FEATURE

# DEBATING SECESSION AND THE RECOGNITION OF NEW STATES IN AFRICA

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It has become obvious that many African states remain unable to meet the most basic development needs of their respective citizenries after more than 40 years of political independence. In fact, many of these states were viable during the Cold War only with the assistance of their patron superpowers. Few appear viable now. Despite the promises of peace and prosperity that came with the Cold War's end, a number of states have since dissolved into civil war. From Angola in the south to Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa, and Somalia in the Horn, regimes have struggled with opposition movements which sometimes have a better grip on territory than the governments themselves. In some cases, the inability of governments to extend control over their territory has led political analysts to worry that terrorist cells are now able to operate with impunity in such countries.

Mobilizing the resources necessary to address Africa's problems has become particularly difficult at a time when the continent's share of global trade has shrunk to less than two per cent.[1] As a diplomat once observed, "Economically speaking, if the entire black Africa, with the exception of South Africa, were to disappear in a flood, the global cataclysm will be approximately nonexistent".[2] African conflicts have also frequently been allowed to run their violent course because the international community has been unwilling to commit sufficient resources and troops to bring security to the continent's people. Indeed, it might be said that Africa's problem is perhaps less one of exploitation by external powers, as commentators have long argued, than one arising from their profound neglect and indifference.

It is also not clear how to solve the challenges Africa faces. Africans and non-Africans alike have been puzzled by the continent's apparent resistance to standard models of development and conflict resolution. The possibility that reforming the African state system might improve Africa's prospects for development and peace is perhaps only the latest hypothesis to be debated among scholars. To date there has been little in the way of a consensus on how state reconstitution might work, or even whether it would work. Some scholars, such as William Zartman,[3] have argued that a more cautious approach which seeks to "reaffirm the validity of the existing unit and make it work" is more likely to yield positive results over the long term. Others have argued that conditions in Africa have deteriorated to such an extent that more creative solutions that go beyond the "steel grid" of the current state system need to be considered if progress is to be made.[4] A few, such as Jeffrey Herbst,[5] have argued that the international community's "dogmatic devotion to the current boundaries" should be discarded

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in favour of new forms of sovereignty. For Herbst, "[t]he inevitable disruption caused by state creation will ... have to be balanced against the profound harm that existing states ... do to their populations everyday".

Decisions about domestic considerations—what kind of government, what kind of state and so on—can and should be decided exclusively by Africans. But the issue of recognition is ultimately an external matter which involves a number of complex questions and dilemmas. Does the collapse or near-collapse of countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia or Sierra Leone reveal the dysfunctional nature of the African state? Does it provide a relatively low-risk opportunity for reform, since weak or non-existent governments have little or no capacity to object? Or has state collapse in a sense liberated Africa's people from the tyranny of their previous rulers? This would obviate the need for boundary reform, since most governments can no longer enforce their authority, and local government structures and administration would emerge on their own. Does recognition of new states imply the abandonment of all existing states and borders, or can it take place alongside the strengthening of existing governments, however weak?

## The rise and fall of the African State

The debate over reform of existing states and the recognition of new ones emerges from a fundamental weakness in Africa's current state system: the arbitrary nature of its colonial borders. A typical explanation for the continent's "legacy of tribal conflict", for example, is that it was "European colonizers [not Africans] who divided the region into administrative units little connected with ethnic identities".[6] While some scholars have debated the extent to which borders were drawn in accordance with existing political structures or identities,[7] few deny that the political entities that were created at the end of the nineteenth century marked a sudden and rapid change from what had existed before. Given the manner in which most African groups at the time tended to centre around the village or, in a few cases, around a decentralized kingdom, political boundaries, no matter how they were drawn, were bound to be arbitrary. "To draw any line to pull 200,000 or 300,000 square miles into a single territory," observes Donald Horowitz (1985: 76), "was necessarily to throw together a great many stranger-groups and to divide other groups".[8] What the colonial powers did then was to change the scale of the polity. The colonies were artificial not merely because they failed to respect the diversity of people within, but because the territories that resulted were often many times larger than the political entities which had previously existed.

Even if we consider the territories that eventually formed independent states in the 1960s (rather than the sometimes much larger colonial territories), the geographic extent of these entities is impressive. Consider that the size of the average African state is more than twice that of the average European state.[9] Another point worth raising is that the six countries of Eastern Europe (East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) whose political and economic transformations signalled the end of the Cold War, occupied an area of 990,329 sq km, which would easily fit inside one medium-sized African state like Angola (1,246,700 sq km). Their combined extent would take up less than half the size of the Sudan (2,505,813 sq km). In fact, all of the countries of Western Europe would fit into the DRC. The point is not that large states do not work (there are many large states that do), or that the developmental challenges faced by African states are attributable solely to their size. Rather it is that Africa's governments—some of which remain among the weakest and most incapacitated in the world—are expected to manage some of the world's largest, most diverse, and least developed countries.

Prior to 1945, the borders of most European states were relatively fluid. Also, owing to both centripetal and centrifugal forces, their governments tended to look for a size that was optimal for efficiency .[10] Newly independent African governments, by contrast, ruled in territories, large or small, which have not changed appreciably since independ-

ence. Their borders have generally not been allowed to expand or contract to reflect the capacity of the incumbent regimes; nor have African governments achieved a strength congruent with the vastness of their territories.

