

RESOURCE OR VULTURE WARS?

CONFUSING VIEWS ON RECENT AFRICAN INTERSTATE CONFLICTSⁱ

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INTRODUCTIONⁱⁱ

In the essay “African Vultures, The New Prevalence of Interstate Wars in Africa”, Karel Hendriks aims to counterbalance what he posits is the widely accepted claim that the nature of international conflict has fundamentally altered from inter- to intrastate conflict. He posits that this is in fact not the case, as recent African conflicts are interstate in nature. Hendriks argues that this stems from the concepts “Old and New Wars”; the influential work by Mary Kaldor, whose concepts unwittingly became synonymous with inter- and intrastate conflicts respectively, in effect creating an invalid binary way of looking at recent African conflicts. This is a situation Hendriks aims to correct.

This response essay is constructed as follows. In the first section I will provide a short summary and the main argument presented in the essay. In the second, I will offer my critique in general terms, as well as in more detail focusing on the argumentation and the case used. Finally, I will conclude this paper with a summary and my overall thoughts on the essay.

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ⁱ *Response Essay to "African Vultures, The new prevalence of interstate wars in Africa" by Karel Hendriks, 2012.*

ⁱⁱ *Similar to the essay "African Vultures", when mentioning Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa is referred.*

SUMMARY

"African Vultures" contains four main sections framed by an introduction and a conclusion. In "An African Peace", the author explains the occurrence of the ironically named concept by Lemke, which describes the lack of interstate conflict between African states, how it was part of the Cold War era and was pivotal in creating the distinct conditions for African Vulture Wars. The section "The resurgence of interstate wars in Africa" elaborates on how the post-Cold War era, with its many interstate wars, contrasts with the era of African Peace. In "Battlefield Congo", a historical narrative to the Congo war is offered and the section "Other hotbeds" briefly deals with other interstate conflicts that started in the last two decades in Africa. The author elaborates on how these cases relate to his main argument.

MAIN ARGUMENT OF AFRICAN VULTURES

The main argument of "African Vultures" is that since the end of the Cold War, a new type of interstate war can be observed in Africa, which Hendriks dubs Vulture Wars. These do not fit neatly within the Old and New Wars framework. The Congo war is used as the primary case to support his argument as it contains attributes of both Old and New Wars. Vulture Wars are defined by factors that are closely related to African states and their international context. These are the presence of fragile or weak states that due to the absence of "Darwinian processes of interstate competition" were able to continue to exist. As a consequence, weaker states became an easy prey for stronger neighbouring states, often governed by neo-patrimonial regimes. The author posits that these regimes are at the core of African politics; are motivated by the need to strengthen and continue their rule; and as such have strong incentives to acquire resources and capital through conflict with weaker states, hence African Vulture Wars.

RESPONSE

“African Vultures” deals at its core with several interesting issues, first the changing character of war within the field of international relations and second the complex political and economic factors behind the recent conflicts in Africa. Hendriks’s aim to challenge the widely accepted notion that international conflict has fundamentally changed from inter- to intrastate conflict, and that this is based on the misunderstanding of the authoritative work of Kaldor’s “New and Old Wars”, is interesting. To solve these problems Hendriks introduces the term Vulture Wars to describe these conflicts and their distinctive characteristics

Although the essay offers some nice ideas, the argumentation does not hold up under scrutiny. After careful examination I realized that the underlying assumptions, arguments and subsequent conclusions are faulty and weak. I posit that the essay offers a misinformed, confused and limited view regarding the many political, social and economic complexities that are behind the recent interstate wars in Africa. I offer my critique in two sections. In the first, General Problems, I will elaborate on the main structural problems found in the essay. In the second section I will offer my critique on individual parts of the essay, which are: (1) On the argumentation; (2) On the African Peace and the resurgence of interstate wars; and (3) On the narrative of the Congo war.

The nature of international conflict has been fundamentally altered from inter- to intrastate conflict

GENERAL PROBLEMS

My first and main critique is that Hendriks makes a puzzling choice regarding the basic concepts central to his argumentation. After stating that the concepts of Old and New Wars has fuelled an erroneous simplification on how African conflicts are viewed, the author does not then rectify the issue but continues building his own argumentation on top of this “oversimplified view”. I argue

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first that this is confusing and discouraging to the reader. It further raises the question: why did he not revisit the original work and definitions as posited by Kaldor and use these in his analysis? I posit that neglecting Kaldor's views on the subject matter presents an important omission in the analysis and weakens the essay.

