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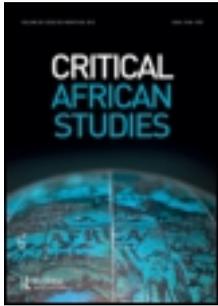
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Sovereignty, territory and authority: boundary maintenance in contemporary Africa

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Why have Africa's borders survived intact in the post-Cold War era, and what changes have the past two decades witnessed in the relationship between sovereignty, territory and authority in African statehood? After 1989, a number of authors predicted changes to the political map of the continent, with far-reaching international changes expected to reverberate in ways the fragile borders of African states were unlikely to contain. Yet legally recognized borders remain basically fixed. Only in the cases of Sudan/South Sudan and Ethiopia/Eritrea did borders change with the consent of the states concerned. This paper tracks the transformations to the postcolonial boundary maintenance regime masked by the lack of meaningful changes to sovereign territorial jurisdictions. The end of superpower competition and the advent of donor conditionality, combined with liberal norms of conflict management and state reconstruction, have attenuated the sovereignty that once bolstered African states against internal rivals. But changes sparked by China's deepening engagement with Africa and the emphasis placed on the effective administration of territory in the War on Terror have shored up wavering sovereigns and contested borders. The cumulative effects have been twofold: first, to diminish the formal protections afforded by juridical sovereignty even as recognized boundaries remain fixed; and second, to complicate authority relations within and across borders, undoing the great levelling of the postcolonial period that sought to replace complicated authority relations within and across states with a relatively uniform system of sovereign territorial states.

Keywords: sovereignty; territory; borders; secession; self-determination; recognition

Introduction

Why have Africa's boundaries largely survived the end of the Cold War intact? Despite inheriting boundaries with origins in the colonial partitioning of the continent, Africa's postcolonial borders have proved remarkably resilient in the decades since independence. After 1989, however, some observers foresaw far-reaching changes in the African state system with the potential to undermine Africa's boundary maintenance regime. 'After nearly a century of relatively unchanged boundaries in Africa, the stability of the current state system is now greatly threatened by powerful forces that have emerged in the wake of the Cold War,' observed Jeffrey Herbst. 'Political and economic liberalization may be the critical factors that finally bring about fundamental challenges to the African state system' (Herbst 1992, 28; also Herbst 1996/1997, 2000; Spears 2003; Krasner 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2004). For many, the boundary maintenance regime on the continent was sustained by the international system, implying that the aftershock of post-Cold War changes would unsettle existing borders. The end of superpower patronage, increased political and

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economic conditionality from Western donor states, and ambiguity regarding the relationship between norms of self-determination and territorial sovereignty as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia collapsed – these all created pressures that African boundaries appeared too fragile to contain.

Yet not a single boundary change has occurred in Africa since 1989 without the consent of concerned states. With the exceptions of Eritrea's negotiated exit from Ethiopia in 1993 and South Sudan's independence in 2011, Africa's borders remain fixed. The persistence of African juridical statehood within existing borders has been especially puzzling in light of the glaring empirical deficiencies of so many states on the continent, a weakness compounded in many states during the 1990s (Jackson 1990; Reno 1998). With few exceptions, African states have failed to support economic development, ensure the basic welfare of their citizens or provide a modicum of security. Too often, in fact, African states have done precisely the opposite as parasitic regimes plunder national assets while foregoing the administration of large tracts of their territories, depriving their populations through corrupt rule, and unleash armies and police that prey on the people they ostensibly protect.

This paper questions the divergent possibilities that opened up in the African state system after 1989, asking how real the alternatives were, why they closed, what durable changes did in fact occur and what their implications are for the future of African borders.¹ Instead of a rupture after the Cold War, the past two decades have witnessed incremental but significant changes in the practices and understandings linking sovereignty, territory and authority in the African state system. These changes fall far short of the potential for a significant reshuffling of territorial sovereignty that many foresaw and even welcomed in the early 1990s. The opening that suggested radical alternatives to the African state system quickly closed. Nonetheless, recent changes have altered boundary politics on the continent. Among the more important have been the rise of liberal rights-based norms and an interventionist regime of conflict management, the War on Terror and the increasing emphasis it has placed on the effective administration of territory, and the tensions between competing visions of international order on the continent signalled by China's challenge to entrenched Western influence. Instead of leading to the redrawing boundaries, these transformations have promoted a redistribution of sovereign authority within states that redefines external and internal boundaries. This has gone as far as providing limited recognition of the semi-sovereign juridical status of sub-state entities and suspending or delimiting the sovereignty of recognized African governments. The apparent stability of the continent's international boundaries thus masks important structural changes in relations between African states and the societies they govern, and between African states and international society.