While alternative forms of political organization or even a reorganization of Africa's borders could have been considered at the time of decolonization, the opportunity was not taken. 'Decolonization' refers to the granting of political independence to former colonies rather than assuring sovereignty to the diverse peoples within each state.[11] With a few exceptions, African states did not get smaller to accommodate the aspirations to independence of each and every ethnic or religious grouping in a given former colony. In some cases, post-colonial states actually became larger, as different colonial territories were merged to form one independent state.[12] This was probably not the intended outcome. Even the parties to the 1885 Berlin conference, at which the colonial boundaries were first drawn, considered the possibility that "revisions" might be needed, "because possibilities and new requirements will probably reveal themselves".[13] Since decolonization, however, respect for Africa's existing borders has been entrenched in the charters of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the subsequent, and recently created, African Union (AU).[14] The reason is that, because most of Africa comprises multi-ethnic states, African leaders recognize that any effort to create another basis for statehood would jeopardize their own hold on power.

Some scholars contend that the viability of states is related to the existence of pre-colonial communities and identities onto which contemporary state structures, including democratic institutions, can be bolted.[15] From this perspective, the continuities and political traditions which evolved over the centuries in Africa remain significant today (as they do in Europe), and could continue to provide a foundation for political development in contemporary times. In contrast, discontinuities and the lack of a common political identity are sources of weakness. It is no surprise that large multi-ethnic states in Africa have failed or collapsed, because this has happened in similar states in Europe. The former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, for example, lumped disparate political entities together and kept them so by coercive means for much of their existence. The achievement of more viable states in Africa since the early 1990s, then, should have been a matter of identifying pre-colonial entities (where they existed), and rebuilding states on top of them.[16] Again, however, African leaders resisted serious consideration of more decentralized models of state formation which might have undermined their rule. Few of them were willing to experiment with new conceptions of political organization, even if they did reflect previous forms of governance.[17] For the leaders of Africa's independence movement, development was contingent on throwing off the bonds of colonialism. General Principle XIV of the 1964 United Nations (UN) Conference on Trade and Development, for example, stated that "complete decolonization…is a necessary condition for economic development and the exercise of sovereign rights over natural resources".[18] Indeed, while African borders may have been arbitrary, most leaders believed that having their borders effectively guaranteed would facilitate development, not obstruct it. This was because secure borders would free governments from having to defend their territories from external threats, and instead allow them to focus attention on political and economic development. Moreover, it was assumed that within these states ethnic divisions would fall away as these countries modernized. To them it did not matter that newly independent countries had ethnic cleavages. As the Guinean president, Sékou Touré, once argued, "In three or four years, no one will remember the tribal, ethnic or religious rivalries which, in the recent past, caused so much damage to our country and its population".[19]

The post-colonial years, however, did not lead to the bridging of ethnic divisions, as Africa's independence leaders had hoped. Nor did a political system which effectively guaranteed the security of African borders facilitate development in the post-independence

era. On the contrary, there was little imperative to develop, since regimes were not required to defend their citizenry from external threats. In this sense, the weakness of African states and the manner in which they achieved political independence were intimately connected. Many early European states were not so different from African ones in terms of ethnic and linguistic diversity. As in Africa, the challenge for Europe's leaders was to develop a common national consciousness throughout a territory. Italy, observed the Austrian statesman, Clemons von Metternich, was also merely "a geographic expression".[20] Similarly, as E H Carr observed, "one of the chief obstacles to the growth of a common German national consciousness was the difficulty in persuading Prussians, Saxons, and Bavarians to treat the good of Germany as more important than the good of Prussia, Saxony and Bavaria".[21] The difference for African states was that they did not have to fight for their independence in the way that some European states had to battle for their survival.

War was of central importance to the political development of European states insofar as it compelled them to develop a strong and efficient state infrastructure. According to Jeffrey Herbst[22] and others,[23] for all its destructive tendencies, war also helped in the consolidation of a national identity forged out of a common fear of an external "other". While African states frequently did have inspired anti-colonial movements, the threat posed by the colonial powers themselves was never sufficient to overcome the deepest internal cleavages. In some cases, such as Angola, the DRC and Rwanda, the intense competition for political office which emerged prior to independence merely exacerbated these differences.

In the absence of a common national consciousness or durable political institutions which could manage or direct political energies to constructive ends, African leaders looked to a number of means to keep their states together. Fearful of divisions which could undermine their rule and fragment their countries, regimes abandoned the democratic constitutions left by departing colonial powers in favour of "popular dictatorships", in the case of Guinea for example.[24] As their rule became increasingly precarious, some of them sought to develop strategic relationships with superpower patrons, who in return provided military aid to keep these struggling client regimes afloat. In a further effort to sustain themselves in power, these "toxic states" sought to compensate for their weakness by bombing into submission those who challenged them.[25] This may have sustained them in the short term, but it also led to the demoralization of the government's own troops and to the creation of other sub-state entities. Some of the latter, being born out of war, became more coherent and capable than the regimes they were fighting.

Patronage by America or Russia, then, served only to conceal (and, in the end, exacerbate) the dysfunctional nature of many African states. Without superpower assistance, countries such as Somalia had insufficient means to sustain a durable state structure. Instead such states learned to adapt themselves parasitically to whatever resources were available. Not surprisingly, client states such as Ethiopia, Somalia and Zaire collapsed after the Cold War (and their patronage by the superpowers) ended. In some cases the political movements which delivered the final *coup de grâce* to these regimes either took up residence in the capital or carved out their own areas of control within the broader failed state.

