4 Regional relations and conflict situations in Central Africa

Yves Alexandre Chouala

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to address the issue of conflicts in the Central Africa Region from the perspective of interstate relations. It strives to assess the possibility that relationships are the root causes of conflicts or at least play a part in them due to their belligerent nature. Precisely because of their belligerent nature, such relationships might be self-destructive or could be a potential source of conflicts. This approach is interesting because it approaches conflicts in Africa from outside the stereotypical context of ‘new conflicts’ (Marchal & Messiant 2003:91–112; Kalyvas 2003:107–135). Rather, it tries to put them in a more realist and traditional context in which they are considered as ‘state affairs’ (Aron 1968; Clausewitz 1995). The Clausewitz approach to a conflict as being a ‘continuation of a war by other means’, or as a foreign policy instrument used by states, is important if there is to be a balanced perspective on the complex web of conflicts and security issues in Central Africa. This traditional yet realist analysis of conflicts lends itself to a more holistic assessment rather than an evaluation based on conflicts solely as adventurous and deadly raids carried out by ‘armed groups on states’ (Bourgi 2004:35–43). Without overlooking the
propensity of African conflicts for mutating and developing new dimensions, they nevertheless remain intricately linked to issues of major interest which are resolved through violence and bloodshed (Bouthoul 1986).

In Central Africa, states are either in conflict with one another or with criminal groups backed from several quarters. Because conflicts in the region can stem from both interstate relations and reasons, the paper addresses conflicts from the double perspective of interstate related factors and transnational factors.

REGIONAL INTERSTATE RELATED FACTORS

Relations in the Central Africa Region are characterised by a number of political and diplomatic practices and behaviours likely to escalate into, prolong or worsen the conflict situation. This does not mean that politics in the region are conflict prone, but rather that it is indicative of the weaknesses of certain provisions, positions and behaviour of the various states that are likely to degenerate into conflicts. Hence the traditional rhetoric of defending state sovereignty and territorial integrity, protecting state interests, defining status and roles – and the struggle for influence and power – might sometimes cause or fuel conflicts, particularly when they do not occur within a clearly defined multilateral setting. In Central Africa, however, there are several factors that unfortunately undermine state intercourse in the region, namely poor relations among neighbours, rivalry among states over status and roles, and the cynical practice of conflict exportation.

Neighbourly relations as a source of conflicts

Regional international relations in Central Africa are marked by mistrust, suspicion and xenophobia between neighbouring states (Choula 2005:155–175). The policy of good neighbourliness that should normally serve the interests of the region by promoting peace seems to be lacking in the daily interactions of the various states. Consequently, relations among neighbours are a source of open and potential conflicts.

In relations of this nature neighbouring states for the most part disregard territorial integrity of states, interfere in the internal affairs of others and violate their sovereignty or are marked by disputes over certain issues in which both have a stake. The behaviour of regional state actors is seemingly a source
of conflicts as well. The disrespect for states’ territorial integrity can be blamed on the near common trend of disputes over colonial boundaries and the impossible craving to conquer more land, which some states manifest openly. Bearing in mind that the border demarcation process inherited from the colonial masters was never completed; territorial disputes now erupt at the whim of states seeking territorial expansion. Regional international relations are deeply entrenched in the intangible colonial borders and any attempt at altering them is likely to affect the regional structure and eventually spark trouble.

Hence the ‘great war’ of the Central Africa Region, or the ‘war of the Great Lakes region’, was triggered by the violation by Rwanda, Burundi and Angola of the territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They all claimed to have legitimate security reasons, including severing the roots of their respective rebel groups which could be traced all the way to eastern DRC, a part of the country that served as sanctuary and political and military stronghold for many a rebel group (Pourtier 1996:15–38). The security motives were compounded by a visible geo-political motivation, namely to return to the ‘Great Rwanda’ of pre-1884, a project initiated by Rwandan authorities as the country was crumbling under the weight of population growth (Chouala 1999:274). Similarly, Angola tried to unilaterally and forcibly alter its landside border with the DRC in order to claim a few Congolese villages with mineral-rich subsoil. The mutual territorial violations in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) by their respective rebel groups fuelled semi-civil and semi-transnational wars in the two neighbouring states. The common border between Chad and the Sudan has not been spared; it has been a source of conflicts within and between the two countries that share a border.

