Defensive restructuring of the military in sub-Saharan Africa

Bjorn Moller

Offence-defence theory

Offence-defence theory as we may call it, for lack of a better term, claims that international relations may be stabilised via a strengthening of the defensive at the expense of the offensive (Jervis 1978; Lynn-Jones 1995; Evera 1998; Glaser and Kaufmann 1998). This is also the contention of the (mainly European) proponents of non-offensive defence (NOD) according to whom every country should, ideally, be able to defend itself against any other with the implication that none should be able to defeat any other through aggression. This would presumably make war less likely and arms races unlikely (Møller 1991; 1992; 1995; Wiseman 2002).

The theory presupposes that offence and defence are distinguishable and that the latter may be strengthened at the expense of the former e.g. by capitalising on the “inherent supremacy of the defence” (Clausewitz 1884, p.358). Distinctions may, in principle, by made at various levels of analyses, but not all make sense. To distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons is thus meaningless, as atapomata are inherently dual-use and because genuine synergies matter. For instance, the possession of a shield (or its modern counterpart) allows for wielding the sword (or other offensive instruments) more efficiently.

To distinguish between total force postures, however, makes a lot of sense, requiring an assessment of whether the composition and deployment of the armed forces as a whole makes them most suitable for offensive or for defensive operations. Indeed, there was neither any doubt in the minds of western military analysts that the Soviet armed forces were mainly suitable for offensive operations, nor about what kind of changes in their composition and deployment would be required to make them significantly less offensive. This was actually accomplished with the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which limited the holdings of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery, combat aircraft and armed helicopters (Falkenrath 1994).

For all the merits of NOD theory as a possible contribution to solving the East-West conflict, it may appear far too eurocentric and oriented towards the status quo to be applicable in the Third World. It could thus be criticized for...
Fences and neighbours in Africa
If one were to present the basic idea of NOD in one sentence it might be “strong fences make good neighbours”. Not because fences are good in and of themselves, but because they allow states to treat part-states such as secessionist provinces or even stateless ethnic groups as quasi-states, as suggested by Barry Posen (1993), Walters and Snyder (1999) and Rosen (2000). Such quasi-states tend to face a “security dilemma of ethnic conflict”, closely resembling the traditional state-versus-state security dilemma (Collins 1997), as one group’s security all too easily produces insecurity for the others.

Second, Africa and the rest of the Third World has seen far too many instances of severe (sometimes even genocidal) human rights violations perpetrated by the regimes in power. In such instances, it may not be a good thing that states can defend themselves, as this would shield them against humanitarian interventions. This, in turn, would allow the regime in power to proceed with impunity, protected by the international norm of non-interference in domestic affairs. As a corrective to this norm, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2001 proposed a “responsibility to protect” (ICIS, 2001, p. 11-18) which seems eminently sensible, provided that it is not abused by simply pinning the label “humanitarian” on military attacks launched for other reasons. That humanitarian intervention may indeed be called for in extreme cases has even been acknowledged by the African Union. While upholding its Constitutive Act the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, it also established the right of the Union to intervene in cases of “war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity” (Constitutive Act of the African Union 2001, art. 4h).

Third, most of the concrete models of non-offensive defence were designed for a European setting and so simply transpose this to a setting as radically different as Africa would be meaningless. African states would not need the same kind of weaponry as European states, nor would they be able to afford the kind of high technology that was a feature of many (but not all) European NOD models (Møller 1991).

European theories and models for defensive restructuring and NOD may thus need some revision for them to be suitable for Africa, but some of the basic ideas appear valid. While international war has, fortunately, been a rare occurrence in Africa ever since independence, it is surely important to keep it so. This means that states should be prevented from attacking each other e.g. for the sake of geographical expansion—as in the case of the recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Gwese 2001). I shall therefore first look at traditional NOD theory as applied to Africa and then suggest some ideas for a possible modification.

Low or broken fences
When applied to Africa, there are both good and bad news with regard to mutual defensive superiority. The bad news is that fences (D values in the above formula) are quite low across the continent, for instance as measured in troop densities. Sub-Saharan regular armed forces are, on average, responsible for the defence of 16 square kilometres of land area. If reserves and paramilitaries are added, the first figure becomes 12, compared with typical European figures of less than 2. The typical African soldier has to patrol much longer borders to guard against incursions and, in the case of a fully-fledged invasion, defend a much larger territory than his European or North American counterpart.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the quality of African troops is usually inferior to that of their northern counterparts, not only because of their lower educational standard, but also because of problems with morale, in their turn partly a reflection of the fact that armies (like the population at large) are often ethnically heterogeneous. This is not necessarily a problem, as soldiers could identify with the State as such. It often is a problem, however, because the State does not really command the requisite respect or enjoy the legitimacy which is taken for granted in the North (Peled 1998). Moreover, as the officers of many African armies are selected as much on the basis of loyalty to the
regime as of skills, their professionalism and competence leaves much to be
desired (Du Plessis 1999a, p. 39-43).