Africans now live in an era that follows the collapse of the state. The question now is: What should be done? Should Africa's states be changed to reflect the realities within, and in a way which might make development possible? Or is African state-building only in the early stages of a centuries-long project which requires patience and support, but not necessarily a restructuring of the state system itself?[26] The next section of this paper considers more specifically the arguments that can be made in favour of reforming the state system and recognizing new states.

## The case for reforming Africa's state system

The legacy of civil conflict and state breakdown has meant that in many places in Africa, the international community has little choice but to work with local and substate political entities rather than national ones. In Somalia, for example, neither the local parties themselves nor the international community have been able to re-establish a government in the capital whose authority extends beyond the city limits.[27] As Hussein Adam and Richard Ford wrote in 1998, "What is clear is that any form of national institution will have only limited power and authority. The wounds and scars of the past ten years are too great at this point to think of a unified and centralized entity".[28] Similarly, and more recently, Matt Bryden[29] has written that the "abusive practices...of the military regime–state sponsored violence, institutionalized repression, authoritarian and corrupt leadership–comprehensively and enduringly damaged the Somali confidence in the institutions of the state". Predictably, following the collapse of the government in Mogadishu in January 1991, many Somalis rejected national solutions and opted instead for smaller and more localized peace processes which have sometimes demonstrated greater accountability. Despite the expensive and very public efforts at national peace-building in Somalia during the early 1990s, only local reconciliation efforts bore fruit.[30] As Ken Menkhaus observed,

> Somalis have well-established social mechanisms for managing interclan conflict at the local and regional level, traditional practices that were resilient enough to step into the vacuum created by the collapsed Somali state. When those grassroots institutions were recognized and assisted rather than marginalized, they were at least sometimes able to overcome deep-seated clan hostilities and forge durable local reconciliation. [31]

Between 1996–2000, these locally-based approaches produced "relative security, stability, and functional (or at least incipient) administration" in more than half of Somalia's territory.[32] Somaliland, the largest and most significant of these political entities, has since gone on to develop a number of features normally associated with formal statehood, including a "national" government, a currency, vehicular licence plates, and a well-established sense of self.[33]

A number of reports demonstrate how these substate administrations can result in regional variations in development. Even prior to the collapse of the Mengistu government in Addis Ababa, Eritrea's per capita income was twice that of the rest of Ethiopia.[34] The 2001 UN Human Development Report indicates that in Somalia, levels of human development are differentiated. They are generally higher in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, where a government has been established, than in southern and central Somalia, where food insecurity, armed conflict and low household incomes have remained persistent problems. Moreover, investment in road and port rehabilitation has also been possible in northern Somalia, allowing for increased volumes of trade, while similar infrastructure in the south has experienced rapid deterioration owing to ongoing conflict and an absence of effective governance.[35] Clearly, the north's ability to manage its internal conflicts has produced benefits in terms of development and rehabilitation.

These experiences in Somalia suggest that substate entities may be the way of the future. The decision of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun, to work with four major ports of delivery during the Somali crisis in mid-1992 recognized both the variations in developmental needs and the existence of four main power blocs in the region.[36] In other regions of Africa, de facto control of territory by rebel movements has meant that the UN and its agencies have had to deal with these entities if they wanted to provide development resources to those on the ground. In the days prior to the fall of the government of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, for example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was required to maintain operations in what were essentially two separate states. One was

controlled by an increasingly weak *de jure* government in Kinshasa, and the other was a de facto state under the *Alliance des Forces Démocratics pour la Libération du Congo* in the eastern regions of the country.[37] In this sense, the issue of supporting or recognizing substate entities in an era of collapsed states is as much one of operational necessity as it is a political choice for the international community.

A second and related justification for the recognition of new states is that reform is the only means to eliminate or even manage violent conflict between groups. Where necessary, Africa's borders should be redrawn so that states do not encapsulate so many different and incompatible groups, and so that bitter adversaries can be separated. Many Africans point to a double standard when it comes to the international recognition of new states. Why is it acceptable to redraw political boundaries to separate disputants or peoples in the former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Soviet Union, when the differences between African groups are equally profound? Western scholars and statesmen preach the merits of coexistence and ethnic pluralism, but they do so from countries which have already been through a process where local identities have been sacrificed for a common national one, or where peoples have effectively sorted themselves out ethnically. It is not that multi-ethnic states are inherently conflictual. On the contrary, most states are multi-ethnic and have developed mechanisms which manage these differences effectively. As a number of scholars have pointed out, multi-ethnic states have also been among the most stable political entities.[38] The problem is, however, that if conflicts are not effectively contained and violence does break out, these experiences become woven into the identities of the communities themselves. It becomes extremely difficult to put war-torn communities back together except in the presence of some new authority which can assure the security of each party.

Critics of secession and partition argue that the fears of disputants are usually unfounded; that the oppressors usually want only to protect their interests rather than to engage in the actual extermination of their adversaries. Moreover, they claim that advocates of partition have yet to produce "proof" that partition is still the only viable and credible solution in the aftermath of these ethnically-motivated civil wars.[39]

Of course, there are a number of institutional solutions to ethnic conflict that stop short of secession, including consociational power-sharing schemes or federalism. But those who take what is in effect a *primordial* view of identity formation see little hope of forging a common sense of nationhood in factions brutalized by war.[40] Minority groups might prefer democratic rule in theory, but resist it in practice (for example Tutsis in Burundi and Rwanda, or Sunnis in Iraq) by spoiling peace processes if effective guarantees cannot be put in place. Power-sharing agreements between former disputants have also proved an unstable form of post-conflict governance, and rarely stand the test of time. And while federal arrangements can be an effective means of balancing the need for autonomy while maintaining state integrity, rebel movements are often wary of them. In a continent where states are so poorly institutionalized and where even the most extreme violence does not elicit international intervention, it is simply not enough to rely on federalist provisions. The implementation of these is ultimately dependent on mercurial leaders in the capital, who can retract them at will.[41]

Consequently, groups opt for formal independence because statehood promises to lessen their vulnerability. While recognition is itself a legal procedure, it is the entitlements that it allows which are most attractive from the disputants' point of view. Formal independence is the only reliable means of defence because it provides groups with the right to take up arms to defend themselves. If the international community is not willing to intervene when political movements are threatened with violence, then it should come as no surprise that some groups should demand political independence.

