

Foreign Intervention in Africa
after the Cold War

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Foreword

Elizabeth Schmidt's earlier work, *Foreign Intervention in Africa* (2013), focused on the period 1945–91, with a brief concluding chapter on 1991–2010. This companion volume focuses on 1991–2017, with a final chapter highlighting the potential impact of the Trump presidency. Schmidt's approach in the two volumes is similar. Her aim is not to provide a comprehensive narrative or advance an explanatory theory, but to introduce a series of case studies, taking into account global narratives and common factors as well as the particularity and nuances of each case.

Intended for undergraduate and graduate students as well as policy-makers, humanitarian and human rights workers, activists, and other concerned citizens, both books provide succinct and readable narratives, without detailed footnotes but with abundant recommended readings for those who wish to dig more deeply into particular cases.¹ As such, they are unique resources that provide an overview and introduction to the complex realities they portray, complementing but not duplicating more detailed scholarly or journalistic accounts of specific cases.

As this foreword is written in early 2018, the Trump presidency in the United States has been the catalyst for a level of uncertainty about the shape of the international political order not matched since World War II. Any predictions would be perilous, except to affirm that African countries will continue to be gravely affected by global political developments as well as by the distinct internal dynamics of specific countries and regions.

As Schmidt explains, global narratives are both essential and misleading in explaining the course and outcomes of intervention in specific conflicts. Thus the grand narrative of the "Cold War" between the United States and the Soviet Union, from 1945 to 1991, was decisive for interventions in African conflicts insofar as it motivated perceptions and policy in Washington, Moscow, and other capitals. Cold War perceptions conflating radical African nationalism and communism affected

policymakers, the media, and public opinion, not only in countries such as the United States and South Africa, but also in transnational networks and multilateral organizations.

Even in this period, however, the Cold War paradigm was not fully hegemonic. The alternative framework of a united stand against Nazism, racism, and colonialism, linked to the common experience of World War II, was shared by Southern African liberation movements and by governments and movements around the world, including many in Western Europe and North America. An exclusive focus on the superpowers, moreover, ignores the distinct interests and roles of other external actors, including the European colonial powers and other communist states, most prominently Cuba and China. And finally, the interests of the African actors involved in conflicts, and the colonial and precolonial histories of specific countries, also shaped the outcomes. In some cases, African parties to conflict sought out foreign interventions—for their own reasons.

Unraveling the course of any specific intervention thus requires a high degree of granularity, at the risk of asking the reader to assimilate a potentially bewildering range of names and places. Political actors such as states, parties, and agencies are not unitary: each is made up of sub-groups and individuals with distinct interests, ideologies, and analyses. Schmidt's clear writing style balances brevity with nuance. Readers who take their time and pay attention will be rewarded—not with definitive answers, which the author does not promise, but with a solid basis for asking more questions and pursuing further research.

In the post-Cold War period examined in this book, Schmidt identifies two distinct paradigms applied by policymakers. A specific intervention might fall primarily under the paradigm of a “response to instability,” some cases of which might also fit under the newly defined multilateral rubric of the “responsibility to protect.” Alternatively, an intervention might fit within the framework of the “war on terror.” Or, as in the case of Somalia, both paradigms might be at work simultaneously. Characteristically, war on terror interventions were often counterproductive, increasing rather than decreasing the impact of movements defined as terrorist threats. Globally, these interventions were driven particularly by the United States, with accelerated militarization in Africa as well as around the world in the period following the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Interventions in response to instability, including those justified by the responsibility to protect, on the other hand, featured a far wider

range of subregional, regional, and global actors. There was vacillation between indifference, leading to failure to respond in a timely way, and complex multiyear efforts in diplomacy and peacekeeping. The actors most consistently involved, for their own reasons, were neighbors of the countries beset by conflict, as well as African multilateral organizations such as the African Union and its subregional counterparts. And, as the cases considered in this book illustrate, the results, as well as the motives of outside actors, were decidedly mixed. The outcomes were difficult to evaluate, as were the possible alternative courses of action that might have produced different results (counterfactuals). While the United States was often a partner in multilateral efforts, consistent policy and commitment to multilateral engagement was in short supply.

Despite the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the shift of paradigms justifying foreign intervention in Africa, there were many institutional continuities in the international order in the period that followed. The “Western alliance” continued, with prominent roles for NATO and the United Nations. The UN Security Council, with its five permanent members, continued to dominate international peacekeeping policy. Africa remained at the margins of foreign policymaking for the United States and other powers outside the African continent, with the exception of the North African region, given its proximity to Europe and close links with the Middle East.

