

# FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

Security Challenges &  
Opportunities in the  
Next American Century:  
*A Conversation with*  
**David H. Petraeus**

---

Ukraine: Europe's New  
Proxy War?  
Geraint Hughes

---

Proxy Wars in Cyberspace  
Michael N. Schmitt & Liis Vihul

---

Purveyors of Terror  
Thomas Dempsey

# MASTHEAD

## EDITOR IN CHIEF

Haider Mullick

## MANAGING EDITOR

Sarah Detzner

## POLICY

Mollie Zapata, *Senior Editor*

Mark Duarte, *Staff Editor*

Jonathan Brands, *Staff Editor*

Katie Baczewski, *Staff Editor*

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

Travis Wheeler, *Senior Editor*

Ahsen Utku, *Staff Editor*

David Slungaard, *Staff Editor*

Leon Whyte, *Staff Editor*

Stephanie Brown, *Staff Editor*

## HISTORY

Greg Mendoza, *Senior Editor*

Barbara Chai, *Senior Editor*

Xiaodon Liang, *Senior Editor*

Matt Bruzzese, *Staff Editor*

Brian Wanlass, *Staff Editor*

## BOOK REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Pat Devane, *Senior Editor*

Deepti Jayakrishnan, *Senior Editor*

## MARKETING DIRECTOR

Elliot Creem

## BUDGET DIRECTOR

Mike Airosus

## WEB EDITOR

Kiely Bernard-Webster

## ADVISORY BOARD

James Stavridis

Richard H. Shultz

Robert L. Pfaltzgraff

## ONLINE & TWITTER

[www.fletchersecurity.org](http://www.fletchersecurity.org)

@fletchersecrev



The *Fletcher Security Review* builds on the Fletcher School's strong traditions of combining scholarship with practice, fostering close interdisciplinary collaboration, and acting as a vehicle for groundbreaking discussion of international security. We believe that by leveraging these strengths – seeking input from established and up-and-coming scholars, practitioners, and analysts from around the world on topics deserving of greater attention – we can promote genuinely unique ways of looking at the future of security.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Address letters to:

Editor in Chief, Fletcher Security Review

[editor@fletchersecurity.org](mailto:editor@fletchersecurity.org)

Or by mail:

Suite 609 Cabot, Fletcher School

160 Packard Avenue, Medford, MA 02155

### INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

Please send submissions to:

[editor@fletchersecurity.org](mailto:editor@fletchersecurity.org)

All submissions should be sent as a Microsoft Word file. Short articles should be 1,500 to 2,000 words and long articles should be 3,000 to 5,500 words.

### LISTINGS:

Columbia International Affairs Online

HeinOnline

Design by Ben Kurland, [www.bkurland.com](http://www.bkurland.com)

Copyright, 2013-2014. Fletcher Security Review.  
All Rights Reserved

# Plausible Deniability: Proxy Wars in Africa

▮ **Jennifer L. De Maio**

## A TOOL OF STATECRAFT

In the decades since independence, proxy wars have frequently threatened regional security in Africa. Many interstate and intrastate wars on the continent have become increasingly complicated by the involvement of opposing nation states using third parties as surrogates for fighting each other directly. As civil wars threaten to spill across borders and destabilize entire regions, the nature and extent of states using these wars as proxies for their own agendas needs to be studied more systematically.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union relied on proxy wars as a means of engaging the enemy indirectly and advancing their foreign policy agendas, while leaving minimal visible blood on their hands. These proxy wars between the superpowers played out across Africa, from the Horn to Angola to Mozambique. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the superpower competition for regional supremacy has been replaced by new proxy wars and trans-border alliances between African states and local armed groups. As Joseph argues, the recourse to proxy wars reflects the challenges faced by the African state and its inability to institutionalize democratic structures.<sup>1</sup> But the problem is much deeper. Engaging in proxy wars is a critical strategy for state-building,

and develops from calculations by state leaders to advance their policy agendas. Threatened regimes wishing to maintain their hold on power may allow and enable civil tensions to spill across borders and destabilize neighboring countries. This approach can be used as a means to consolidate power domestically and spread influence internationally. A civil war thereby becomes a proxy war between states, with the advantage that governments can distance themselves from atrocities committed by their proxies by either attributing blame to rebel factions or by just claiming that they are in fact not sponsoring any group.

This essay proposes that governments have an incentive to allow civil wars to spread across borders in order to engage in proxy battles with neighboring states. Governments can utilize proxy wars to strengthen their hold on the domestic state apparatus and to gain regional superiority. This strategy can include using militarily weak countries as proxies in order to assert their regional dominance and broadcast domestic power. Proxy wars can then advance domestic and foreign policy agendas while allowing states to avoid engaging in costly and bloody direct combat. The use of proxy war as a tool of statecraft is thus calculated and controlled.