In many cases, there is justification for the fears of former rebel movements. Consider Rwanda, for example, where the rhetoric of

Hutu extremists following the breakdown of the 1993 Arusha Accords was matched only by the intensity with which they sought to eliminate the entire Tutsi population.[42] Or recall the experiences of both Eritrea and northern Somalia (Somaliland), where government aircraft repeatedly bombed civilian targets and engaged in acts of brutality.[43] Indeed, as Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis have argued, in the midst of weakening or collapsed states, disputants may take the view "that the other is such a menace that they can be secure only if it is crippled, if not destroyed".[44] From this perspective, it is not a question of providing "proof" that partition is the only viable and credible solution to ethnic conflict; rather it is a question of ensuring *perceived* security gains for the disputants. While many may lament the fragmentation and demise of Yugoslavia, few have regrets about the security it has brought them. Similarly, in Africa, few Eritreans say that they would have been better off staying within Ethiopia, after years of violent civil war during which they were left to fend for themselves.[45] Consequently, one can accept that partition does not "help prevent recurrence of ethnic war", as Nicholas Sambanis argues,[46] and still recognize that for some groups partition—escape—will be regarded as the only acceptable option.

Interestingly, most scholars who contextualize partition in terms of conflict and conflict resolution recognize that partition can be avoided if anarchy is controlled. African leaders, however, have now become accustomed to a timid international community which is more interested in rescuing its own expatriates than in restoring order. At some point, then, the international community must accept that if it is not able or willing to step in and manage political transitions or defend groups being assaulted by their adversaries, then local disputants will see few alternatives to the creation of new states.

## The case in favour of the status quo

The arguments of those who reject partition often comprise merely an inventory of all the things that can go wrong in the event of partition, rather than the making of a positive case in favour of the status quo. To be sure, many observers of Africa recognize the challenges to development and conflict resolution that exist in large, arbitrarily assembled and poorly institutionalized African states. Although 40-odd years is perhaps too short a time to make a definitive judgment on the continent's record of governance, Africa's experience of the type of state structure that has existed since independence does not give one much hope for the future. But how can one be sure that Africa's troubles are solely the result of supposedly arbitrary colonial boundaries? Or that changing these boundaries and recognizing new states will reduce complications in the long run?

Beyond these general concerns, two broad sets of arguments can be advanced for maintaining the status quo. The first of these arguments questions the motivations for, and the actual benefits of, reform and the recognition of new African states. While their argument was not necessarily one in favour of the status quo (in fact quite the opposite), Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg[47] claim that the recognition of African states in the 1960s did little to promote their development. Once recognition is granted, they argue, "there are few if any compelling international pressures on governments to engage in state building.... On the contrary, in so far as it will not cost them their sovereignty and the significant privileges and perquisites which go with it, they are at liberty to neglect development". In short, instead of focusing on development, African leaders were relieved by recognition of the burden of state-making, and many saw it as an opportunity to enrich themselves instead.

The trend in Africa toward seeing statehood in terms of self-interest rather than as allowing national problems to be addressed has continued to the present. Ken Crossley[48] even questions the degree to which those who aspire to statehood have an interest in development. He argues that while there may be legitimate grievances among ordinary people, there is little genuine interest in the actual *resolution* of these issues on the part of what is

frequently a self-appointed local leadership. He argues that the leaders of the various factions would rather engage in the *process* of conflict resolution (which affords them the comparative luxury of endless meetings in fancy hotels in European and African capitals) than undertake the more challenging task of government. The case of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army in the Sudan is given as an example, Similarly, Ken Menkhaus has observed that in southern Somalia critical reconciliation issues, such as property return and compensation, or political issues such as decentralization, representation, taxation and budgetary sustainability, are never considered. Instead, he argues,

> all energies are devoted to protracted wrangling over 'seat banking' by clan, followed by internal squabbles within each clan over which political figures may claim its allotted seats. This inevitably causes rapid inflation in the number of seats in parliament and proposed ministries—designed solely to buy off and satisfy as many clans as possible—leading to bloated and utterly unsustainable administration. [49]

It is not that the southern Sudan is not entitled to become an independent state or that the incipient government in Mogadishu should not be recognized. Rather the point is that care has to be taken not to support any movements with a dubious interest in the welfare of ordinary citizens. Despite protestations and efforts to demonstrate the contrary, the attributes, infrastructure and credibility that local elites require to make their states politically and economically viable are often absent.

All of this raises questions about the possibility that identities are being fabricated by self-appointed local leaders or a political diaspora, both of which which seek to benefit from the acquisition of statehood. Another concern is that in pursuing a decentralizing approach to state-building, the international community risks being unduly charmed by the appeal of charismatic grass-roots leaders. Indeed, some critics[50] have questioned the nature of the links between local leaders and civil society, and claim that naive assumptions about wise community elders who are beyond reproach are seductive but ill-founded.