These deficiencies in terms of manpower are all the more disturbing as
African states cannot afford the luxury of replacing men with machines i.e. of
making their defence more capital- or weapons-intensive. This is all the more
impossible because they have no indigenous arms production but, with the
exception of South Africa (Bachelor and Willett 1996), rely almost exclusively
on arms imports. During the Cold War the major arms producers had strate-
gic reasons to furnish African states with weapons for free or at discounted
prices (SIPRI 1997, p. 597-645), but this is not longer the case. As a result arms
acquisitions by African states have become an even greater burden on the
national economies—to say nothing of the actual arms embargoes which have,
over the last five years, been imposed on several African states (SIPRI 2001, p.
345-349). While slowly rising, the import of major weapons systems by
African states thus remains miniscule compared with most of the rest of the
world.

Each African soldier is thus much more poorly armed and equipped, hence
is probably capable of covering much less border or territory, than European
or American troops—a problem made much more serious because of the demanding
terrain and lack of adequate infrastructure that usually characterises Africa. To
this should be added that African states lack such underpinnings of their
national defences as NATO-type alliances or nuclear deterrence. While South
Africa developed a few nuclear weapons under the apartheid regime, it has
subsequently abandoned them, and the entire continent has been proclaimed
a nuclear-weapons free zone (Oyebade 1998).

Nasty, but weak neighbours
The good news about the offence/defence balance is that the low and/or bro-
ken fences may not be too much of a problem in Africa, as the neighbours of
most countries are significantly different from those in Europe. While some of
them may be quite nasty and fearsome—or at least uncomfortably unpre-
dictable—in terms of intentions, their military capabilities in most cases do not
provide them with the means to attack their neighbours. The O values in the
above formula are thus also quite low. While quite a few African states might
be able to undertake small-scale incursions into the territory of neighbouring
states, none are really in a position to launch (much less sustain and success-
fully complete) large-scale cross-border offensives, because of their lack of the
means of power projection, both with regard to weapons systems and logistics.
This becomes obvious from a comparison between African states and
selected northern great and small powers in terms of their holdings of those
types of equipment that were singled out in the CFE negotiations mentioned
above as critical for “surprise attack and large-scale offensive action”. Table 3
thus shows the United States to have about four times as many main battle
tanks and armoured personnel carriers, twice as much artillery, almost eight
times as many combat aircraft and around four times as many armed helicop-
ters as all of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, even a small and relatively peaceful
European country such as Denmark, has more CFE-type weapon systems than
most African states.

Table 3 in fact grossly underestimates the discrepancies by not taking quali-
itative factors into account. While most of the African tanks, for instance, are
obsolete Soviet tanks (e.g. T-54s or even T-34s), the holdings of Germany con-
sist almost entirely of Leopard-1 and 2 and those of the USA of Abrams-1
tanks, each of which is much more capable. Moreover, while most of the
equipment of the powers of the North is combat-ready, a very large propor-
tion of the equipment of the African armed forces is, at best, suitable for
parades, and quite inadequate for actual combat.

Even the continent’s great powers, South Africa and Nigeria, have far fewer
and less capable tanks or other armoured vehicles and much fewer aircraft
than even minor European powers. Their recent experience with military
interventions seems to confirm the assessment that their offensive strength is
quite limited. Even though they were virtually unopposed by regular military
forces, neither the Nigerian interventions (under the auspices of a multilater-
al ECOWAS force) in Liberia or Sierra Leone (Sesay 2003) nor the South
African intervention in Lesotho (Neftling 2003) were thus particularly suc-
cessful. The main weakness may be in the field of logistics, where few states
have the capacity to supply their armies over long distances—in its turn
severely hampering mobility (Du Plessis 1999a, p. 43-49). While this defect
affects both the offence and the defence, it is most severe for the former, and
few African states have air forces or navies which could make up for the defi-
ciencies in terms of ground forces (Hough 1999a; 1999b).

Arguably, Sub-Saharan Africa may thus constitute a zone of defensiveness
almost by default, as very few countries would be able to attack others, even
if unopposed. Certain states may be able to launch small-scale incursions into
the territory of their immediate neighbours—as in the combined Rwandan
and Ugandan intervention in the DRC (Shearer 1999)—but none is able to
defeat others decisively, much less to consummate victory through occupa-
tion.