The violation of states’ territorial integrity usually goes hand in hand with a desire to seize portions of land, particularly mineral-rich areas along the borders, in what has been dubbed an ‘environmental war’ – a war to conquer resources (Grandvoinnet & Schneider 1998). It is in this connection that Nigeria waged a war against Cameroon to claim mineral and maritime resources in the Bakassi peninsula for itself. Gabon and Equatorial Guinea have been fighting over the Mbanie Island in the common territorial waters of both countries. Rwanda is planning to take over a vast portion of the Congolese territory rich in natural resources and return Congolese citizens of Rwandan extraction to their homeland.

Such attitudes lead to large-scale violations of national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states, the most current form being interference in the
domestic affairs of others. Regional relations can thus be said to be marked by interference expressed in various ways, including unilateral modification of borders; immeasurable craving for land; extension of the national security area beyond states’ territorial borders; recurrent violation of state authority over resources; mutual support for rebel and dissident groups; ostentatious support to some political and military groups fighting for power within states.

Voluntary conflict exportation

The complex conflict situation in Central Africa can in many respects be blamed on a technique developed by some actors dubbed voluntary conflict exportation. This is a technique which does not favour neutrality in regional conflicts, but rather encourages collective chaos and widespread regional disorder. Conflict exportation has become a well-developed strategy implemented by governments which feel threatened and seek to hang on to power and ensure their political survival by any means.

Conflict exportation is quite common in Central Africa. In 1996, Rwanda exported its civil war to the eastern DRC (Pourtier 1996:15–38). After seizing the capital city of Kigali and pushing back the loyal forces to the borders with former Zaire, the new Rwandan leaders had to guard against the military and political reconstitution of the defeated forces by launching a major offensive on the Kivu region. Officially, this move was intended to ensure the country’s security, but another reason given by Rwanda for voluntarily exporting its civil war to the eastern DRC was to track down the perpetrators of the genocide who had sought refuge in the Kivu Mountains. The outcome was the transformation of the Great Lakes Region into a major conflict zone involving Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, DRC and Congo Brazzaville (Republic of Congo).

Chad also exported its civil war to the CAR with the intention of destabilising President Ange-Felix Patassé, considered to be the main financial backer and ally of political and military groups hostile to President Idriss Déby Itno of Chad. Self-proclaimed ‘liberators’ from the Chadian army were involved in the military offensive officially led by General Francois Bozize all the way from Paris, which resulted in the toppling of Patassé and his government.

Chad and Sudan too have been trading civil wars on their respective territories, with the result that the wars in both countries have become inextricably and structurally linked. Both countries are faced with the same conflicts but
tailed to the socio-political realities of each. In similar vein, Angola for long time extended its civil war front to the two Congos because its rebel movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA)) had established strategic strongholds and military bases in both countries with the blessing of their two governments. For this reason the government forces of the People’s Liberation Movement extended their military operations to the two countries in order to destroy the base and military support of UNITA.

**Rivalry and enmity among heads of state**

Central African heads of state, ‘brothers and friends’ as might be, are in a perpetual state of rivalry and competition over various issues and challenges, including politics. In an environment where diplomatic relations are determined and dominated by heads of state, it goes without saying that any misunderstandings and differences among them would spill over and impact on the official relations of the various states. The expression ‘rival heads of states, rival states’, can certainly be applied here to describe relations in the region. Indeed, international relations in the Central Africa Region are marked by multifaceted rivalry among heads of state.

That the relationship among some heads of state is hostile is an open secret, and it does have a negative effect on state relations, too. For instance, the hostility between Omar Bongo of Gabon and Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbazogo of Equatorial Guinea has had a considerable effect on the bilateral relations between the two neighbours. The deep-seated enmity between the two presidents is partly due to Equatorial Guinea’s ‘arrogance’ and ingratitude as well as its growing condescension following the oil boom that has given the country substantial financial leverage. Furthermore, the oil-rich Mbanie Island has been a bone of contention between the two sides. One of the glaring examples of this enmity was Teodoro Obiang Nguema’s absence from the ceremony in Libreville, Gabon, in 2007 to mark Omar Bongo’s 40 years in power.

The personal conflict between Laurent Desire Kabila and Paul Kagame over the leadership of the Great Lakes region considerably and protractedly destabilised the region. The personal enmity between the two heads of state of the DRC and Angola has also greatly undermined relations in the region. The hostility between Pascal Lisouba and Eduardo dos Santos was so severe that
the latter did not hesitate to back the military rebellion that ousted Lisouba from power.