My second critique concerns the term African Vultures. Here Hendriks seems to ignore the concept of Resource Wars; an existing and popular term within the research field of International Relations and International Security, which just as the proposed Vulture Wars, argues that natural resources and power asymmetries between states are important factors behind many conflicts (Rotberg 2004). I personally prefer the term Resource Wars, as it is a broader definition than African Vulture Wars. It would, for example, include the 1992 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, which involved Western states; where natural resources were important motives, and where there were significant power asymmetries between the states involved (Peters 2004: 187). This raises the questions, is there a substantial difference in definition between the two concepts? And does the term African Vultures offer something new? As these definitions are so similar, apart from the obvious geographic aspect, I posit that there is no substantial difference and thus the term African Vultures does not add anything new. I posit that ignoring the concept of Resource Wars is a regrettable omission in the analysis that weakens the essay.

In the following section I will elaborate on the individual parts of the essay.

CRITIQUE #1 – ON THE ARGUMENTATION

My first critique on the argumentation is that it is based on the misinterpretation of the earlier work of Charles Tilly, concerning the relationship between the occurrence of war and the modern

state. This creates problems for other subsequent parts of his argument. Hendriks quotes the famous statement by Tilly, “war made the state and the state made war,” and infers from it that ever-present danger required European states to develop. In contrast, African states had since their independence operated in a rather calm international environment (Hendriks 2012: 61). The author incorrectly infers from Tilly’s statement that states benefit from interstate wars. I argue that this is erroneous and rests on a misunderstanding from Tilly’s work.

I posit that what Tilly meant was something wholly different. Namely: that the making of war is intimately related to the formation of states and its defining characteristics, i.e. sovereignty, territorial borders, the monopoly on violence and the relationship between rulers and their subjects. The quote must be viewed as Tilly’s explanation of the birth of the modern state; how the world’s social and political order transformed from pre-modern state societies to a world consisting of modern state societies (Tilly 1975). During this process states used the rationale and actions that are similar to how criminal organizations operate; by offering security through the claim of monopoly on violence in return for extraction of resources and taxes. This transformational period began after the 30 Years’ War with the Peace of Westphalia treaties in 1648, which codified solutions for the problems of political order between states. Thus, the quote describes the behaviour of state elites and the logic that drove their actions during these transformative times (Milleken and Krause 2002: 756; Tilly 1985).

This misinterpretation of Tilly’s work is further reflected in phrases like “the remarkable absence of Darwinian processes of inter-state competition,” “[d]o Africa’s new interstate wars, like the early European ones, have the potential to spark considerable improvements in state capacity?” and other variations of these (Hendriks 2012: 52, 62). These statements posit that interstate conflict somehow has a positive effect on states, a process that Hendriks never fully explains. I argue that this is a very simplistic and erroneous view on the relationship between states and war. I posit that this relationship, old, new, inter- and intrastate, is more complex and unsurprisingly has been discussed in depth by Kaldor (1999).

In some ways, New Wars are similar to the reversal of how modern states evolved

This brings us to the second critique, the omissions of the definition of Old and New Wars as proposed by Kaldor. This is also mentioned in the main critique section, but must be dealt with in more depth, as it poses problems to the overall analysis. Before I continue allow me to express that I regard Kaldor's "New and Old Wars" as a classic work which explains its themes extremely well and provides a more than competent analysis regarding its subject matter. The definitions offered are not merely based on them being inter- or intrastate conflicts. New Wars are at their core defined as conflicts that involve the fragmentation, decentralization or erosion of the state. Thus, between the work of Tilly and Kaldor one could make a striking synthesis. As Kaldor herself offers, Old Wars can be linked to the emergence and creation of states, while New Wars can be linked to the disintegration and failing of states (Kaldor 1999: 90-92). She posits that in some ways, New Wars are similar to the reversal of how modern states evolved (5). These characteristics are all part of the recent intra- and interstate wars in Africa, making the exclusion of these definitions a regrettable omission in the analysis of "African Vultures".