The boundary maintenance regime in postcolonial Africa

To understand the balance between change and continuity in the way that sovereignty, territory and authority fit together in contemporary Africa, one must revisit the boundary maintenance regime that emerged in the postcolonial era. The arbitrary nature of African borders is much remarked upon (Touval 1969; Brownlie and Burns 1979; Davidson 1992; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996; cf. Clapham 1996). The relatively rapid demise of the colonial era left Africa with 80,000 km of contested boundaries, of which only 26% correspond to geographical features, the remainder having been determined by astronomical and mathematical lines (Englebert 2000, 88). To be sure, boundary-making processes and events on the ground often had far greater implications than those in international diplomacy, not least the General Act of the 1885 Conference of Berlin (Katzenellenbogen 1996; Zeller 2010). Imperial division nevertheless left a legacy of peoples divided by contested borders policed by weak states facing formidable nation-building challenges.

Despite the frailty of so many postcolonial states in Africa and the artificiality of their inherited borders, they did not fall apart after independence. Surveying the stability of Africa's internationally recognized borders two decades after independence, Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg observed:

no country has disintegrated into smaller jurisdictions or been absorbed into a larger one against the wishes of its legitimate government and as a result of violence or the threat of violence. No territories or people – or even a segment of them – have been taken over by another country. No African state has been divided by internal warfare. (Jackson and Rosberg 1982, 1)

Explanations for this impressive record have relied heavily on the stabilizing effects of a particular form of juridical sovereignty around which African states and great powers alike cooperated in international society.

International norms and juridical sovereignty

International recognition conferred important benefits on African sovereigns. Entities that otherwise lacked the prerequisites of empirical statehood, or positive sovereignty, owed their survival to the rights and privileges that came with international recognition. The right to self-determination as non-interference in domestic affairs was the foundation for a 'negative sovereignty' that compensated for any deficiencies in the actual capacity for effective government (Jackson 1987). Juridical statehood is:

the international institution by which Africa and some other extremely underdeveloped parts of the world were brought into the international community on a basis of equal sovereignty rather than some kind of associate statehood. It was invented because it was, arguably, the only way these places could acquire constitutional independence in a short period of time. (Jackson 1987, 529)

But the norms on which juridical statehood rested did more than simply allow African states membership in an international society, which would have been denied under earlier historical criteria. With international recognition also came privileged access to resources, not least foreign aid, which proved useful if not crucial in ruler's attempts to consolidate power (Clapham 1996).

The peculiar form that the sovereignty regime assumed in Africa was the regional expression of a global consensus, which required rapid decolonization on the terms of equal sovereignty, delegitimized violent changes to boundaries and emphasized non-interference in internal matters. As a pre-emptory norm of the post-1945 era, the principle of self-determination was formulated to promote international order and the stability of boundaries. The two references to self-determination in the United Nations Charter envision the principle in the broader context of developing 'friendly relations among nations' and the 'equal rights' of peoples. In navigating the challenges of decolonization, states and international organizations dodged the problematic task of identifying 'peoples' by defining them in terms of colonial units, eschewing any right to unilateral secession outside the colonial context. Existing territorial jurisdictions rather than nationality would determine the people (Pomerance 1982; Cassese 1998). In 1960, the landmark UN General Assembly Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (XV) restricted the right of self-determination to a one-time act determining international status, namely the establishment of a sovereign state (or occasionally, integration or association with existing states), after which the full complement of empirical and juridical authority inherent in sovereign statehood was to be transferred in full. Self-determination was to take place whatever the peoples' preparedness for independence and alternative sovereignty arrangements were

foreclosed. Most importantly, UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 stated, ‘Any attempt aimed at partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.’ The principle of self-determination had been transformed into the positive right of the people within an existing political unit to exercise sovereignty. The primary criterion for identifying the accepted political units would be the non-European inhabitants of former colonies. ‘The boundaries have been singularly successful in their primary function: preserving the territorial integrity of the state by preventing significant territorial competition and delegitimizing the norm of self-determination’ (Herbst 2000, 253).

The founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 strengthened this normative consensus and created a regional ‘post-imperial ordering device’ that effectively halted any forcible challenge to inherited colonial jurisdictions (Lyon 1973, 47). Having witnessed the bloody partition of India, and aware of the substantial uncertainty and violence that wholesale territorial revisionism would entail, the founding member states of the Organization of African Unity endorsed existing boundaries. Article III, paragraph 3, of the 1963 OAU Charter called for ‘respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence’. The following year, the OAU Summit in Cairo issued a formal Declaration on Border Disputes (1964). Calling borders ‘a tangible reality’, the resolution committed members to ‘respect the frontiers existing on their achievement of national independence’. The OAU became a club of leaders mindful of their own territorial bases and jealously guarding their hard-won territorial sovereignty in ways that impeded any plans to redraw borders or redistribute authority – either downwards, towards meaningfully autonomous regional entities, or upwards, towards confederations or post-imperial governance arrangements linking former colonies with one another and the former colonial power. A sort of ‘frontier fetishism’ rendered changes to existing borders taboo, unthinkable even (Lewis 1983, 14). ‘The entrenchment of borders has been part and parcel of what African rulers have attempted since the 1960s: to fix themselves in positions of power within territorial states’ (Cooper 2008, 170).