Clearly, however, there are important exceptions to these tendencies. Somaliland, for example, has persisted in its independence agenda despite its lack of major foreign donors. Similarly, while Eritrea has shown greater willingness to accept outside assistance in recent years, the country demonstrated marked discipline and an impressive desire for self-reliance both before independence and during the early years of statehood. Moreover, while patron states were willing to lavish funds and other perquisites on their clients in the context of the Cold War, these same benefits are now unlikely to be forthcoming except where African countries can demonstrate progress in democratic and economic reforms. Any discussion of recognition then must, as always, involve an important element of due diligence.

The second set of arguments against partition begins with the view that political independence for one group will create a precedent or demonstration effect leading all other similarly oppressed groups to consider secession as well. Moreover, given that no state can be ethnically pure, attempts to redraw borders will inevitably create new nervous minorities. It is simply impractical to think that a state can or should be created for every group that has at one time aspired to self-determination. While it may be true that colonial map-makers did not always take the ethnic composition of their proposed colonies into account, such a project was never feasible. For example, if language were to be used as the basis of state formation, Nigeria's 248 distinct linguistic groups would provide grounds for skepticism.[51] In Ethiopia, the government's efforts to create more or less ethnically homogeneous states during the 1990s ran into difficulty because its southern region is divided among more than 40 nationalities. From this perspective, the states of contemporary Africa should not be regarded as having failed. On the contrary, given that Europe's nationality problem was solved only through wars and population transfers which

took place over centuries, interstate conflict among African states has been relatively minimal. In these terms Africa's states should be regarded as having achieved a comparative success.

So many African states have ethnic cleavages that they might all be subject to fracture if divided according to ethnic or religious groupings. Not only would the resulting fragmentation create an unmanageable and perhaps undesirable proliferation of fragile and dependent states,[52] but the mere prospect of such an occurrence and the message of weakness it sends would lead existing central governments to strenuously resist such changes. As Barbara Walter[53] has observed, governments rarely allow sections of their territory to be severed because "their reputation for resolve is intricately tied to their ability to defend and maintain their territory. Once it becomes clear that governments can no longer defend their own sovereign territory, they become attractive targets for any domestic or international foe". Indeed, even in Europe, political borders have been changed only in the aftermath of great wars—and only for the defeated powers. From this perspective, then, reforming Africa's current borders could never be executed peacefully except in cases of total state collapse. Indeed, African specialists have declared that this is a particular problem for African states because territory and territorial integrity remain of critical importance, particularly in peasant-based societies. The prospect of a rebel movement undermining even Africa's large and multi-ethnic states can elicit strong nationalist responses.[54]

On the other hand, existing governments may be more willing to accommodate secessionist movements if they believe it might relieve them of the burden of fighting them in the future. For example it was clear that new Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government in Addis Ababa recognized that the secessionist war in the north could not be won. It was therefore willing to respect the democratic wishes of Eritreans as expressed in the 1993 referendum.[55] Some governments may be more accepting of secession if it leaves an ethnically homogeneous rump state rather than a multi-ethnic state that could continue to splinter. The government of Czechoslovakia was more amenable to the secession of the Slovak Republic in the early 1990s than were the leaders of a larger multi-ethnic state, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the early twentieth century. Secession set a less risky precedent in the former than in the latter case.[56]

Proponents of partition claim that fears of a chain reaction of secessions are unfounded. Michael Lind, for example, argues that worldwide the likely number of new states "is in the dozens, not in the hundreds or thousands". According to him,

> While there are thousands of ethnic nations in the world, there are at most only dozens of national groups numerous, unified and compact enough conceivably to serve as the nuclei of sovereign nation states. The impossibility of basing nation states on tiny minorities like Sorbs or Wends in Germany or the Amish in the United States in no way discredits the potential for statehood of the Kurds or the Ibo or the Tibetans...If the world survived the rapid expansion of the number of UN member states from 52 in 1946 to 183 today, surely it can survive a more incremental expansion by a dozen or two more.[57]

But Africa, with its hundreds if not thousands of ethnic groups, would appear to be the exception. Even here, however, it is not clear that one incident of secession leads to similar aspirations among other ethnic groups within the same state. In Ethiopia, for example, the secession of Eritrea in 1993 has not led to the fragmentation of its other regions, even though the country's administrative units are based to some extent on ethnic identity (which, at least in theory, entitles them to self-determination).[58] Similarly, in neighbouring Somalia, aspirations to political independence are associated only with Somaliland, although other regions have established rudimentary administrative structures.[59]

## Shortcomings in the existing debate and an exploration of alternatives

The response to the issue of boundary reform and recognition of new states depends on one's level of analysis. The international community's preference for stability and order among states will lead it to emphasize the status quo and minimal or no alteration. The process of border reform involves too many uncertainties and risks, as even its proponents admit. The arguments for change, however, become more compelling as one moves from the global to the local level. Recent trends in developmental thinking have emphasized the benefits of decentralization.[60] With respect to group security, disputants in civil wars may also feel secure only if they are able to enjoy the entitlements of statehood, specifically the right to arm themselves. In any event, the chronic weakness of many existing states and the emergence in some locations of what are sometimes more effective states-within-states will make it difficult for the central government to regain its authority.