The North-versus-South scenario
This leaves us with the question whether African states would be able to
defend themselves against non-African enemies, e.g. against Europe or the
Table 3: Major weapons in SSA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Tanks</th>
<th>Armoured vehicles</th>
<th>Artillery pieces</th>
<th>Combat aircraft</th>
<th>Armed helicopters</th>
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may simply play on the unwillingness of the intervening power, especially the United States, to accept casualties, in combination with the low interest in anything African by the West (Luttwak 1995). The ability to merely exact a minor casualty-toll from the prospective interventionist may thus suffice for deterrence, as any U.S. president would find it hard to justify even a few body-bags for a cause with little impact on U.S. security or even interests.

Whether this is a good thing or not, however, is debatable, as the fact that the West in 1994 was deterred from dispatching the perhaps five thousand troops required to stop the horrific Rwandan genocide (Feil 1998) may have cost as many as 800,000 civilian Tutsis and moderate Hutus their lives (Melvern 2000).

### Squaring the circle: non-offensive-defence in Africa

We have thus seen that most of Africa constitutes a zone of mutual defensive superiority, but that this is not so much due to defensive strength as to a largely unintended absence of power projection (i.e. offensive) capabilities. While this combination does make large-scale war between African states very unlikely, it is still far from an ideal situation. First, the inadequacy of defensive strength means that the door is wide open for small-scale incursions by neighbouring states, for instance for the sake of plunder—as has been the case of the Rwandan and Ugandan forces in the DRC (Report of the Panel of Experts 2001). Second, scarce resources thus cannot be protected from predators, which is even more true at sea, where the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of most African states cannot be adequately protected from European, Japanese and other maritime poachers (Mills 1995; Du Plessis 1999b).

Third, even armed forces which are insufficient for national defence may be used against a country's own population. Indeed their defensive weakness is sometimes a reflection of their unfortunate emphasis on internal repression, or of a need to fight domestic insurgents, of which Africa has more than its fair share (Clapham, 1998). While counter-insurgency warfare is certainly often justified (e.g. in Angola or Sierra Leone) the insurgents are sometimes in the right, as when the state with its armed forces represents a threat to, rather than a safeguard of, the security of its citizens.

When regional states cannot, and extra-regional powers usually will not, intervene in cases of atrocities and genocide, unspeakable horrors can take place with impunity behind African borders, as in Rwanda—where the armed forces of the state were the main culprit. If external powers (e.g. donors) were to help strengthen the armed forces for the sake of national defence, they may...
Multilateralisation seems to be the key to the more substantive changes in the direction of African non-offensive defence. The power projection capabilities which would be required for PKOs as well as for humanitarian interventions would be much less likely to activate the security dilemma if they were to reside with a regional organisation such as the African Union or a sub-regional one such as SADC or ECOWAS than if under the national command of, say, South Africa or Nigeria. The best way to achieve this would surely be truly multilateral forces under an all-African or sub-regional command—as seems to be implied by the AU’s endorsement of the goal of “a common defence policy for the African Continent” (Constitutive Act 2001, art. 4d) or by various decisions by SADC (Cawthra 1997, p. 133-142; Cilliers 1999; Hough 1999b). For the short and medium term, however, this does not seem to be a realistic objective.

Much more realistic is a gradually intensifying collaboration, involving a division of labour. If, say, each country were to possess some of the components of a power projection capacity without having the whole range, the community of states would be able to project power in the form of a joint task force, but no single state would have any usable offensive force that might threaten its neighbours. The implied divisions of labour would also allow for substantial savings as compared with a quest for complete armed forces that would anyhow be futile, and which would represent a further drain on resources much needed for civilian purposes.

Preventing international war

Military matters are very much a matter of perceptions. By implication, it is important to prevent such misperceptions about the respective other’s intentions as could lead to war, thereby promoting confidence. Some of the instruments known from Europe could be valuable for building mutual trust, including confidence and security-building measures.

Seminars on military doctrines, strategies and other military conceptions could acquaint military planners with how other countries plan to defend themselves, thereby preventing misunderstandings deriving from, for example, military mobilisations in emergencies. They could also serve as the first step towards the inter-operability which is necessary for military collaboration. Joint training programmes could further the same objective, albeit mainly for the lower echelons of the military hierarchies. Confidence-building measures of the European type – such as invitations to observe military manoeuvres would serve the same purpose—and could be an appetizer for actual joint exercises, of which some have already been conducted by the sub-regional organisations (Hough 1999b).

