Review - United States-Africa Security Relations

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KEVIN DUNN, MAR 11 2014

United States-Africa Security Relations: Terrorism, Regional Security and National Interest
By Kelechi A. Kalu and George Klay Kieh (eds.)
London and New York: Routledge, 2014

I recently read an essay by a fellow at the Brookings Institute, a well-respected United States (US) think tank, bemoaning the fact that the US and its military were ignoring Africa much to its own detriment. The author suggested that the US military needed to have an increased presence on the continent (O'Hanlon, 2014)[1]. I spent much of my time scratching my head as I read the essay, because the situation he described distorts the current US-African security relationship. The fact is, the United States military has an active presence across the continent, just not one that grabs headlines as an occasional French intervention does. Kalu and Kieh, Jr's edited volume*United States-Africa Security Relations: Terrorism, regional security and national interests* (2014) has a bit of a better grip on reality, understanding quite well that the US has a growing military engagement with the continent. While recognizing that American policy-makers of the 20th century tended to treat Africa with "benign neglect" (pp. 10, 18) – except in the very noticeable exceptions of Cold War competition (e.g. Somalia, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, etc.) and high crisis situations (e.g. Congo in the 1960s) – they argue that the pivotal moment of US-African security relations occurred on 11 September 2001.

For the editors, as well as the contributing authors to this collection, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were a "game changer" (p. 12) for US-African relations and the international community at large. I remain unconvinced that the "game" of international relations (and the rules that supposedly govern it) were actually changed that much, despite the rhetoric from the Bush Administration at the time. I do, however, agree with the authors of this collection, that Sept. 11th provided a strategic framework for the US to focus its engagement with the African continent. The 9/11 Commission's Report famously noted that terrorists were and likely to increase using Africa as "a safe-haven, staging area, or transit point to target US interests" (p. 12). Of course, for the most part it has been US economic interests – most significantly access to oil and other treasured natural resources – that were the primary motivators for American policy makers. But now it was joined by a desire to combat terrorism worldwide. A number of the contributors shrewdly observed that America's pursuit of its "Global War On Terror" (GWOT) might actually be used to obscure its desire to capitalize on its economic interests. After all, most of American military aid happens to clump around oil-rich regions of the continent (noted quite well in Arogbofa's chapter, esp. pp. 174-176). But the book takes the George W. Bush administration's "war on terror" as its central framing point (with varying degrees of critical questioning across the contributors) and develops a few core engagements/questions from there: Where does Africa fit into the GWOT? What are the actual manifestations of the American policy in Africa? How will they impact Africa? And, perhaps, most central to this collection: what *should* American security policy towards Africa look like?

This last question is actually quite different from the previous three questions. The first two questions are descriptive, the third speculative and the last one prescriptive. When answering the first two questions, this collection provides some interesting and useful information. Particularly valuable are the three chapters (by authors Mbaku, Aning, and Arogbofa) that spend a significant amount of time engaging in the creation of the US' Africa Command (AFRICOM). But ultimately this book is a significant disappointment when it comes to answering these two core descriptive questions about US-African security relations. The simple reason for this being that the information in the book is already dated, with its focus on the George W. Bush administration, its 2002 National Security Strategy Report and

the "War on Terror." But Bush left office in 2008 and we are now well into the second term of Barack Obama. The Obama administration(s) have intentionally dropped the language of a GWoT, toned down the confrontational rhetoric of George W. Bush's administration, and have attempted to return American foreign policy towards the multilateral orientation that typified earlier administrations. Most of the book fails to address these developments and their implications for US-African relations. For example, the most recent data in the Tables (such as those concerning Africa's oil reserves and production on pp. 96-97 and US development assistance to Africa on pp. 159-160) are from around 2006. Yet, this book was published in 2014. Sadly, there are works published prior to this one that contain more up-to-date information and, therefore, analyses than this one. I'm merely guessing here, but I suspect the manuscript was delayed at some point, which is too bad. These analyses would have been extremely useful 5-10 years ago. Unfortunately, now they feel rather dated. Which is not to say there are not important observations being made throughout the book. But this reader is struck by how the book is responding to a specific moment in time – Bush's "War on Terror" – when global events and American policies seemed to be in flux, perhaps opening up avenues of possibility for Africa. But that moment has passed and those opportunities now seem quite out of reach. It is insightful to reflect upon why that is the case, but readers won't find that type of engagement here.

What readers will find, however, are several intelligent and articulate Africanists suggesting what American security policy towards Africa *should* be. The editors and the authors provide strong arguments for why American security interests should take seriously the issues of human security and development in Africa. In the early days of Bush's GWoT, as evidenced in the 2002 US National Security Strategy Report mentioned earlier, a good bit of lip-service was given to the notion that African states that were politically and economically weak were counter to American national interests because, in large part, they would be breeding grounds and safe havens for terrorists. In 2014, one can cynically observe how hollow that rhetoric actually was, and how the subsequent 12 years of US engagement with African has done little to address issues of human security and development. Indeed, the chosen path of both Bush and Obama's administrations has been selective engagement typified by pronounced militarization, arguably resulting in the exacerbation of human insecurity across the continent, as small arms continue to proliferate and illiberal but pro-US regimes entrench themselves, such as Museveni in Uganda. However, the authors of this collection do a good job of showing exactly why that should not have been the path taken. As the editors note in their introduction: "the relationship between national security interests intersects at that point where it meets human development to yield human security" (p.15). Furthermore, in his discussion of AFRICOM and its focus on a militarized response to loosely-defined "terrorism", Saine warns that "AFRICOM may well subvert the national security goals of development, peace, and stability in the region" (p.111).

Ultimately, this collection was frustrating to read and review, but not through any deficiencies in writing or analysis. Instead the frustrations came because it is so clear that the policy prescriptions they are advocating – namely a more even and reciprocal relationship between the US and African states, that interweaves national interests and national security with human security, development, growth and stability – have not been realized, and look unlikely to be so any time soon. This I believe is due to the US' myopic focus on extracting natural resources from Africa, whilst fearing both China as an economic challenger and a minority of radical Islamists as a security threat. Perhaps the biggest frustration is that this book was not published in 2002 and taken to heart by American policy-makers in the approach they should have taken with relations with Africa. For, in the end, this collection is more useful for its arguments about where we should be going, than as an adequate description of where we are now.

[1] O'Hanlon, M.E. (2014), 'Strengthen Stability in Africa.' [online] Available from http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/01/strengthen-stability-africa-ohanlon [7th March 2014].

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