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New directions for African security

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ABSTRACT

African security, particularly conflict-related political violence, is a key concern in international relations. This forum seeks to advance existing research agendas by addressing four key themes: domestic politics and peacekeeping; security sector reform programs; peace enforcement; and the protection of civilians. Each of the articles in this forum makes a case for analyzing African agency when it comes to African security. As a way of introduction, this short article sets out the main debates and concludes by providing further directions for future research.

KEYWORDS Africa; security; peacekeeping; security sector reform; civilian protection; peace enforcement

African security, particularly conflict-related political violence, is a key concern in international relations. The Global Conflict Tracker of the Council on Foreign Relations, for instance, identifies 28 major ongoing conflicts of which nine are located in Africa (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). The tracker identifies, among others, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan. Similarly, 9 out of 16 United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations are deployed in African countries. This includes the five largest UN missions in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Mali, and South Sudan (United Nations, 2016). While the brutality of and resources committed to these conflicts naturally attract significant attention, insecurity in Africa goes beyond “hot” conflicts. Even in relatively stable African countries, weak governance systems leave open the space to reform state institutions, especially the security sector, thereby also exposing non-conflict-related insecurity (Ansorg, 2017).

As a theme of interest, African security has been somewhat of a blindspot for *Contemporary Security Policy*. While the journal has published research on

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armed violence, intervention, and conflict resolution since 1980, the emphasis has traditionally been on east–west relations. Indeed, up until 1993, the journal was published under the title *Arms Control*. Topics of arms control remain important as, for example, the articles on nuclear policy in this issue show. Yet over the years, the thematic and geographical scope of the journal has developed. CSP has paid attention, in particular, to European security both through NATO and the emerging European Union (EU) security policies. It has also increasingly published articles on Asian security, including India–Pakistan as well as the strategic implications of the rise of China and broader questions of strategic culture.

While the journal has included a significant number of articles on “Africa,” oftentimes they were not really about Africa. Rather they were about Africa as a venue for the international relations of great powers. For instance, the journal published a symposium on U.S. Africa Command (Jackson, 2009). It also included a series of articles on interventions by international actors in Africa (Bueger, Stockbruegger, & Werthes, 2011; Burgess, 2013; Burgess & Beilstein, 2013; Germond & Smith, 2009; Schmidt & Zyla, 2011). Some articles dealt with broader themes—such as failed states (Newman, 2009), non-state armed actors (Davis, 2009; Krause & Milliken, 2009; Podder, 2013), or civil war intervention (Goldman & Abulof, 2016)—and African states were part of the wider empirical data. In other words “Africa” often lacked its own agency in these important contributions. Admittedly, there have been some excellent articles about Africa “proper.” For instance, Burbach and Fettweis (2014) have written about the decline of warfare in Africa; Kinsella (2006) and Grip (2015) have published on small arms; and Rein (2015) has discussed how to promote peace and security through institutional cooperation. These articles, however, are the exceptions.

As mentioned in the most recent editorial statement, *Contemporary Security Policy* is committed to broadening its geographical scope to also include innovative research on Africa. To give this intention more substance, we have collected four articles on a wide range of topics relating to African security. The purpose of the forum is twofold. First, it is the clearest signal that this journal is open for business and it should be seen as an invitation for scholars working in this area. Second, it is an opportunity to outline some of the key conceptual advances and the major empirical developments on African security. The four articles open up new research avenues. In line with the ambition of *Contemporary Security Policy*, these articles provide broader (thematic) arguments about African security rather than descriptive detail through country case studies. As such they should be of interest to the broad audience of this journal. We are nevertheless aware that these four articles are unable to cover all of the important themes in African security research and practice.

In the remainder of this forum introduction, we discuss how these articles contribute to different research agendas, some missing reflections, and what we think remain key questions for the future.