## PROXY WARS IN AFRICA

In Africa, many proxy wars take the form of transnationalized conflicts, or

---

1 Richard Joseph, "Africa: States in Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 14.3 (2003):159-70.

civil wars that spill across borders. Escalation of civil wars can occur when groups forge alliances with affinity groups across their borders<sup>2</sup> and/or when outsiders perceive interests or opportunities in joining ongoing internal conflicts. External actors will take advantage of windows of opportunity in order to capture the spoils, often resulting in intentional spillovers, irredentism, or border conflicts.<sup>3</sup> An example of this use of transnationalized conflict as a proxy war can be seen with Tutsis in Rwanda, who allied with elements of Uganda's Hima ethnic group in the early 1990s to invade Rwanda and displace a Hutu-led regime.<sup>4</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Rwanda used claims of helping kinspeople defend themselves in order to access natural resources in northeast Congo. Ethiopia has also engaged in proxy wars

within Somalia with the aim of crushing radical Islam at its regional root.

Wars can erupt, escalate, and spill across borders as the result of extreme insecurity and ethnic distrust. When kin groups live in neighboring states, as often happens in the African context, civil conflict is likely to spill across borders.<sup>5</sup> But whether conflicts become internationalized depends in large part on the relations among African states. As states begin to look outward to expand their power and rally domestic support, they deliberately foment internal rebellions in neighboring states. External powers back internal rebellions in order to have local groups fight their international wars for them. By arming surrogates, they can advance their goals with minimum accountability and avoid international censure.

Governments, or political brokers, in Africa increasingly perceive opportunities to wage proxy wars for a variety of reasons against neighboring states. The increase in proxy wars illustrates the changing dynamics of Africa's relations between states. In the absence of the Cold War superpower competition for global dominance, there is much less engagement from the West with the African continent. In response, Afri-

---

2 Edmond J. Keller, "Transnational Ethnic Conflict in Africa," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 275-92.

3 Barry Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," in *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 103-24. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). David A. Lake and Donald S. Rothchild. "Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, ed. David Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 23-32.

4 Edmond J. Keller, "Culture, Politics and the Transnationalization of Ethnic Conflict in Africa: New Research Imperatives," *Polis/RCSP/Cameroon Political Science Review* 19 (2002).

---

5 Edmond J. Keller, "Transnational Ethnic Conflict in Africa," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 277.

can international relations have shifted their focus inward, towards the region rather than the world. The post-independence period in Sub-Saharan Africa was marked by respect for the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) Char-

***"The disparity in military, economic, and political power among the states in Sub-Saharan Africa is one key to understanding the increase of proxy wars."***

ter calling for noninterference in each other's domestic affairs.<sup>6</sup> In the decades since independence, African countries have made progress towards consolidating power domestically and now are looking outward to expand their power and secure or increase support for their policies. The borders defined by colonialism created interstate boundary situations throughout the continent that had enormous potential for conflict. The weak state capacity of many African nations has meant that they have

less control over their borders. For actors looking to advance their policy agendas and secure particular conflict outcomes, they may have an incentive to seize upon the inability of states to control and protect their borders and engage in proxy wars over border issues. Third parties can then be mobilized as proxies by states to fight over borders. These border conflicts, especially in cases where the borderland areas consisted of valuable mineral resources, thus become critical components of proxy war strategies.

The disparity in military, economic, and political power among the states in Sub-Saharan Africa is one key to understanding the increase of proxy wars. At independence, most African countries were in a similar position in terms of economic, political, and social development. In the 50-60 years since independence, the spectrum has widened between African countries on all dimensions. There are states that are vastly more powerful and wealthier than others. The gap between countries like North Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) is widening and this changing distribution of power has generated greater competition between states and has encouraged predatory behavior on the part of states with more resources. These richer, predatory states are eager to expand their spheres of influence, secure their hold on power domestically, and capture as many resources as "cleanly" as possi-

---

<sup>6</sup> Few wars were fought between African states – with exceptions such as the conflict in Western Sahara, which involved Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco – and destabilization campaigns undertaken by South African in Angola, Lesotho, and Mozambique.

ble, as is the case with the Khartoum government and the proxy wars with Chad and CAR.

The core realist hypothesis of international relations is that international outcomes are determined by, or at least are significantly constrained by, the distribution of power between two or more states.<sup>7</sup> As states weaken, they tend to look outwards as a means of consolidating support at home in order to remain viable. And as surrounding states fall into political or economic crisis, stronger regional powers have additional incentives to intervene and profit from the economic resources and opportunities that exist in neighboring states. What then happens is that states can allow civil tensions to spill across borders and utilize the escalation of violence in neighboring countries as a proxy war between governments.