Superpower patronage

The set of norms, rules and principles that comprised Africa’s boundary maintenance regime relied on a tacit cooperation of African states with the superpowers. In a rare example of Cold War cooperation in the interests of international order, the superpowers sought stability in existing boundaries. Meanwhile, their competition for client states provided African leaders with access to resources and bargaining leverage, while the continent’s relatively marginal geostrategic position in the Cold War allowed leaders to switch allegiances without fearing external intervention (David 1991). ‘Put simply, African states were accorded an international freedom of action which largely reflected the fact that they did not matter that much’ (Clapham 1996, 42).

The implicit rules of Cold War competition included abjuring support either to client states that embarked on irredentist adventures and to overtly secessionist rebel proxies. Neither superpower offered significant support to efforts to redraw existing boundaries (Herbst 2000, 108). In the form of financial and military assistance, superpower support allowed weak state governments to face down separatist threats internally. As the Sudanese government reportedly warned southern politicians in the early 1980s, for instance, an ‘air bridge’ from America ensured a steady supply of arms that would be used against them if they resisted reforms that were dismantling southern autonomy (Johnson 2003, 58). When external military intervention did take place, it was almost invariably in support of sitting rulers and existing borders. Most famously, during the Congo crisis (1960–1964), the UN intervened decisively against secessionist forces in Katanga and contributed to the diplomatic isolation and reversal of the 1961 secession of the

Mining State of South Kasai. After the Biafran secession in 1967, both Britain and the Soviet Union cooperated with the Nigerian federal forces. Similarly, Western military support for Chad in its wars against Libyan efforts to annex the Aozou Strip, and Soviet and Cuban support for Ethiopia's war against Somalia in the Ogaden were critical in thwarting forcible territorial revision.

Weak but unchallenged

Others have traced border stability back to the remarkable degree of quiescence amongst those who might otherwise be expected to challenge Africa's boundaries, both internally and externally. As Herbst argues, the combination of low population density, abundant fertile land and the inability of African states to project power over large distances has led to a historically low rate of wars of territorial conquest and allowed rulers to forego the need to extend administration into hinterlands to protect them against external predation (Herbst 2000). Internally, even the weakest predatory states have faced fewer challenges than expected. Given patterns in other world regions, Africa should have something like five times the rate of secessionist conflict (Englebert 2009). After Africa's early secessionist bids failed, 'the period from the end of the Biafra secession to 1990 was characterized by the virtual absence of secessionism from Africa' (Englebert and Hummel 2005, 422).

The relative absence of challenges to Africa's borders can be traced back to the disincentives that this form of juridical statehood and its support by outside powers engendered both externally and internally. Externally, the international normative foundations of juridical statehood meant that territorial conquest had low prospective returns given that boundary changes realized by force were unlikely to be recognized. Thus, only rarely did interstate wars challenge the territorial definition of existing states, with the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, and Somalia's failed invasion of the Ogaden the exceptions that prove the rule. Juridical statehood thereby disconnected the imperatives of regime survival from the need to expand and maintain territorial state power. Whereas the decades of fighting and preparing for international wars and subduing internal rivals left the surviving European states with the infrastructural underpinnings of strong statehood, the state system in postcolonial Africa cushioned sovereigns from costly and potentially destabilizing investments in national development (Tilly 1992; Herbst 2000; Reno 2011).

Internally, the prohibition on secession in international society had similar effects. Instead of challenging the centre in secessionist bids, the sorts of peripheral and non-state actors that might otherwise attempt to secede frequently forego separatism, instead vying for access to the existing sovereign state (Englebert 2009, 7). They do so because access to internationally recognized sovereignty provides sufficient benefits to those who would otherwise challenge to maintain a relationship to whoever controls the title to juridical sovereignty. The premium on the prize of sovereignty in Africa, as William Reno argues, owes much to foreign firms that prefer to transact with sovereign partners that can offer more convincing contracts (Reno 1998, 222). Sovereignty also allowed African rulers to engage in profitable 'arbitrage' over economic exchanges across their borders, while creating opportunities for their citizens to do the same (Dorman, Hammett and Nugent 2007). Domestically, this sovereignty can also be divided out amongst various agents in ways that transform international legal sovereignty into the right to legal command on the ground. With the right to command come opportunities to extort and accumulate, as Pierre Englebert observes: 'Everyone associated with a parcel of juridical sovereignty has the opportunity to use it in order to extract resources from others' (Englebert 2009, 6). These logics lead the would-be secessionists to come to some sort of arrangement with weak, beleaguered but internationally recognized rulers in national capitals – or, at least, transform a

secessionist bid unlikely to attain international recognition into an attempt to capture the national capital and assume the mantle of sovereignty within existing borders.

