Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror

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Author: Elizabeth Schmidt
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Reviewer: Jason Robinson

Elizabeth Schmidt’s Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror is an enticing prospect for those studying conflict and warfare in contemporary Africa. Schmidt’s text analyses the changing nature of foreign - principally extra-continental - intervention in Africa since the end of the Second World War up until the ostensible end of the first decade of the ‘War on Terror’ in 2010. Schmidt is careful when dealing with such a contentious theme to put forth her definition of intervention early on, stating that ‘Intervention implies a relationship with an imbalance of power’ (p. 2). Furthermore, ‘it is not synonymous with engagement, involvement, or influence, which reveal nothing about the power dynamics of the relationship. Foreign intervention occurs when a dominant country uses force or pressure to interfere with and exert power of a weaker sovereign entity’ (pp. 2–3).

For many of those engaged in conflict studies, however, Schmidt’s definition may prove somewhat problematic and this is increasingly the case as the text unfolds: what if a weaker power deliberately attempts to undermine a stronger power through acts of sabotage or sponsorship of rebel/terrorist groups? How does one define ‘pressure’ and at what level must ‘force’ be taken to amount to an ‘intervention’ in such a categorization? Finally, within the given definition itself little is dwelt on the crucial word ‘intervention’: is it troops on the ground or can such manifestations of force be simply violent acts, whether isolated or coordinated, by a foreign (sovereign) entity? Schmidt admits that ‘The distinction between foreign involvement and intervention can be blurred’ (p. 5), yet at times it appears her overall conceptualisation is rather too clean-cut. Whilst semantic pedantry on one level, such issues later manifest themselves as uneasy aspects of a well-meaning but overly-simplified text; Schmidt offers up a range of interesting case studies, but ultimately undermines her efforts by a net cast too wide.

Foreign Intervention is divided into seven case studies overall, with all regions of Africa covered; interventions from former Colonial powers, as well as the Soviet Union and United States predominate (China features also, although to a much lesser extent). Following an overview of ‘Nationalism,
decolonisation and the Cold War, 1945–1991’, chapters follow on ‘Egypt and Algeria: radical nationalism, nonalignment, and external intervention in North Africa, 1952–1973’; ‘The Congo Crisis, 1960–1965’; ‘Portugal’s African Empire, 1961–1975’; ‘White-Minority Rule in Southern Africa, 1960–1990’; ‘Conflict in the Horn, 1952–1993’; ‘France’s private African domain, 1947–1991’; and ‘From the Cold War to the War on Terror (1991–2010)’. Early on, Schmidt notes cautiously that ‘governments are not sentient beings with desires, will and the capacity to act. Yet the need for shorthand sometimes leads to personification of political structures and the occasional reference to governments as actors’ (p. 3). Caveats in the author’s introduction – ‘governments are not monolithic’; ‘foreign intervention cannot occur without internal collaboration’ – are too often forgotten, however, as an attempt is made to cover a large breath of time and space in a short, readable text that is simultaneously appealing to an academic audience and a more general reader. The balance is clearly skewed the way of the latter and as a result, a formatting issue comes to form an increasingly misguided element of the text’s construction and overall planning: minimal footnoting, with a focus on ‘suggested reading’ sections at the end of each case study. Whilst eschewing overlong footnotes can sometimes be a positive element of a text (as the book’s foreword from William Minter puts it, trying to pay ‘due attention to nuance without getting bogged down in detailed narratives and academic disputes’ (p. xiv)), in Schmidt’s text their absence is misguided. It is often within the suggested reading sections themselves that certain viewpoints and elements of given case studies – and in many cases, important rejoinders and caveats – have been omitted. As the text progresses, it is clear that a reconsideration of this decision could have added significantly to the text for it is within these sections that many of the nuances of Schmidt’s arguments and thinking are lost. Similarly, it is evident that reducing the number of case studies may well have offered greater comparative worth and room to expand on themes and issues that the text as a whole is trying to speak to. Ultimately, the nuance and layers of analysis are often greater in the suggested readings than in the case studies themselves.

