others) comes with the added quandary of placing all prominent resources into the hands of one as opposed to dispersing it equitably. Such biased treatment negatively affects national security because the general public does not recognize the armies or governments' legitimacy. It also serves to curtail the recruitment pool from which the armed forces can draw upon. Segregation of the armed forces serves to increase the level of apprehension people feel towards state despotism.

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Somalia's TFG is a case in point of a government that has to carefully balance the ethnic component of its armed forces to prevent desertions or uprisings. As a result, allotments have been made to the different

ethnic groups in the country including but not limited to the Majerteen, Marehan, Rahanwhein, Abgal and Saad. These forces are spread across Somalia, yet, it is very possible that these various clan representatives obey their clan leaders more so than their military commanders.[13]

Guinea-Bissau is another example of a military force that has been plagued with problems of professionalism around ethnicity. Many within its army have been accused of assisting rebels groups such as the Senegal's Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance. These links have resulted in a massive illicit proliferation of arms in the region.[14]

In Equatorial Guinea, the armed forces serve as a place for the majority ethnic clan to get access to arms and maintain a strong hold over the country. This has resulted in human rights abuses and severe repression.[15]

Domestic Use of Troops – Many a times, Africa's armies have been deployed to curtail internal unrest. This has served not only to weaken the bond between soldiers, but also created a severe rift between civil society and the armed forces. Often these forces are used to control domestic instability by political heads of states who wish to maintain their authoritarian control. Presidential Guards are created – an elite force whose sole objective is to keep big men in power. Such guards are given preferential treatment, higher salaries and are better trained. Redirecting state resources to protect and sustain totalitarian rule ends up creating parallel militaries in addition to national armies, and furthers resentment among troops.

The Nigerien army is a primary example of a place where larger numbers of personnel defected back to rebel movements after disputes occurred between the presidential guard and the regular army[16]. Disaffection amongst the ranks in Gambia has also resulted in several coups or coup attempts.

The DRC is another case in point of a country racked in internal conflict. The FARDC, an integrated army comprising of former government troops and rebel forces, has been facing stiff confrontation from dissident soldiers in the North Kivu area, under the leadership of renegade officer, General Laurent Nkunda.[17]

In the Ivory Coast, the national army, through its increasing involvement in domestic politics, has shifted the balance of political power. The military remains at odds with itself, struggling to unify its personnel.[18]

Disease – The prevalence of HIV/AIDS remains a huge problem for many of the armies of sub-Saharan Africa. When a large percentage of soldiers are infected, it affects the operational effectiveness of these militaries and reduces the professional lives of these soldiers through illness or death. Botswana has the second highest infection rate in Africa amongst adults around about 24.1%. Some 55% of the Zimbabwean Defence Forces remain affected, double the national average. Zambia is one of the worst affected armies due to the AIDS virus, and in 2003 announced that it would no longer recruit infected people. This is true of Swaziland as well, where the Umbutfo Swaziland Defence Forces introduced mandatory AIDS testing in 2004. As of 2008, about 26% of its forces are believed to be suffering from the virus. Namibia, Malawi and Kenya are some other African armies facing a severe crisis of the spread of HIV/AIDS among troops.

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Corruption – A severe paucity of defence money has exacerbated the problem of corruption in various African armies. Whatever little floats around has occasionally been siphoned off by officers to fund their private financial needs. Furthermore, army activities remain opaque and undisclosed to the general populace. In Nigeria, for instance, much of today's ineptitude and sleaze is a product of its earlier military dictatorship. In a process to professionalize the armed forces, the government under the Obasanjo regime, sacked 150 officers and has implemented a reform plan to reduce the size of the army by 40%.[19] Elsewhere in Congo-Brazzaville, army moral and loyalty has been critically affected due to low salaries, which are not paid on time. President Sassou-Nguesso is known to build a clientelist support base with regular handouts of cash and military promotions. This has allowed officers to operate in an environment lacking in accountability. Not only do they have direct access to the states' coffers, they also are immune from prosecution. One example of such a scenario is when corrupt commanders have often claimed the wages of thousands of "ghost soldiers", i.e. people who either do not exist or are not part of the armed forces.[20]

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countries with major corruption problems, where wages haven't been paid, and soldiers often turn to other illicit activities in order to provide for their welfare. Such practices in turn have an effect of subverting regional security.

Procurement – Procurement practices have limited military capabilities for most of sub-Saharan Africa. Since earlier trends had been to make random or questionable purchases, rather than rationalizing threat assessments to drive weapons acquisitions, most procurement practices are driven today by foreign governments or intergovernmental organizations. In the absence of military doctrines, the lack of enough monetary resources, and with the widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons, procurement for most sub-Saharan African countries has been limited, curtailed, driven by external powers, or completely absent. Most countries are acutely under-equipped, which has a direct impact on their militaries. This has created a security vacuum across swaths of sub-Saharan Africa, often shifting the monopoly on violence from the hands of the military to non-state actors.