However, this analysis does not take one very far in explaining the ability of African borders to withstand sustained secessionist challenges, irredentist adventures and incipient state-building in the midst of collapsed states that did occur. Even if Africa has seen a lower-than-predicted rate of separatism, there have nonetheless been approximately 20 serious secessionist conflicts since independence, in addition to a handful of serious interstate wars over territory, tens of border disputes and a number of states-within-states that have failed to attract international recognition (Table 1).

It is possible to overemphasize the historical importance of cooperation around boundary maintenance and superpower patronage in maintaining the status quo distribution of territorial sovereignty. African rulers' record of mutual cooperation around existing borders in the interests of regime survival is at odds with their tenacious support of armed proxies that sought to overthrow rival regimes or break away from neighbouring states (Prunier 2004). The mutual vulnerability of African rulers to secessionism has not stopped the pursuit of rivalry through support and sanctuary for separatist insurgencies that seek to topple recognized governments in order to redraw existing borders, even if the price these insurgents paid for this support was to mute their separatist ambitions. Similarly, the superpowers did occasionally tolerate territorial revisionism on the part of strategic client states. Though there was little diplomatic support for boundary changes, with notable exceptions such as tacit US support for the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara, material support knowingly made its way to separatist forces. The French government supplied arms to the Biafran government and Mengistu transferred Soviet arms to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) with Moscow's knowledge, for example. And before the

Table 1. African secessionist conflicts.

State	Separatist movement(s)	Date
Angola	Movement for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda	Since 1975
Cameroon	Southern Cameroons National Council (SNCN)	Since 1995
Comoros	Anjouan People's Movement	1997–2008
DRC	Katanga	1960–1963
DRC	South Kasai	1960–1962
Ethiopia	Eritrean Liberation Front and related factions	1962–1991
Ethiopia	Western Somali Liberation Front, Ogaden National Liberation Front	Since 1975
Ethiopia	Afar Liberation Front and related factions	1989–1996
Ethiopia	Islamic Union	1996–1999
Mali and Niger	Several allied and shifting Touareg and Islamist armed movements, e.g. Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, Ansar Dine, and Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (Toubou)	Since 1990
Namibia	Caprivi Liberation Army	1997–2000
Nigeria	Biafra, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)	1967–1070, since 2004
Senegal	Movement of the Democratic Forces of the Casamance and related factions	Since 1982
Somalia	Somaliland Republic	Since 1991
Sudan	Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement, Sudanese People's Liberation Movement	1963–2011
Zambia	Barotseland	Since 1964

Note: DRC, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Sources: Englebert and Hummel (2005), with substantial revisions and additions based on Zeller, Tomas, and Nugent (Forthcoming).

Soviets supported Ethiopia, they directly supplied both an avowedly irredentist Somali government and indirectly supported Eritrean separatists contesting Ethiopia's boundaries, while the Soviet Union and German Democratic Republic provided support to Libya despite its efforts to annex the Aozou Strip.

Indeed, neither the unequivocal granting of juridical sovereignty to nominally equal states with fixed boundaries, nor the forms of territorial sovereignty in centralized states that followed was predetermined. Leaders in France's African colonies – Senghor, Dia and others – advocated a federal or confederal vision of layered sovereignty that would have spread 'authority and alternative loci of power at each level that might prove a check against concentration at any one of them' (Cooper 2008, 191). In Anglophone East and Central Africa, various schemes for federation were mooted that would have redistributed sovereign authority across new states. More radically, African nationalists had contemplated wholesale boundary revision, perhaps as part of Nkrumah's vision of a 'United States of Africa'. The 1958 Resolution of the All African People's Congress (AAPC) declared, 'artificial barriers and frontiers drawn by Imperialists to divide African peoples operate to the detriment of Africans and should therefore be abolished', specifically endorsing, for example, the Somali desire for union of Somali territories (Healy 1981, 18; Gewald 1990). Those committed to a Pan-African programme called for the creation of a continental state and the retention of colonial institutions established for regional cooperation as the basis for integration. By 1960, however, these ideas found waning support as conservative African rulers pushed for the maintenance of colonial boundaries. The 1961, AAPC Resolution on Neo-colonialism denounced 'Balkanization as a deliberate political fragmentation of states by creation of artificial entities, such as, for example, the case of Katanga, Mauritania, Buganda, etc' (cited in Healy 1981, 21). The new pragmatism of ambitious African leaders, reinforced by outside states keen to avoid disorder on a continent that appeared primed to unravel, banished alternative 'models of political authority from the sovereign imaginary' (Grovogui 2002, 331).