The task then is to find alternatives which both meet the development and security needs of local citizens and do not unsettle the international community. The problem is that currently this balance does not exist. Since World War II, the globe has been levelled into a single format or category: the sovereign territorial state.[61] While there are, indeed, significant differences in terms of development, population and (perhaps most important) state capacity, the *formal* or *legal* international hierarchy has been eliminated. State recognition has become an all-or-nothing affair. This has consequences for development. Somaliland, for example, has been unable to persuade international financial institutions such as the World Bank to provide funding because of its lack of formal status. As one Somaliland politician observed, "After a certain point, you can't go any further. You need recognition".[62]

Not surprisingly, then, there have been calls for alternatives to the existing state system which address the needs of local populations but do not necessarily involve the redrawing of state borders or the creation of new states. Gidon Gottlieb[63] writes, for example, that "there should be some intermediate status between politically subordinate autonomy and territorial sovereignty that can ease the relationship of nations without a state of their own to the remainder of the world community". He calls for "a deconstruction and rearrangement of [the] rigid concepts of territorial borders, sovereignty and independence" in favour of "soft" solutions which do not alter political borders or make new states. This might make such a solution more acceptable to existing governments. Instead of mutually exclusive jurisdictions, these "functional spaces and zones" and "historic homelands" would involve multiple and overlapping jurisdictions and authority.[64] Such an arrangement would allow for recognition to be granted to nationalities so that they have international standing, even if their territorial claims do not.

Ironically, perhaps, the experience of Somalia may provide some of the best insights into how to deal with state collapse and issues of conflict resolution, development and recognition. Beginning in 1998, the UN began to distinguish between regions of Somalia in terms of recovery, transition and crisis zones. In so doing, the UN and its agencies attempted to tailor their humanitarian and rehabilitation strategies and types of external assistance to meet the most pressing needs of each environment. The international community has also experimented with newer methods of state rebuilding. In Somalia since 1998, the UN has adopted the so-called "building block" approach, which is meant to reflect this bottom-up vision of state reconstruction. As some observers have recognized, the idea of building-blocks is less an approach than a reflection of the current situation in failed or weak states, in an acknowledgment that the many previous efforts to rebuild a central government have been fruitless. The proponents of "building blocks" seek to base their efforts on existing though smaller-scale and more localized successes, and to take advantage of the regional administrations that have already established themselves in various regions.[65]

Clearly, there is a need for flexibility on the part of the international community and for a variety of responses to Africa's problems of underdevelopment and conflict. The point is not for the international community to endorse anything and everything. Rather it is to identify and work with effective structures which promise to bring about genuine development; and to strengthen those that need support, so that they can become effective, democratic and benevolent. Beyond this approach, four tasks can be proposed.

- First, the international community must distinguish predatory movements which are incorrigible and need to be sidelined from those which can be engaged and encouraged to practice good governance. Examples of the former are those led by Charles Taylor and Foday Sankoh (both of whom controlled relatively large, sometimes state-like territories in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively),[66] while instances of the latter are the Somaliland government in northern Somalia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in Eritrea. While the latter movements have not been flawless, they have demonstrated a greater capacity for responsible government than the former. Indeed, enhancing their credibility may be an effective means of socialization and go a long way toward making them constructive partners in the larger project of rebuilding the state.
- Second, in situations of humanitarian disaster which have been precipitated by predatory groups or individuals, the international community should acknowledge publicly the sovereignty of the existing state and do more to help the recognized government to neutralize the coercive capacity of the threatening group.
- Third, in cases of humanitarian disaster precipitated by the existing state, it may be necessary for the international community to intervene and to provide protection to the people most at risk. This can be done by creating a temporary state-within-a-state or trusteeship, or by allowing the local group that has been targeted to maintain the means to defend itself. The objective here is to provide space and incentives for an agreement rather than a permanent two-state solution.
- Finally, in the few cases where a virtual state-within-a-state already exists and has an apparently irreconcilable rift with a dysfunctional or collapsed 'parent' state, the international community may have no choice but to consider some sort of recognition for the former.

To sum up, it would be simplistic to argue that either the status quo or the redrawing of borders is the correct solution in all cases in which the territorial integrity of African states is threatened. The challenges facing Africa and much of the developing world are profoundly complex. Addressing them requires patient and careful attention to local circumstances. The international community should be aware that whatever options are chosen, they will need to be accompanied by trade-offs. While the scholars are remarkably divided on the issue of secession, the tendency to date in policy circles has been to leave things as they are. There is value in remaining conservative on issues of secession. The criterion for the creation of new states needs to be an exacting one in order to prevent a proliferation of weak states. On the other hand, maintaining the status quo may not advance development and conflict resolution either. Therefore it may be advantageous to consider appropriate and carefully calibrated alternative solutions.

## Notes

1. Africa's share of world trade fell from more than three percent in the 1950s to less than two percent in the mid-1990s. If South Africa is excluded, this figure falls to only 1.2 %. See World Bank, *Can Africa claim the 21st Century?* World Bank, Washington, 2000, p 20.
2. M Chege, Remembering Africa, *Foreign Affairs*, 71(1), 1992, p 148.
3. I W Zartman, *Collapsed states: the disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1995, p 268.
4. C Young, Self-determination, territorial integrity, and the African state system, in I W Zartman & F Deng (eds) *Conflict resolution in Africa*, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 1991, pp 320-346.
5. J Herbst, *States and power in Africa: comparative les-*

*sons in authority and control*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p 267.