Idriss Déby Itno and Ange-Felix Patassé were involved in a media warfare in which they accused one another of plotting to destabilise their respective governments. Because of their mutual hatred, Déby provided arms and munitions to the political and military groups that stood against Patassé and finally ousted him in March 2003.

All in all, Central African heads of state are on the whole rivals and their rivalry manifests itself in deep-seated disagreements over political, economic and security issues in the region. This rivalry gives rise to relations that weaken and destabilise the various countries. As a consequence, international relations in the region have become highly precarious.

**CHANGING THE POLITICS IN THE REGION**

Politics in Central Africa is marked by the emancipation and aspirations of the numerous groups who have become part and parcel of the regional politics. The growing number and strength of non-sovereign actors who are diplomatically independent, have their own foreign agenda and substantial means to carry out their activities, contribute in making the region a fertile ground for conflicts. The unhealthy politics has lead to a growing trend which further compounds the precariousness of life in the region, namely the forging of alliances between states and private groups, the militarisation of criminal groups and the free movement of arms and weapons across the various borders.

**Alliances between states and private groups**

In Central Africa like everywhere else, diplomatic relations is no longer the preserve, business or prerogative of sovereign states. Increasingly, non-state actors are involved in the regional politics and have more political and financial leverage than some of the states themselves (Porteous 2003:307–320). With regard to conflicts, the age-old and realist belief that states alone or at least states predominantly, are responsible for regional conflicts has been challenged by a consideration of the number of non-state actors who are involved in them (Hugon 2006:64–74) and the socio-political realities on the ground which highlight relations of mutual assistance and competition between states, and private
and rebel groups (Reyntjens 1999). In some areas the state is under the yoke of private groups or simply dominated by them. It is equally worth noting the mutual defence and assistance agreements signed between sovereign states and rebel or private groups.

Consequently, some of the groups aspire to greater positions at the helm of the state and consider themselves to be on equal footing with state governments or to be a state’s alter ego. Alliances between states and private groups are generally a tangled web of relations and connections that I can only try to disentangle in my analysis for the sake of clarity.

First, heads of state display a craving for power and influence (Chouala 2005: 288-306) which they satisfy by forging partnerships with private groups. The sole purpose of networking within and across states by these groups in their turn is to influence domestic and foreign policies. Consequently, the region now has a system of mutual interference, influence peddling and domination in the internal affairs of one another. It is against this backdrop that an alliance was forged between the government of Ange-Felix Patassé and the Movement for the Liberation of Congo; a rebellion led by Jean Pierre Bemba, which controlled the border area between the DRC and CAR. Rwanda and Uganda set up, armed and led rebel groups in eastern DRC, which led both countries to have considerable influence in the Congolese crisis (Bourgi 2004:35–43; Calas 2001:125–163). At present Rwanda and Uganda still remain key actors, or rather major protagonists, in the politics of the DRC (Katumanga 2000:89–103). Chad had transported groups of ‘freedom fighters’ to the CAR to take part in the establishment of a new political order in that country, who also ‘imported’ Chadian influence into CAR. Today, Chad and the CAR both have rebel group networks in their respective countries.

Second, the alliance between states and private groups can be explained by economic motivations, mainly plundering the economy of a state or engaging in criminal economic activity (Banfield 2003). Forging alliances with private groups in mineral-rich states make illegal transactions possible (Berdal & Malone 2000; Cilliers & Dietrich 2000). Hence, through the rebel groups which enjoy their support, Rwanda, Uganda and other neighbouring countries have illegally tapped the immensely mineral-rich wealth of the Congo.

Third, the state/private group alliances build on what Luc Sindjoun (1998) called ‘affection based politics’. This entails building political allegiances based on ethno-cultural or close relationships in order to conquer or preserve
power (Chretien 1997; Amselle & M’bokolo 1985; Gazibo 2006:121–124). These are alliances that take advantage of the ethnic groups that live on both sides of the borders. Rwanda established very close ties with Congolese rebel groups of Rwandan origin, also known as the ‘bayamulengues’. This large Rwandan community enables Rwanda to have an active say in Congolese politics. So, too, the Zaghawa people living on both sides of the Chad/Sudan border serve as a corridor through which both states influence one another.