A similar process of foreclosing alternatives happened within states as existing autonomies were undermined and discussion of alternatives to centralized, unitary states ended. Frequently, violent conflict ensued. The often messy administrative arrangements of colonial and newly independent states, which did sometimes correspond to social cleavages they themselves had engendered, were flattened and made uniform through the state- and nation-building efforts of central governments. The institutional arrangements through which Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia lasted just over a decade before being abrogated by the Ethiopian Emperor, eliciting little reaction from the outside states and organizations that had negotiated the federation. In Sudan, southern hopes for a federal arrangement were dashed. Under military rule, Nigerian federalism was undermined by the steady accumulation of powers by the centre at the expense of states and localities, resulting in the 'hypercentralized' shell of a federal state (Suberu 2001). In all these cases, central governments could respond to demands for autonomy and independence with a heavy hand, secure in the knowledge that international society vested legitimate authority exclusively in the internationally recognized government within its postcolonial territory. Only five states recognized Biafra's secession – Gabon, Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania and Zambia – none a major power and none able to bring about a precedent of secessionism that might have drastically altered the continent's trajectory.

In the wake of Biafra, UN Secretary-General U Thant expressed the organization's unequivocal attitude towards secession: 'As an international organization, the United Nations has never accepted and does not accept and I do not believe it will ever accept the principle of secession of parts of its member states' (cited in Kirgis 1994, 3). As secessions in Katanga and Biafra were reversed and Southern Sudan abandoned the struggle for self-determination in favour of a rare autonomy agreement, other groups were deterred from pursuing secession, and the state

system was largely isolated from the consequences of ongoing separatist conflicts. Writing in 1983, Crawford Young offered this pessimistic prediction for the fortunes of African separatist movements in paraphrasing the OAU Charter: ‘Whatever else may lie ahead, “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each [African] state” appears one of the safer political forecasts’ (Young 1983, 229). Similarly, Jackson observed:

the resort to international law by African sovereigns to preserve ex-colonial boundaries has been remarkably successful. Although nearly all territorial populations are deeply divided along ethnic lines, not one single state jurisdiction has disintegrated. Rebels can gain *de facto* control of territories of course, but this is insufficient to capture sovereignty. (Jackson 1990, 153)

Along similar lines, Herbst (1989) predicted that African sovereigns would likely continue to cooperate in preserving existing frontiers. And James Mayall, surveying the limited achievements of Somali irredentist movements, made the forecast that ‘the chances of the Eritreans establishing their right to an independent existence seems hardly better than those of the Somalis’ (Mayall 1983, 89).

Challenges to Africa’s boundaries in the post-Cold War period

The Cold War equilibrium of border stability was punctuated by political upheaval on the continent and beyond after 1989. However, the changes that year were not as dramatic on the African continent as they were in Europe, where the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the imminent disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and Yugoslavia in the following two years. The economic interventions of structural adjustment in the 1980s had already begun to erode the regime of negative sovereignty that sustained juridical statehood, and in turn insulated African rulers from internal threats. External aid also began to drop in the late 1980s as superpower competition on the continent wound down.

But in the years shortly after 1989, these trends accelerated and appeared to foreshadow broader changes. The final pieces of the decolonization puzzle came together with the independence of Namibia, a referendum in Western Sahara scheduled for 1992 and the transition from apartheid in South Africa. Though movements of self-determination in all these cases drew international legitimacy from both their recourse to norms of self-determination and the congruence of their demands with internationally recognized borders, their success represented how the end of the Cold War had boosted the status of opposition movements and insurgencies (Clapham 1996, 1999). Outside states, having already recognized what were in effect the unilateral secessions of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, endorsed Eritrea’s right to self-determination after having insisted on the finality of its annexation by Ethiopia.

Groups with separatist agendas took advantage of weakened and collapsed statehood to pursue their aims of autonomy and independence, moving towards seceding or otherwise withdrawing from the centre with varying degrees of success. The Sudan People’s Liberation Army invested the southern capital of Juba in 1991 and looked poised to win the war in the South against an embattled northern government on the verge of collapse. The failure of the Somali state after the fall of Siad Barre was greeted by a declaration of independence in the former British Somaliland and the emergence of other entities, a process mirrored in parts of West and Central Africa and in the Comoros, where the island of Anjouan later broke away. Significant if uneven progress towards democratization across the continent, and the liberalization of politics it entailed, seemed poised to unleash demands for self-determination from disaffected ethnic groups long alienated from central state power as autonomies were created or dusted off after decades of neglect. In Ethiopia, for example, the success of the ethnically based insurgencies

was followed by a constitution that instituted the same ethnically based federalism, complete with a constitutional right to secede, that had just proved so destabilizing in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

The period also saw significant regional changes. African states engaged in a series of inter-state and internationalized civil wars that seriously compromised the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states on which they were fought. Even though territorial claims were not at stake in wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or West Africa, foreign armies and their local proxies occupied and exploited the territory of neighbouring states, using the legal status of sovereign patrons to bring resources to market. The continent has also seen a revived push towards regional integration, invigorating the African Union to manage conflict, including border conflicts through its African Union Border Program (Asiwaju 2010).