As a whole, the chapters on France and its former colonies (and newly acquired areas of post-colonial influence) and the final case study on the War on Terror stand out as the strongest of the set. The former in particular is especially pertinent given France’s increasingly overt presence in many of its former colonial possessions in recent years, be it militarily or (more commonly) diplomatically (as Schmidt notes, the ‘French military presence in Africa was overhauled in the 1990s’ and ‘by 2008, Paris had reduced the number of troops on the ground to approximately 6,000 and had eliminated all but three bases’ (p. 189)). France’s ostensible new post-Cold War approach to Africa emerged under President Mitterand – announced in a new Africa Policy in June 1990 – where it was stated that ‘there could be no development without democracy and … French aid would be tied to human rights practices’. However, as Schmidt caustically notes, ‘Mitterand also affirmed that France would continue to help its allies ward off external threats and would refrain from interfering in internal conflicts. Throughout Francophone Africa, wary dictators embarked on superficial reforms to bring about “multi-party democracy” that would protect their relationships with France, then resumed rigging elections and cracking down on dissent without fear of the consequences’ (p.188–9). France’s recent military intervention in Mali – as well as forays into Chad and the Central African Republic – indicate a new hybrid form of intervention, reflecting the new approach Schmidt notes of ‘French troops in the new millennium … [being] moved in and out of African countries on short-term assignments’ (p.189). The French Government just recently announced that Operation Serval (its recent operation in Mali) was now being taken over by Operation Barkhane. The latter operation ‘comprises a 3,000-strong French force spread across five countries in the most wide-ranging French military deployment since World War II. In partnership with Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, the mission aims to fight the jihadist threat in one of the world’s most dangerous zones’. (1)

Another effective element of the text is the deconstruction of the processes and different hands at work in conducting United States foreign policy towards Africa – the outlining of debates and divisions between the Presidency, the Defense Department, the State Department (& its Africa desk) & Congress – highlight Schmidt’s initial goal of holistic approaches to viewing coordinated state interventions. As before, however, the level of detail in outlining diverging opinions fluctuates and whilst certain case studies hammer home the nature of intra-departmental division and ideological rifts at play, at other times we are only given a snippet
of a much larger, interesting story (for instance, the case study on Portugal shows the fascinating see-saw battles for influence within the Kennedy Administration over the approach to be taken towards Portugal’s engagement with Angola and Portugal’s other African territories, p.83–9). Indeed, the disjoint between United States Administration ideals and realpolitik make for a fitting analogy for Schmidt’s overview on intervention in Africa more broadly:

Because the balance of forces changes over time and according to circumstances, the United States has pursued contradictory Africa policies. On the one hand, as an early proponent of decolonization, which would open the door to American influence, the U.S. government rhetorically championed freedom, democracy, and self-determination. On the other hand, factions in the government have sympathized with the concerns of white settlers, and at times, their voices were dominant. Pervasive anticommunism in some quarters often led to a misunderstanding of nationalist movements. Radical nationalism was frequently confused with communism – or viewed as an equal threat to Western interests’ (p. 24).

In many respects, the same tensions pervade in 2014 and echo similar undercurrents in American foreign policy towards the Arab Spring and North African nationalist uprisings of recent times; indeed, such summaries can be applied to many of the former Colonial powers under analysis in Schmidt’s text.

Schmidt notes that ‘with varying degrees of success, the former imperial powers attempted to control the decolonization process, just as they had asserted their authority over African political and economic processes during the colonial period’ (p. 6–7). Schmidt’s principal contention that external intervention in Africa has often done more harm than good is one few would fault, but unfortunately at times it appears to develop little from this starting point. If there is an overall theme running through Schmidt’s analysis, it is that of the common thread of hypocrisy emanating from a range of Western powers and the continuation of such self-serving behaviour from the colonial to the post-colonial period. Schmidt demonstrates how short-termism in foreign policy outlook has repeatedly come back to haunt the major international powers; as the text makes clear, the actions of the principal Western powers during the Cold War left many African nations in a Catch-22 situation: isolated and often forced to look to the Soviet Union for assistance which then simultaneously brought the disapproval of Western powers and demonisation (such as Guinea in the case of France, p. 175). Whilst the axiomatic nature of short-term foreign policy strategy often proving fateful in the long-term comes as no surprise, Schmidt’s text does offer a good overview of repeated patterns of self-interested actions gone wrong and the problem of isolated foreign policy actions devoid of wider strategic and historical considerations. This is most clearly shown in the borderline comical shifting of allegiances between the United States and Soviet Union over their Cold War allies in Eastern Africa, for instance; in one case, the United States government was funding Cold War ally Ethiopia as a bulwark against regional neighbour Somalia (then supported by the Soviet Union), yet after a change in political outlook from both regimes, the superpowers swapped their respective regional partners (p. 26).