6. H Handelman, *The challenge of Third World development*, 3rd ed, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 2003, p 82.
7. S Touval, *The boundary politics of independent Africa*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1972.
8. D L Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 76.
9. If there are 53 African countries spread over a continent of 30,293,000 sq km, the size of the average African state is approximately 571,566 sq km. Compare this figure with Europe, where there are 35 countries spread across a territory of only 10,245,000 sq km. In Europe's case, the average size is 219,714 sq km, less than half the size of the average African state.
10. R Bean, War and the birth of the nation state, *Journal of Modern Economic History*, XXXIII (1), 1973, p 204.
11. R Jackson, *Quasi-states: sovereignty, international relations, and the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.
12. The two colonies of Italian Somalia and British Somaliland were united to form the Republic of Somalia soon after both achieved independence in 1960. The British Southern Cameroons and the former French Cameroons were also united in 1961 (although this marked the *re*unification of German Cameroon, which had been between Britain and France in 1916 following the defeat of Germany in World War I).
13. Cited in Herbst, op cit, pp 258-59.
14. Article III of the OAU Charter called for "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence". Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which has now superseded the OAU, calls for "respect of borders existing on achievement of independence".
15. C Clapham, *War and state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea*. Paper presented to the colloquium, La guerre entre le local et le global. Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, 2000, p 15; R Putnam, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993; and Herbst, 2002, op cit, pp 29-30.
16. Others have argued, however, that the political foundations which would have served as the basis for contemporary states were effectively erased by colonialism, or were denied by an elite group of Africans determined to embrace the modern state. See B Davidson, *Black man's burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state*, Times Books, New York, 1992.
17. Herbst, op cit, p 100.
18. R Jackson and C G Rosberg, Sovereignty and underdevelopment: juridical statehood in the African crisis, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 24(1), 1986, p 20.
19. S Touré, *Toward full reafricanisation*, Presence Africaine, Paris, 1959, p 28.
20. Putnam, op cit, p 121.
21. E H Carr, *The twenty years' crisis, 1919–1939*, Macmillan, London, 1956, p 166.
22. J Herbst, War and the state in Africa, *International Security*, 14(4), 1990, pp 117-139.
23. C Tilly, Reflections on the history of European state-making in C Tilly (ed) *The formation of national states in Western Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975; and S P Huntington, *Political order in changing societies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968, p 123.
24. S Touré, The role of the party, in R Emerson & M Kilson (eds) *The political awakening of Africa*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, pp 129-134.
25. M Bryden, *Reviving the Somali peace process: perspectives and prospects in the Post-Arta period.* Paper presented to the 8th Congress of the Somali Studies International Association, Hargeisa, 2001, p 2.
26. Samuel Makinda writes, for example, that "it is tempting to assume that in places like Liberia and Somalia—where anarchy has emerged—a viable state might have existed and it disintegrated when the Cold War ended. Yet the truth is that, in much of Africa, the state has not fully emerged. The process of state-making is still in its early stages". S M Makinda, Book Review of *Africa in the new international order: rethinking state sovereignty and regional security,* E J Keller & D Rothchild (eds) in *Survival* 39(4), 1997.
27. Anonymous, Government recognition in Somalia and regional political stability in the Horn of Africa, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40(2), 2002, pp 247-272.
28. H Adam R Ford, *Removing the barricades in Somalia: options for peace and rehabilitation*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 1998.
29. M Bryden, *Undiscovered options: a way forward for Somalia?* Unpublished paper, 2002, p. 2.
30. According to K Menkhaus, International peacebuilding and the dynamics of local and national reconciliation in Somalia in W Clarke & J Herbst (eds) *Learning from Somalia: the lessons of armed humanitarian intervention*, Westview 43, Boulder, 1997, p 60, "of the seventeen national level and twenty subnational Somali peace conferences from 1991 to 1995, the only examples of successful reconciliation occurred at the local and regional level".
31. Ibid, p 60.
32. Bryden, 2002, op cit, p 2.
33. I S Spears, Reflections on Somaliland and Africa's territorial order, *Review of African Political Economy*, 95, 2003, pp 89-98; and S Touré, The role of the party in R Emerson & M Kilson (eds) *The political awakening of Africa*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, pp 129-134.
34. Noted by P Collier, Economic causes of civil conflict and their implications for policy in C A Crocker, F O Hampson & P Aall (eds) *Turbulent*

*peace: the challenges of managing international conflict*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 2001, p 52. For a journalistic account of the impressive infrastructure in Eritrea created during the war with the central government, see R Kaplan, Fate and war in Eritrea, *New York Times*, 23 May 2000, p. A25; and A Buckoke, Rebels' cocktail of socialist theory, *The Times* (London), 29 November1988, p 10.