These transformations were both cause for and effect of a changing sovereignty regime. The protections of negative sovereignty had eroded to the point that African states were subjected to increased external interference in internal arrangements as superpower patronage was in rapid decline. Outside states and agencies placed pressure on African rulers on democratization, human rights, conflict management through power sharing and economic liberalization, especially in post-conflict reconstruction efforts (Tull and Englebert 2008). Donors used conditionality, and along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly circumvented the central state in favour of non-state and sub-state actors. Violent internal challengers could no longer be beaten back by a steady supply of arms. Patronage networks that had previously pacified potential opposition movements became unsustainable given decreased aid flows. African rulers were more vulnerable to Western pressure, not least to abide by broadly liberal political and economic norms, by foreclosing the option of defecting to the Soviet Bloc.

Even as sovereignty has been attenuated, the international legal sovereignty of central governments still matters. Outside powers still remain wary of recognizing separatist claims. The two exceptions on the continent, outside recognition of Eritrea's right to self-determination in 1991 and recognition of South Sudan's declaration of independence in 2011, both involved state consent and changes to the formal status of these entities according to colonial boundaries – even if both cases underscore how ill-defined colonial boundaries actually were. In other cases, such as Somaliland, outside states have largely delegated decisions around recognition to powerful African states whose leaders remain hostile to secessionism. Thus, even the weakest African states have managed to persist in their recognized boundaries, Somalia's survival being merely the most extreme example.

Thus, even as the consensus that helped freeze Africa's borders in the postcolonial period came under challenge from discontented separatist challengers and more powerful, territorially revisionist neighbours, the last two decades have not seen a rapid unravelling of continental boundaries. Why not? In other words, if the conditions that sustained the border maintenance regime in the three decades after independence have been undermined, what replaced them? Has the African state system found a new border maintaining equilibrium, or is it still in flux, with the prospect for significant border revisions?

The sovereignty regime that took shape in the 1960s was in many ways clearer than what is observed today. The postcolonial regime served the complementary and:

dual functions of protecting the territoriality (and in some degree the autonomy) of the state itself, and of providing international backing for the entrenchment of state control (and the power of the regime currently in office) over the rest of the domestic population. (Clapham 1999, 529).

In comparison, trends since the 1990s have been contradictory. Three forces are particularly prominent.

First, liberal norms of conflict management have attenuated the ‘negative sovereignty’ norms of non-interference that African states once enjoyed and redistributed power within African states even as borders remain fixed. The continent has lost the strategic importance Cold War competition and neo-colonial ties lent it in the post-independence period, diminishing the autonomy of African rulers vis-à-vis outside actors.

A second trend has been the increased attention paid to weak and collapsing states especially in American security strategy. The focus on cooperating with local authorities capable of providing effective administration hostile to radical Islam has generally bolstered the centre in the face of peripheral challenges precisely where borders face their greatest threats, namely in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

Third, China’s growing presence on the continent has almost invariably favoured existing rulers, territorial jurisdictions and the territorial status quo. The cumulative effect of these forces has been to rearrange and redistribute sovereignty within and between states in subtle but significant ways. Whereas Africa’s international borders and national capitals more or less accurately mapped the locations and boundaries of legitimate authority during the Cold War, in recent decades authority has been reshuffled within states and across their borders in ways that empower new sets of actors.

Liberal conflict management

The continued salience of norms against secessionism has many peripheral elites to use their increased power vis-à-vis the central government to push for power-sharing at the centre and degrees of regional autonomy rather than exit from the state. This strategy reflects the aversion to potentially destabilizing boundary revision regionally and internationally, a fear only reinforced by border tensions along the new boundaries between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and Sudan and South Sudan. Sub-state challengers have thus benefited from outside state preferences for broadly liberal approaches to conflict management that place pressure on recognized governments to accommodate peripheral challengers.² Through fighting and negotiating, many such groups have managed to obtain increased autonomy for regional institutions, often in tandem with external pressures for democratization, decentralization and power-sharing.

This shift reversed a decades-long postcolonial trend toward state centralization in Africa. The centralization of power in national capitals fit the nation-building priorities of post-independence governments and international norms that de-emphasized liberal democracy relative to non-interference in domestic affairs. Outside states remained mute as African governments dismantled arrangements that provided a degree of autonomy and sub-national authority to minorities, many with their origins in colonial governance.

Liberalization and democratization in the 1990s halted and in some places reversed this tendency. Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa introduced meaningful federalism, countries as varied as Mozambique, Senegal and Kenya introduced competitive elections for sub-national governments, and fragile power-sharing pacts became a feature of conflict settlements (Boone 2003; Olowu and Wunsch 2004; Fessha and Kirkby 2008). Outcomes in terms of the actual redistribution of authority often fail to meet expectations. Many power-sharing pacts fail before being meaningfully implemented. Despite the liberal rhetoric, many Western states prefer stable authoritarianism to unstable democracy. In the DRC, for example, outside states have condoned and even abetted the Kabila government’s efforts to centralize rule in violation of the decentralizing reforms of the quasi-federal constitution carefully negotiated and approved in a 2005 referendum (Tull 2010). There has nonetheless been a meaningful trend towards decentralization and power sharing that has redistributed authority within states even as borders have been left unchanged.