**Militarisation of gangs**

Regional relations in Central Africa are characterised by two specific trends, namely the militarisation and trans-nationalisation of criminal groups. Both these trends fan the flames of conflict in the region.

This is in line with the phenomenon of organised crime which can be blamed on the widespread privatisation of the administrative machinery intended to combat crime. The reason for organised crime is that the state, which used to have the full responsibility for curtailing crime, has lost its prerogative due to the inability of national security forces to curb crime, the growing economic discrepancies and the correlated social fragmentation of populations, increasing urban development and unemployment. Like conflicts within states and arms proliferation, militarised gangs have gradually become one of the enabling factors of conflicts in the region. There is a rampant crime wave in some major areas, particularly with regard to drug trafficking and counterfeiting.

**Drug trafficking:** This is a flourishing trade in the region (Banbara 2000), linked to a major underground cartel with market outlets, bulk buyers, retailers, prospectors, intelligence agents and secret services usually more efficient than that of the states. In Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville and Equatorial Guinea, drug trafficking is a flourishing business, making the region one of the linchpins in the business worldwide. Drugs are an element that is favoured in armed conflicts, for it opens doors to resources and could be used to ‘motivate’ combatants.

**Counterfeiting:** All forms of counterfeiting are rife in the region, particularly in the form of counterfeit money and forged documents, such as passports, bank documents and identification papers. However, even postage and revenue stamps are forged. It is a profitable business that can ably finance other activities, including the quest for power. Countries of the Central Africa Region are all affected by counterfeiting and piracy, albeit at different levels.
The transnational movement of persons, particularly as a result of conflicts, is a key factor in regional wars. It contributes to the export of crime and delinquency to the country that plays host to the displaced persons. Criminal records from the police department in Cameroon testify to the fact that Nigerians are the brains behind the Indian hemp business and fake bank documents in that country. Chadians for their part dominate the armed robbery and carjacking sector while Rwandans mastermind the trade in illicit arms and munitions. This amounts to the exportation or transnationalisation of crime and insecurity which could partly be blamed on the fact that the criminal activities, and particularly the drug business, flourish in times of trouble, border conflicts and civil wars and usually take root in a country as a result of arms trafficking. By the time peace returns to the country, the criminal groups are likely to have established links with the government they helped seize power. They then settle in and diversify their activities in an atmosphere of economic turmoil (Quentin & Joannidis 1999:63).

The militarisation of gangs has exacerbated crime in the region. Central Africa therefore has a common criminal environment which spreads with conflicts across borders.

The trans-border movement of and illicit trade in war arms

The illicit trade in weapons is central to the conflict situation in Central Africa. Almost every country in the region is both a source of and market place for arms. Consequently there is an uncontrolled flow of arms which fuels and sustains conflicts. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the porous borders of the countries. The border areas in the region are seemingly grey areas which receive very little attention from the state, and because the state control is virtually absent from the borders, the criminal groups are able to cross from one country to another at will and indulge in a lucrative arms business which eventually undermines the stability and security of states. Crime in Central Africa is a growing phenomenon and its transnational nature has given it some degree of uniformity throughout the region.

The transnational conflict relations in the Central Africa Region are marked by two major facts: first, it spotlights and confirms a form of non-military threat. The security of countries in the region is no longer defined in terms of a military threat posed by an external and well-known enemy. Rather, the enemy
has become invisible and is scattered around the region. Second, the traditional concept of collective security, an interstate responsibility which entailed having common national security policies, mutual non-aggression and defence pacts, and regional early warning systems, is itself being challenged (Mubiala 2003). This form of interstate security has very little impact on the society of today, mainly because states have shirked their security responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

All in all, regional relations in Central Africa have been characterised by conflicts due to a lack of trust among neighbours, the cynical exportation of internal crises from one country to another and the near-entrenched rivalry and enmity among regional leaders. In similar vein, ‘co-operation to enhance peace in Central Africa’ has become impossible, or at best, merely a power game to which leaders pays lip service. They are more interested in salving their consciences and re-inventing their images in the international community. The global changes affecting international relations in general and Central Africa in particular, have also contributed to the precariousness and vulnerability of peace in the region. Hence the growing number of private alliances, competition and rivalry among states, the militarisation of organised crime groups, the free movement and illicit trade in weapons which are current trends in the region, have all contributed in making conflicts almost inevitable.

REFERENCES