High "Tooth-to-Tail" Ratios – The number of combat forces to non-combat related forces in Africa is among the highest in the world. Even those states with professional armies have too many war fighting units as compared to those in administrative or support roles. As of 2008, the tooth-to-tail ratio for South Africa was 1:2.3, Ethiopia 1:2, Kenya 1:1.6, Nigeria 1:1.5 and Ghana 3:1.[21] Compare these to the US for instance, where there is 5 support staff for every 1 soldier. African militaries tend to have too many soldiers as compared to support staff. As a result of this, tactical problems of sustenance, managing equipment, command and control tend to arise frequently in these armies. Furthermore, if deployed into the field, these armies cannot sustain themselves for too long because there is not enough emphasis being placed on rescue and recuperation of the wounded, upkeep of weapons and communication systems and logistical management.

This also prevents African militaries from developing effective naval and aviation capacities as well – the two arms of the services which require a particularly high level of maintenance capability lying on the tail end. The large number of senior level officers has created competition amongst members of the same rank, leading to disorganization and lack of professionalism.[22]

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All of these above factors have led to the formation of armies that are weak and rudimentary in design. There is a vague distinction between the civil and military space, with the latter often violating the liberties of the former. One of the greatest problems for intergovernmental organizations such as the AU remains their inability to do much about governments and big men that have come to power through coups or rigged elections. Lack of trust between the two often brings parties who accuse each other of electoral corruption to a clash. Thus, many Africans live in a state devoid of basic freedoms and fairness. Perhaps these armies are manifestations of larger trends across the continent – one that has its roots in governance and capacity building practices. They are an amalgam of traits from Africa's colonial and post-colonial past. Yet, it might be too early to make judgments on these budding militaries. Many such national forces are in the throes of replicating the Western model, and while deployments are limited, they are participating in military exercises and learning from the rest of the world.

Conclusion

It is impossible to capture the entire cultural, social and political gamut of the modern day African armed forces. It would also be impossible to make sweeping generalizations about them. What is clear is that while the military's role in external conflicts or traditional state-based wars has become more outstanding through increased interaction with other military forces from around the world, few analysts would go so far as to say that these foreign operations go beyond the role that these militaries play within the domestic sphere. Many African armed units end up becoming guardians of the political party or person in power. Many others have yet to face legitimate

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threats that can become the testing grounds for their improvement and professionalization. Some states have experienced complete collapse in the post-Cold War era, and are still recuperating. Such states still lack the fiscal power and the institutional structures necessary to maintain standing armies.

Increasingly over time, social security is also becoming privatized. When governments fail to provide basic civil protection, it rests upon citizens to fend for themselves. The increasing privatization has taken on myriad forms from the formation of private military companies or mercenary outfits to private policing. The security sector has become increasingly commercialized as soldiers turn to corporations or individuals for their wages. In other words, security has become a commodity of trade and the provision of such security is a business unto itself. In many parts of Africa, the institution of the armed forces has yet to gain legitimacy and recognition as a symbol of the state. Their most prominent features have so far been their divisiveness and their predisposition towards violence. Even "international peacekeeping missions, whether launched by the UN, the African Union, or sub-regional organizations like ECOWAS, do not provide the political accountability that accrues when military forces are deployed directly by and on behalf of their respective state sovereigns". Until the time that Africans do not address the basic concerns of its armed units such as salaries, equipment, training and reduction of corruption, military evolution will continue on a downward spiral. *idsa*

Notes:

1   Crowder, p. 45- 47
2   Crowder, p. 53
3   Crowder, p. 54
4   Michael Crowder describes this phenomenon in his book, *Colonial West Africa*, saying that the "education and training [Africans] received in the civil service and professions were not designed in the eyes of local governors to equip them for self-government" (p. 14).
5   Howe, p. 28
6   Howe, p. 28
7   Herbst, p. 130.
8   Thomas A. Dempsey, The Transformation of African Militaries, http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA510417#page=129
9   William D. Hartung and Bridget Moix (Jan 2000) "Deadly Legacy: US Arms to Africa and the Congo War", http://www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arms/reports/congo.htm
10   JHerbst, p. 136.
11   Thomas A. Dempsey, The Transformation of African Militaries, http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA510417#page=129
12   Mark Malan (1998) "Peacekeeping in Africa: Trends and Responses", Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper no. 31, http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/Papers/31/Paper31.html
13   Eleanor Kaymer (2009) Jane's World Armies, Issue 25, p. 632.
14   ibid, p. 297.

15   ibid, p. 223.
16   ibid, p. 513.
17   ibid, p. 191.
18   ibid, p. 167.
19   ibid, p. 516.20
20   ibid, p. 164.
21   Thomas A. Dempsey, The Transformation of African Militaries, http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-
        bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA510417#page=129
22   ibid
23   ibid