35. M Bradbury and K Menkhaus, *Human development in Somalia, 2001: an overview*. Paper presented to the Eighth Congress of the Somali Studies International Association, Hargeisa, 2001; and United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 2001: Somalia*. Nairobi, 2001.
36. M Bryden, New hope for Somalia? The building block approach, *Review of African Political Economy*, 26(79), 1999, p 134.
37. L T Munro, Providing humanitarian assistance behind rebel lines: UNICEF's eastern Zaire operation, 1996–1998 in P Kingston & I S Spears (eds) *States within states: incipient political entities in the post Cold War era*, Palgrave, 2004.
38. P Collier, Doing well out of war: an economic perspective in M Berdal & D M Malone (eds) *Greed and grievance: economic agendas in civil wars*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2000, pp 91-111; and N Sambanis, Partition as a solution to ethnic war: an empirical critique of the theoretical literature, *World Politics*, 54(4), 2004, pp 37-483.
39. Sambanis, op cit, p 439.
40. C Kaufmann, Possible and impossible solutions to ethnic civil wars, *International Security*, 20(4), 1996, pp 136-175; and C Kaufmann, When all else fails: separation as a remedy for ethnic conflicts, ethnic partitions and population transfers in the twentieth century, *International Security*, 23(2), 1998, pp 120156.
41. Eritreans argue that their special status was dismissed by Haile Selassie in 1962 when he dissolved the 1952 federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Similarly, the 1972 Addis Ababa peace agreement between Khartoum and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army was annulled by President Nimeiri in 1983. See T M Ali, R O Matthews & I S Spears, Failures in peacebuilding: Sudan (1972–1983) and Angola (1991–1998) in R O Matthews & T M Ali (eds) *Durable peace: challenges for peacebuilding in Africa*, University of Toronto Press, Forthcoming. Inhabitants of British Somaliland also maintain that northern representation was effectively ended in the years following independence in 1960.
42. M Mutua, The Tutsi and Hutu need a partition, *New York Times*, 30 August 2000, p. A23.
43. Africa Watch, *Somalia: a government at war with its own people*, Africa Watch Committee, New York, 1990; and Africa Watch, *Evil days: thirty years of war and famine in Ethiopia*, Human Rights Watch, New York, 1991.
44. J Snyder and R Jervis, Civil war and the security dilemma in B F Walter & J Snyder (eds) *Civil wars, insecurity, and intervention*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999.
45. In the case of Eritrea, support for independence was extremely high. The results of the referendum, announced on 27 April 1993, showed that 99.805 % of those participating had voted in favour, and only 0.17 % had voted against. See United Nations, *The United Nations and the Independence of Eritrea*, Blue Book Series, Volume XII, United Nations Department of Public Information, New York, 1996, p 29.
46. Op cit.
47. K Menkhaus, Somalia: in the crosshairs of the war on terrorism, *Current History*, May 2002, p 212.
48. K Crossley, Why not to state-build new Sudan in P Kingston & I S Spears (eds) *States within states: incipient political entities in the post-Cold War era*, Palgrave, p 263. Forthcoming.
49. Menkhaus, 2002, op cit, p 212.
50. W Finnegan, A world of dust, *The New Yorker*, 20 March 1995, 70, p 70.
51. This figure for Nigeria's linguistic diversity comes from L Diamond, Nigeria: pluralism, statism, and the struggle for democracy in L Diamond, J J Linz & S M Lipset (eds) *Democracy in developing countries: Africa*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1988, p 33.
52. On this issue, see A M Rosenthal, The driver's license, *New York Times*, 23 February 1993, 23: A21. Others have argued that the drive for secession is motivated by a desire in leaders to rid themselves of having to support the poorer regions of their respective countries. The problem then is not simply state break-up but the large number of impoverished communities that would be left behind. See also Collier, 2001, op cit, p 152. On the other hand, countries that were once believed to have limited potential for growth have on occasion proved to be more viable than expected in the years after partition. See, for example, D Milbank, How the Slovaks have taken flight, *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 5 December 1994, A10.
53. B Walter, The critical barrier to civil war settlement, *International Organization*, 51(3), 1997, p 355.
54. Clapham (op cit p14) notes, on the recent conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, that "The 'invasion' by Eritrea of what was perceived by Ethiopians as 'their' territory...prompted a far wider and more nationalist Ethiopian response than could otherwise have been expected from a small local conflict over land that most Ethiopians had never heard of". Indeed, when they have occurred, external threats have had an important psychological impact on the developing world's *existing* state system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, arbitrary as many of these states are, even the largest and most capricious of them can elicit some kind of common effort from their citizens when faced with an external threat. For instance, observers have remarked how Congolese from various parts of the country have shown varying degrees of com-

mon affinity for the Congolese state when threatened by the country's neighbours, Uganda and Rwanda. See I Fisher and N Onishi, Congo's struggle may unleash broad strife to redraw Africa, *New York Times*, 12 January 1999, p. A1.

55. The willingness of the EPRDF to tolerate the secession of Eritrea was also attributable to the fact that the core group within the EPRDF, the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front, had itself been a regionally-based movement that had seriously considered a future independent Ethiopia. See J Young, *Peasants and revolution in Ethiopia: the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, 1975–1997*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
56. S Van Evera, Hypothesis on nationalism and war, *International Security*, 18(4), 1994, p 17.
57. M Lind, In defense of liberal nationalism, *Foreign Affairs*, 73(3), 1994, pp 90-91.
58. The Ethiopian Constitution pledges that "[e]very nation, nationality, and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including secession". With the exception of Eritrea, the provision remains untested. See Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, 8 December 1994.
59. Bryden, 2002, op cit, p 7. The region known as Puntland has also established a self-governing administration, but does not seek formal political independence.
60. R C Crook and J Manor, *Democracy and decentralization in South Asia and West Africa: participation, accountability and performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
61. Jackson, 1990, op cit, p 17; and K J Holsti, *The state, war and the state of war*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p 79.
62. Cited in Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), A Question of Recognition—Part 2, 10 July 2001.
63. G Gottlieb, Nations without states, *Foreign Affairs*, 73(3), 1994, pp 101-2.
64. According to Gottlieb, such a system is not as foreign as it sounds: "The deconstruction of rigid boundaries is a feature of current state relations. Soft jurisdictional lines for authority of all sorts have long been a characteristic of national life: agencies like the New York Port Authority exercise their powers astride the limits of the states of New York and New Jersey".
65. Bryden, 1999, op cit; and Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), Somalia: are "building blocks" the solution? 17 July 1999.
66. W Reno, Reinvention of an African patrimonial state: Charles Taylor's Liberia, *Third World Quarterly*, 16(1), 1995, pp 112-117.