One disappointing aspect of the text which offers up a tantalising glimpse of a road not travelled by Schmidt, are the less frequent, yet illuminating references to the role of Cuba, China and (to a lesser degree) Israel throughout the continent. Whilst Schmidt’s text is weighed towards the former imperial powers within Africa and their post-colonial actions, these three nations offered up some of the more intriguing ideological and at-times counter-intuitive interventions; take Israel’s support for Mengistu-ruled Ethiopia ‘united by their mutual distrust of their Arab neighbors’, training ‘thousands of Ethiopian soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques’ (p. 158). It’s clear that the nature of the book’s organization- looking at former Colonial powers and all the regions of Africa – precluded further exploration along these lines, but within some of these references lay fascinating future research. To a significant degree, it appears Schmidt’s text is a precursor to a more appealing study to follow, namely her forthcoming From State Collapse to the War on Terror: Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War, which aims to look at a period that
witnessed a wide range of interventions, including bilateral operations by African and non-African countries and multi-lateral actions by global, continental, and regional organizations. In many cases, the lines between intervention on behalf of political and economic interests and those based on humanitarian and peacekeeping concerns were blurred’ (p. 219).

At the text’s conclusion, Schmidt offers up ‘four general observations’ that she believes her case studies attest to:

first, both colonial and Cold War powers attempted to control the decolonization process in ways that would advance their interests’; ‘second…conflicts during the Cold War and decolonization period, free market austerity policies imposed by international financial institutions, and weak postcolonial states led to deadly struggles over power and resources in the post-Cold War period’; third …Washington’s global war on terror resulted in increased foreign military presence on the continent and renewed support for repressive regimes’; ‘during the period under consideration (1945–2010), foreign intervention in Africa generally did more harm than good’ (p.228–9).

Whilst the case studies put forward sustain her conclusions, in many respects, the results are unsurprising and unspectacular to anyone but a novice to post-Second World War African history. General readers are thus offered a broader, sweeping narrative of foreign intervention on the African continent since 1945 that sacrifices nuance for generality in preparation of more systematic analysis of the post-Cold War nature of African conflict and instability in a later text.

For all this reviewer’s criticisms of the text, however, *Foreign Intervention* will prove useful and readable to many of those new to post-Cold War African history and the role that foreign powers played in the roles of Africa’s newly-independent nations. The suggested reading sections that undermine the analytical quality of the text proper on the one hand, do offer important pointers for new students of African history to delve further into given case studies and regional histories. Furthermore, there are moments of interest and insight and intimations of interesting avenues not yet explored which may offer up new possibilities for future research as a result. Unfortunately, however, Schmidt’s evident expertise on the states and interventions in question are too often hidden within the suggested readings and background knowledge which does not make it into the case studies themselves; as a result, we are often left with an often too-simplistic rendering of counter-factuals and the realities of power politics & humanitarian concerns in the modern era. Schmidt’s re-tellings thus emerge as too deterministic in looking at government motivations and causality and ultimately the overall point of the text lacks bite: stating that intervention often does more harm than good is (whether intentionally or not) posing a problem, but Schmidt’s text offers very little by way of solution. In stating that foreign intervention ‘refers not only to military terrain and the corridors of power but also to the struggle for African hearts and minds’ (p. 2), by the text’s conclusion it is clear there is an absence of discussions on how such hearts and minds react to interventions or interpret the machinations of power politics that intersect their nation’s politics. Indeed, an off-hand comment that many humanitarian interventions ‘were viewed as positive by many African constituencies’ but became problematic due to the fact that they ‘could not control international forces once they established themselves on African soil’ (p. 11) is another problematic generalization which offers up an all-too-easy summation of complex reactions on the ground, reactions the reader unfortunately is not privy to come the text’s conclusion.

Notes

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