Preventing internal war

In countries torn by internal strife e.g. between opposing ethnic groups, a NOD-type solution to the intra-state security dilemma might be that each group or province should be able to defend itself against the others. This, in turn, might be ensured through a military restructuring that would allow each constituent part of a federation or confederation to defend itself against the other(s) and to defend its regional autonomy against encroachment by the national government. However, this would inevitably weaken the state as such, which may not be desirable in all cases. A similar result might be achieved through various forms of power-sharing (Lapidloth 1996; Liphardt 1977), such as a quota system for the security services. Such an arrangement was, for instance, entailed by the peace agreement for Burundi, which stipulated that the security forces should be composed evenly by the two main ethnic groups, Hutus and Tutsis (Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi 2000, Protocol III, Art. 14; 1g, and 2e); regardless of the fact that Hutus comprise about 85 percent of the total population (CIA 2001).
Developments in the past three years seem to have confirmed most of the assessments in the original version with one significant exception. A greater (but still cautious) optimism now seems warranted concerning the vision of a common African defence policy. This is especially true as far as the plans for an African Stand-by Force are concerned, envisaged to include a standing brigade at the AU level as well as five subregional brigade-size on-call units, all multinational. It still remains to be seen whether they will ever see the light of day and, if so, whether they will resemble the “combined joint task forces” suggested in the article, but both by the time of writing seemed quite likely. It also appears that these multinational forces will place an emphasis on speed of deployment, which seems entirely appropriate—and the recent troop deployments by the African Union to Burundi and the Sudan testify to a determination to address the continent’s problems.

Recent events in Sudan also seem to confirm some of the assessments of the article—for good and bad. First of all, the agreements on security matters reached in 2003 between the government in Khartoum and the SPLA seem quite in line with the territorial defence arrangements mentioned as a corollary of federalism, as the agreement appears to provide for a more robust and well-coordinated security apparatus. This is in addition to the fact that the SPLA is better at fighting insurgents than aggression from the outside. Second, the civil war-cum-ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region of Sudan since the beginning of 2003 seem to confirm both the assessment that the armed forces are better at fighting insurgents than aggression from the outside, and the more general observation that governments often engage in such “dirty” wars for various reasons, including the difficulty of containing them once they are unleashed. It is also worth noting that the recent events may allow for some cautious optimism with regard to the North’s contribution to addressing the security problems in Africa. At the meeting of the G-8 in June 2004, it was decided to provide training and equipment for up to 75,000 peacekeepers, most of whom will probably be from Africa. Even though this still falls short of a contribution that is proportional to the North’s military and economic preponderance, it is certainly better than nothing.

Conclusion and perspective

We have thus seen that the general principles of non-offensiveness are applicable to Africa, albeit with a significant twist. What is most needed is a strengthening of the national defence capacity of African states, but this must be done without—however inadvertently—creating offensive capabilities that might, at the end of the day, make everybody less rather than more secure. If they want to do so the countries of the North could help in this quest. The premise for such assistance must, however, be an acknowledgement of the legitimate security needs of African states. However well-intentioned, it is not helpful at all to simply stipulate artificial ceilings on the permissible defence expenditures of African countries—and it is a blatant case of double standards when these ceilings are well below those of the global North.

What the North could do to help is to provide military assistance that should be conditional, discriminatory and multilateral in spirit. Conditional upon the adoption of democracy, security sector reform and the signing of peace agreements with neighbouring countries; discriminatory in the sense of only offering such military equipment as would strengthen defensive capabilities and the ability to contribute to FKO’s and other multilateral operations; and multilateral in the sense of being offered not to individual countries—but perhaps in a delicate balance of power—but to regions as a whole. This does not necessarily mean that a donor country (or group of donors) should merely grant military equipment, infrastructure and training to groups of states, which might well be impractical. However, it means that donors should ensure that they do not end up in a situation where they cannot control their military assistance and primarily seek to boost the ability of adjacent states to collaborate in managing their shared security problems.

Postscript - October 2004

The article was written in 2001 and time did not permit an update of the text, which is thus printed in its original form without any revisions. I am therefore grateful to the editor and publishers for the opportunity to add this short postscript.
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Civilianising military functions

Geoff Harris

Introduction

The intervention of government in economic activity may be justified by the presence of market failure so that the free market does not deliver a socially optimal outcome. The four major reasons for market failure are: monopolies (the restriction of competition so that prices of a good or service are higher and its output lower than otherwise); externalities (where spillovers from an activity impinge positively or negatively on the well-being of people outside the activity’s boundaries); an unacceptable income distribution resulting from the free operation of the market; and public goods.

The last of these is particularly relevant to the military. A public good or service, as opposed to others which are publicly-provided, has two defining characteristics. The non-excludability characteristic means that it is impossible to prevent people from consuming it; and the non-rivalry characteristic means that one person’s consumption of it does not preclude another from consuming it. Governments therefore maintain a military on behalf of their populations and finance it from general taxation.

The economic explanation is not the sole reason why defence is almost always a government activity. The military is closely associated, for example, with national pride and prestige. There is also a very widespread belief that security must be directly provided by the state although, as we will see, this is a fairly recent fashion and increasingly subject to modification.

The privatisation of security

Privatising government activities has been a major activity in many countries, both developed and developing, since the late 1970s. In essence, it involves the