Chinese engagement

Another factor reinforcing shaky regimes against rival sovereignty claims internally and pressures to liberalize internationally has been the displacement of the *Washington Consensus* with the *Beijing Consensus*. Through opening new embassies, posting military attaches, scholarship programmes for students, and the increasing volumes of aid, development financing, trade and investment, China has helped bolster African states. Indeed, China's importance goes beyond the economics of foreign aid and development policy, providing different terms of engagement with the continent reflecting an ideology backed by China in international diplomacy around the continent.

By vigorously supporting the theme of non-interference in domestic affairs and promoting a cultural relativist notion of human rights, China has been able to secure its own position and, at the same time, appeal to African leaders mindful of the West's pressure on their own governments. (Taylor 1998, 459).

The effect has been to insulate rulers from the effects of conditionality premised on liberal political and economic norms.

China's strategy emphasizes stability in regimes in a position to supply its economic demand for natural resources, which translates into support for the sovereign and territorial status quo backed by arms for shaky but friendly regimes. Along with Russia, it was the continent's major arms supplier by the end of the 20th century (Rotberg 2008, 11). China also has a range of military ties to regimes across the continent, including significant relations with Angola, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda (Shinn 2008). China's role in arming, financing and providing diplomatic cover for a Sudanese state confronting rebels in Darfur, the East and the South illustrates a broader trend. Chinese investment was crucial in realizing oil production in areas contested in the war in Southern Sudan during the 1990s. 'The oil companies, and by extension their state sponsors, were implicated in helping the Sudanese government's military operations, including through the construction of infrastructure that could double for military use' (Large 2011, 162). Though China was forced into cooperation with South Sudan during the final stages of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, eventually coming round to the inevitability of secession and backing off its support for unity, it had previously offered strong political and diplomatic support to Khartoum.

While much of the writing about China strikes an alarmist tone, indeed its mode of engagement with the continent is in many ways reminiscent of the ways Western powers approached Africa during the Cold War. Yet Chinese investment and assistance in Africa have served to strengthen the centre against separatists and other internal challengers in ways that support the territorial status quo. China's preference for territorial stability, including the ways diplomatic competition over the recognition of Taiwan's status affect its African diplomacy, its self-interest in supporting the consensus against secessionism in international society, and the legal requirements of contracting with recognized sovereign governments in economic transactions have made Beijing a powerful force for regime consolidation and boundary maintenance.

The War on Terror

A final unforeseen change has been the War on Terror and its reverberations on the continent where Islamic movements draw the attention of Western governments. Unlike China's role, which almost invariably supports those in the national capital, the effects of counterterrorism efforts in Africa have tended to benefit those actors in a position to combine effective governance with a hostile stance towards political Islam, regardless of their sovereign status. In privileging actors who effectively control territory, Western foreign and security policy generally, and American policy in particular, has shored up the centre while pushing governments to administer and control peripheral territories and make borders less permeable.

The end of the Cold War and the inglorious end to the US mission in Somalia saw a rapid decrease in Africa's importance in US policy. After the attacks on its embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, the United States expanded defence cooperation with Kenya. But policy remained incoherent, ad hoc, and focused on humanitarian relief and evacuation missions. But the events of September 11, 2001, lent US policy new coherence, focusing a new national security strategy on shoring up weak regimes, especially those that confront Islamists and have a prominent role in US energy security. The Defense Department has played the lead role in implementing the strategy, culminating in the creation of a military headquarters in 2007 dedicated to Africa. AFRICOM, the Pentagon's sixth combatant command, replaced a structure that divided the continent between three separate regional headquarters. AFRICOM oversees existing programmes that are providing new resources to strengthen sovereignty. A five-year, US\$500 million plan between the State and Defense departments includes Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia.³ A related initiative in the Gulf of Guinea assists ten states – Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome and Principe, and Togo – to develop and improve maritime security against a variety of threats. Though the efforts are focused on military training in counterterrorism and maritime security, there are clearly dividends for the fight against other insurgent groups.