The marginal position of Africa in global politics is almost certain to continue for the foreseeable future. But the election of Donald Trump has brought unprecedented questioning about the continuity of multilateral institutions and alliances, and challenges to the frameworks for understanding them. The incoherence of policymaking under Trump, rapid staff turnover in his immediate entourage, lack of staffing in government agencies, and the ongoing investigations into his administration make even the immediate future highly uncertain. But there can be little doubt that new elements have been introduced into the international arena, including high-level advocacy of Islamophobia and white nationalism, as well as a Hobbesian disregard for any values other than narrow political and economic self-interest. It is clear both that the United States retains enormous power for destructive action on the world stage and that its capacity for constructive engagement and leadership is plummeting. And whatever remains to be revealed about the ties between the Trump campaign and Putin’s Russia, there is abundant confirmation of the ideological convergence between the two in legitimizing kleptocracy and autocracy and in heralding “traditional” values

of hierarchy and exclusionary identity in contrast to “cosmopolitan” values such as peace, development, and human rights.

What does this mean for ongoing conflicts in Africa in which multi-lateral institutions or outside powers are engaged, or for future conflicts that are highly likely to emerge? The case studies in this book make clear that no easy generalizations can be applied. But one can perhaps suggest a few questions that will need to be posed.

1. *To what extent will US policy toward Africa under the Trump administration be distinctively new or a continuation of previous trends? Will there be “no policy” on Africa, or “bad policy?”*²

At the most general level, both globally and by extension in Africa, one can say that there will be a continuation of the so-called war on terror that has driven US policy since 2001. But both global debates and responses to specific African cases may vary enormously, depending on the level of attention from the White House and on the outcome of debates between zealots and the few more sober-minded members of the administration. As for responses to humanitarian crises, these will undoubtedly be affected by the general climate of increased US disrespect for multilateral institutions and by the “America First” ideology. The extent of the damage will also depend on reactions not only from within executive branch agencies but also from the US Congress and public.

2. *If, as expected, the Trump presidency leads to a loss of US influence on the world stage, what regional or global powers will gain influence on policies related to intervention in Africa?*

Most analyses of global economic or geostrategic changes anticipate rising influence on the part of China and other regional or midlevel powers, as well as reduced international capacity for a Europe facing its own internal divisions. But it is not at all clear what these macro-level power balances imply for multilateral or bilateral interventions in Africa. A scenario in which a rival alternative power or coalition replaces the United States as the most prominent party in defining global agendas, including intervention in Africa, seems improbable. Instead, there will likely be even more uncertainty about which outside actors will be involved and the extent to which there will be coordination or conflict among them.

3. *Finally, what will be the effects of structural factors such as climate change, global inequality, economic stresses, gross human rights violations by states, ethnic and national stereotypes, and others? To what extent, and how, will they increase the risks of conflict and subsequent intervention?*

Such structural issues go far beyond the scope of this book. But whether the issue is climate change, economic policy, or the fate of global human rights norms, Africa cannot escape the fallout from worsening global trends or the failure to find global solutions. The impact of these structural issues on conflict in Africa will surely be as great as, or greater than, the impact of policy decisions on intervention in specific crises.

In her concluding chapter, Schmidt notes that her book offers no solutions. Rather, “its goal is to question faulty assumptions, to expose superficial understandings and simplistic analyses, and to offer deeper knowledge to those hoping to glean lessons from the past that will enhance future prospects for positive social change.” Her key point is that durable solutions cannot come from formulas, from leaders of states, or from multilateral agencies, but instead must build on inclusion of voices from African civil society.

In previous generations, African movements fighting against colonialism and racism inspired worldwide mobilizations that changed Africa and the world. Now, as Africa and the world are struggling to confront new challenges and address the unfinished agendas of struggles for freedom, the Trump administration epitomizes the impulse to return to a past explicitly based on hatred, division, and inequality.

Both national states and multilateral agencies have a role to play in setting a different course. But these efforts will fall short unless they are driven by mobilization on the part of social movements and committed individuals working within those structures. We need a vision as encompassing as that evoked by Nelson Mandela, speaking to a rally in London’s Trafalgar Square in 2005:

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest. . . . Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. . . . Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice. . . . Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.”³

William Minter
Washington, DC, April 15, 2018