Research on African security

As a starting point for this forum, Brosig (2017) makes a case for analyzing African politics when dealing with questions of African security. He notes that while many scholars study UN peacekeeping, for instance, they often treat peacekeeping as “an apolitical exercise” (p. 111). This is problematic because peacekeeping not only shapes the domestic politics of contributing African states, but is also shaped by the politics of these states. As African states now contribute the majority of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, it is worth engaging with the political motivations of UN peacekeeping contributors. While he is not the first one to make such points (cf. Cunliffe, 2013; De Waal, 2015; Kathman & Melin, 2016; <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/>), he introduces the concept of “rentier peacekeeping,” where African states extract rents from Western donors which they use for private gain. Empirically, he shows that the defense budgets of several African states are indeed largely funded as a result of the participation in peacekeeping operations. His examples of Burundi and Kenya particularly underscore the effect of such rent-seeking behavior.

The article by Ansorg (2017) nicely complements Brosig’s argument. She focuses on security sector reform (SSR) policies across Africa to make a case for increased attention to the local context in African states. SSR programs often follow donor-inspired templates, which typically ignore pre-existing security institutions. In the context of SSR, then, institutions are hard to change. The tendency of institutions to resist change is, of course, one of the central contributions of historical institutionalism to the social sciences (e.g. March & Olsen, 1989; Pierson, 2004; Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992). Yet, as Ansorg (2017) shows, in the most likely case of institutional change in the aftermath of conflict when there are major windows of opportunity to start anew, SSR programs often fail as a result of a lack of attention to the local context. And in more stable or transitional countries where there is the absence of exogenous shocks, “reform of the security sector is often very slow and gradual” (p. 140).

Like Ansorg, de Coning (2017) highlights the importance of the local within institutional contexts. In his contribution however, he challenges the prevailing assumptions that African stabilization missions take on the same characteristics as UN peace enforcement missions especially when the African Union (AU) and UN cooperate. He shows how seemingly shared meanings and practices can only be understood within their specific institutional contexts and why this matters for “how we assess, plan, manage,

command and evaluate the effectiveness of peace operations” (p. 158). He provides a useful remainder of how UN doctrine, with its emphasis on consent, impartiality, and the minimum use of force, differs from peace enforcement by the AU, before outlining the conceptual underpinning of AU missions across the continent.

In the final article, Gelot (2017) turns the readers’ attention to recent attempts by African actors to prioritize civilian protection in their regional security practices. This analysis provides theoretical innovation in its introduction of Africa as a “site of practice.” In the systematic analysis, Gelot shows the ways in which civilian protection is being inadvertently militarized. But, Gelot not only analyzes the activities that constitute civilian protection in Africa, she also engages with how the actors engaged in the practice understand the concept. In this way, Gelot’s contribution to this collection emphasizes the importance of African agency in how we write security studies and indeed international security practice.

Toward future research on African security

It is easy to see how some of these contributions can be used as openings to further research. Brosig’s (2017) intriguing notion of “rentier peacekeeping” opens up a research agenda, which forces us to consider the broader implications of domestic politics on international relations, and particularly the role played by African actors. Moreover, the local and institutional context of African politics is essential for understanding its international relations, which is the core message of both Ansorg (2017) and de Coning’s (2017) contributions. Ansorg’s work, in particular, highlights why success defined beyond attaining mission goals, often the criteria used by Western donors to measure success, requires that Western donors and allies take a step back and support rather than direct the logic of security on the continent.

In an increasingly interdependent world where security cooperation between security institutions is more than less likely, the tensions highlighted by de Coning in the AU–UN context requires international security scholars to give voice to and space for African conceptions of seemingly apolitical international security practices. Finally, the theoretical innovation of Gelot’s (2017) contribution in applying the practice turn within an African context coupled with her exploration of a new area of security concerns invariably broadens the conceptual and empirical dimensions of African security. This could serve as an opening to scholars of African security while forcing practitioners to reflect more carefully on their practices.

At the heart of these contributions is, of course, the way in which African actors seek to secure the most vulnerable. Recent feminist security studies have pointed our attention, in this respect, to the position and role of women and girls (Gaanderse, 2010; Hendricks, 2015; Okech, 2016). This

was also underlined when the UN Security Council adopted the famous resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000. Resolution 1325 is one of eight resolutions that make up the WPS agenda. Any future research agenda on African security requires us to consider the role of women and gender relations in Africa (Haastrup, 2013, 2015). Whereas the contributions to this forum have still largely focused on “traditional” sources or concerns of insecurity (with arguably the exception of Gelot), research that addresses the intersection of women’s lives with “security” can help to further define what security means in the African context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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