African states wishing to advance their policy goals have also adopted proxy war strategies as a means of avoiding the violation of the norms of sovereignty championed in the OAU charter that make direct engagement difficult. Proxy wars allow states to distance themselves from appearing to be too involved in each other's affairs yet still be able accomplish their goals. The appeal of proxy wars for leaders derives from the fact that this strategy can reduce the

political and financial costs of full-born incursions. Proxy wars combine several lowered risk factors, notably an absence of combat deaths and plausible deniability. This strategy is particularly attractive to policymakers who appreciate the fact that no direct war implies "no overt military defeat if the war is lost, but continued influence and enhanced interest if the war is won."<sup>8</sup>

### DARFUR: A CALCULATED CRISIS

The crisis in Darfur further illustrates the argument that a government's domestic concerns and foreign policy goals can interact to produce the transnationalization of civil war. Specifically, the spillover of violence stems from calculations on the part of the Sudanese government, which is using the violence in Darfur to wage proxy wars in Chad and CAR. One of the most serious threats to domestic stability in Sudan comes from the Zaghawa ethnic group, which has the support of the Chadian state. The Zaghawa are on either side of the frontier and are excellent fighters. For Sudan, the Déby regime in Chad is nothing more than a Zaghawa state. Therefore, Sudan is determined to get rid of President Déby, who Khartoum views as a weak and powerless leader unable to control his followers. Chad has accused the Khartoum-backed Arab *Janjaweed* militia of attacking villagers in Chad.

---

7 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

---

8 Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).



Chad also alleges that Khartoum is backing the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD), which is a coalition of armed rebel groups and army deserters who have launched cross border attacks from Darfur. Sudan claims that Chad is supporting Darfur's National Redemption Front (NRF) rebels as they carry out cross-border raids.

With regards to the Central African Republic, Sudan has used its poorer neighbor to the south as a staging ground for attacks throughout its civil war. CAR says Sudan backs Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) rebels who have captured towns in the country. The

UFDR are allegedly operating from Darfur with the support of the Sudanese government.<sup>9</sup>

The common denominator in the three crises is Khartoum's political will, which drives the spread of the conflict in the region for reasons of regime security, economic expediency, and ethnic pride. Khartoum is motivated by several factors. First of all, the Sudanese government wants to control Darfur and is using the present ethnic cleansing to create an "Arab" environment. Secondly, Khartoum is threatened by Déby's Zaghawa ethnic group, which it perceives as "African" and, therefore, a potential ally for rebels in Darfur. Sudan's main objective, therefore, is to either eliminate Déby or force him into pro-Khartoum behavior. Control of oil in Chad is also a consideration for the Sudanese government. As long as Déby and the Zaghawa control the mineral wealth in the country, the Darfur rebels will have financial and material support. If that oil wealth were to be in the hands of a pro-Khartoum govern-

<sup>9</sup> Belachew Gebrewold, *Anatomy of Violence: Understanding the Systems of Conflict and Violence in Africa* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009), 185-6.

ment, Khartoum would have a better chance of defeating the rebels and of enjoying some of the spoils itself.

To be sure, the situation has become “a power grab that goes beyond the Darfur-specific agenda.”<sup>10</sup> Weakening state structures, political transitions, pressures for political reform, and economic problems can traditionally bring about vulnerability. Each of the above is present in Sudan. The Khartoum government is determined to fend off emerging political challengers and anxious to shift blame for whatever economic and political setbacks the country may be experiencing. As a result, the government is trying to bolster solidarity and its own political positions by engaging in power struggles with neighboring countries. In the case of Darfur, the governments of Sudan and Chad are each using ethnic alliances across their borders to consolidate and protect their positions at home.

### THE BENEFITS OUTWEIGH THE COSTS

As in other regions, international relations in Africa are no longer mostly global in orientation, but regional. African countries are looking to their relations with each other as a means of extending and consolidating power. But this new type of African foreign relations and

the proxy wars that accompany it tend to create problems of a much-expanded regional or sub-regional security dimension. Like direct warfare, they can destabilize countries and entire regions and have significant costs for the parties standing in for, and being manipulated by, states. These wars can also have serious implications for domestic and regional economic development by promoting longer-term political and financial dependency between the sponsor and the proxy. In addition, proxy wars can exacerbate tensions and increase the intensity and duration of the war.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite these costs, regimes benefit from proxy warfare versus state-to-state violence because of the high level of deniability for atrocities committed across borders and the political legitimacy that comes from spreading power and influence. As long as these benefits outweigh the costs for leaders, we can expect to see proxy wars continue as important tools of statecraft in Africa. 🌐

*Jennifer De Maio is an Associate Professor of Political Science at California State University, Northridge. She is the author of “Confronting Ethnic Conflict: The Role of Third Parties in Managing Africa’s Civil Wars” (Lexington Books, 2009) as well as papers on ethnic politics, civil wars and conflict management in Africa.*

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie McCrummen, “Sudan Severs Ties With Chad, Blaming It for Attack on Capital,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/11/AR2008051101866.html>.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



[WWW.FLETCHERSECURITY.ORG](http://WWW.FLETCHERSECURITY.ORG)



[@FLETCHERSECREV](https://twitter.com/FLETCHERSECREV)