To an extent, however, the emphasis on effectiveness of local authorities in Western policy is agnostic as to just who provides order on the ground, as long as they abjure links to radical Islamists. Western support coalesced around Ethiopia's support for the beleaguered Somali government in its fight against the Islamic Courts and al-Shabab, or the Malian government's efforts to roll back a rebellion by an alliance of Tuareg and Islamist movements. In places such as Somalia and to a lesser extent Sudan, the new emphasis in US policy has provided one avenue for the rulers of separatist and autonomist polities to engage a powerful patron. The United States began cooperating with Somaliland's security services from mid-2003, for example, and Somaliland's government began cooperating in regional security initiatives around the same time (International Crisis Group 2005). The Defense Department has taken the lead in pushing for engaging with Somaliland in Washington, even as the State Department has followed the African Union position. The government in Hargeisa has attempted to instrumentalize the Islamist threat, turning it into a strategic argument favouring its international recognition, arguing that without recognition it will lose legitimacy and Islamist challengers will gain ground (International Crisis Group 2006). 'Somaliland should be independent,' argued one senior defence official, adding, 'we should build up the parts that are functional and box in the unstable regions, but the State Department wants to fix the broken part first – that's been a failed policy' (Tyson 2007). Even as the United States, Ethiopia and other Western governments have stopped short of recognition, they have expanded counterterrorism cooperation with Somaliland's government in ways that constitute de facto recognition of its authority. Likewise, the tight relationship between South Sudan and the United States saw these two countries cooperate closely, including defence cooperation, prior to formal diplomatic recognition of the South's independence. Security sector training and financing provides capabilities and resources to deploy against internal and external enemies.

Redefining, not redrawing

Viewing the continued survival of African states within their internationally recognized boundaries, some see a remarkable degree of 'structural inertia' in which 'apparent transformations and prevailing volatility have contributed little progress, little systemic change, and little

substantive improvement across the board' (Englebert 2009, 2). Inside the static lines of the continent's political map, however, there have been significant changes.

Under sustained pressure from below and with continued variation in state capacity to control and administer national territories, the boundaries of existing African states have more often been redefined rather than redrawn, a process with domestic and international implications. With the support of outside states, and often under pressure from them, African states 'have begun moving away from colonially designed juridical statehood to fashion empirical formulas that respond to the messiness of their current realities' (Lawson and Rothchild 2005, 228). These redefinitions have significantly redistributed authority within states through power-sharing and forms of decentralization. Meanwhile, polities that lack juridical sovereignty have been endowed with degrees of informally legitimated authority in international society, even as incumbent states that enjoy international recognition have found their sovereignty circumscribed. In some cases, these changes have created an opening for case-by-case changes in the juridical status of particular claimants that would redistribute sovereignty and redraw the recognized international boundaries of existing states. One may yet see an entity like Somaliland added to the roster of African states and the short list of successful secessionist bids. More often than not, however, these same changes have rendered wholesale boundary revisionism on the continent less urgent and less likely by decreasing the returns to possession of juridical sovereignty.

Those who advocate using selective recognition, conditional sovereignty, and calculated territorial revisions to improve conditions of governance in Africa are likely to be disappointed by the ad hoc and incomplete nature of these changes. Somaliland is frequently cited as a case in favour of engagement with entities that provide stability, development and broadly democratic governance. Yet, it is hard to be encouraged by the precedents set by Eritrean independence, which lapsed into authoritarianism and a deadly but pointless war, or the independence of South Sudan, with transformed a protracted civil war into a potentially enduring interstate rivalry.

Conclusion

The cumulative effect of the changes in the past two decades has been to undo the levelling that occurred with decolonization as a diverse set of authority relations between colonial polities and the metropole, and within polities themselves, were replaced by a much more homologous system of territorially sovereign states. The unique configurations of sovereignty, territory, and authority inherent in the heterogeneous and differentiated set of polities that have emerged since the early 1990s have altered authority relations within and between states even as international borders have remained intact. Though Africa's borders provided an accurate guide to the locations of legitimate authority in international society in the postcolonial period, contemporary realities are more complicated. Hargeisa, like Juba before it, operates an independent foreign policy and is treated by many outside states as if its government has a legitimate right to the territory it claims, rights commensurate with a right to territorial integrity, despite overlapping claims from Mogadishu. Elsewhere, central governments are no longer able to abrogate regional autonomies or power-sharing arrangements without consequences. In the decades after independence, such institutional arrangements were dismantled and rendered unthinkable. The emergence of entities that correspond more accurately to politically legitimate authority and the territories across which it can be broadcast, and norms and practices in international society that support and sustain these entities, are welcome developments.

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Notes

1. Frederick Cooper poses a similar set of questions of the decolonization period: 'If we can, from our present day vantage point, put ourselves in the position of different historical actors, in 1958 – or 1945, 1966, or 1994 – we see moments of divergent possibilities, or different configurations of power, that open up and shut down. Just how wide were those possibilities? And how much did actions taken at any one of many conjunctures narrow trajectories and alternatives?' (Cooper 2008, 169).
2. Arguably, the emphasis on power sharing in conflict management strategies of external intervening and mediating states has reproduced insurgent violence through the demonstration effect that rewarding violent challenges with power at the centre (Mehler and Tull 2005).
3. The US State Department calls it the Trans Saharan Counterterrorism Training Initiative, while for the Defense Department it falls under Operation Enduring Freedom Trans Sahara. USAID also supports the programmes.

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