CRITIQUE #2 – ON AFRICAN PEACE AND THE RESURGENCE OF INTERSTATE WARS

Hendriks argues that the roots of African Vultures lies in the Cold War era, a time period during which there was an absence of inter-but a prevalence of intrastate conflict. This period has been named by Lemke, the researcher who found the statistical anomaly, rather absurdly "the African Peace" (1998: 163). The "African peace" contrasts with the many internal conflicts that states endured during this period. Hendriks notes that the African peace runs counter to the Democratic Peace theory and argues that the lack of interstate war is the result of the lack of external threats for states. In addition often these states were weak; were ruled by neo-patrimonial elites; and were able to survive due to the absence of "Darwinian processes of inter-state competition," allowing weak states with little

legitimacy to continue to exist. This in effect provided the conditions for the distinct type of interstate wars that would erupt between African states during the post-Cold War era. I subscribe to parts of this analysis that explain how the era of African Peace created specific conditions that would set the stage for events that would occur in the post-Cold War era and disagree with parts as discussed in Critique #1. I must however stress that the notion that the African Peace runs against the Democratic Peace theory is wrong. This part of the argument contains a logical fallacy also known as the cause and effect mistake. The theory posits that democratic states do not go to war with each other, i.e. explaining the lack of interstate war between democracies. This however does not mean that the presence of democratic states is the common cause behind interstate peace, i.e. correlation does not equal causation.

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CRITIQUE #3 – NARRATIVE OF THE CONGO WAR

Regarding the overall presented narrative of the Congo War, a rather confusing approach is taken. My main critique on this section concerns Hendriks's concluding statement: "[m]oreover, pilfering resources to consolidate domestic rule and retain control over the neo-patrimonial state is of primary concern for these vulture [sic] states" (Hendriks 2012: 59). This is an oversimplification of issues, events and actors concerned with the DRC war. As the author himself mentions, the war started due to ethnic tensions along the shared border of Congo and Rwanda. To the reader it is puzzling and even contradictory that Hendriks does not consider this as a major characteristic of the concluding statement. Second, Hendriks regards the war in the DRC as singular. I posit that at least three wars can be distinguished (Tjon 2011: Ch. 4.3). The first Congo War (1996-1997) was in part the continuation of the 1994 Rwandan conflict caused by the massive displacement of people from Rwanda into the Congo state then named Zaire. During the second part (1998-1999), the war shifted from an ethnic war to a resource war. During the third part (1999-ongoing),

the war transformed from an interstate war to a civil war, largely contained in South and North Kivu and the district of Ituri (Daley 2006: 303; Weiss and Carayannis 2004; Prunier 2009: 53; Tjon 2011: Ch. 4.3.; Human Rights Watch 2012).

Regarding the discussion of the Congo war, the author posits that the president of Rwanda, Habyarimana, was ousted by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1994. I posit that he was not so much ousted as he was assassinated. Although it is unclear who is behind it, most view the hardliners within his own political party as the perpetrators (Prunier 1995: Ch. 7).

In sum, I posit that the narrative regarding the DRC wars, though not entirely incorrect, is not representative for the complexity of actors and events concerned. I argue that this weakens the main argument.

CONCLUSION

I am positive about some parts of the analysis on how the era of African Peace created the conditions for the wars that would be part of the Post-Cold War era. However, too much of the essay is marred by problems that ultimately hinder its conclusion. This is so much so that one must conclude that the essay's main point, that recent African interstate wars should be viewed and understood as "Vulture Wars", is unconvincing.

My critique can be summed up as follows. First, Hendriks ignores the original definitions of the concepts of Old and New Wars by Kaldor. These are not solely defined as inter- and intra-state wars, but also as wars related to the concept of the modern state as posited by Tilly. In some ways, new wars are akin to the reversal of how modern states evolved (Kaldor 1999: 5). New Wars differ from Old Wars in that they involve a process of erosion of the state while Old Wars involve the creation and development of the state. To the reader, this omission is unsuspected and discouraging. Why were the definitions as posited by Kaldor not used in this analysis? I argued that neglecting these represented important omissions in the analysis and weaken the essay.

Second, with the introduction of the term “African Vultures”, a prevalent and established term within the fields of IR and Security, “Resource Wars”, is ignored. Similar to Vulture Wars, Resource Wars suggest that resources and power asymmetries between states are important factors behind many conflicts (Rotberg 2004). This raises the question if the term Vulture Wars offers something new in comparison to Resource Wars. I have argued that it does not, first because these concepts are so similar in definition and second because Resource Wars goes beyond the African context, and as such it offers a broader scope in viewing and understanding recent conflicts. This omission further refutes Hendriks’s main point as unconvincing.

Furthermore, what I found remarkable about the analysis and its conclusion is the assumption that interstate conflict has a positive effect on states. How this process works is not explained by Hendriks, but asserted as a given. I argued that this statement is the result of a misinterpretation of Tilly’s work. It seems that Hendriks fails to realize that the context of 17th century Europe is radically different from Africa’s post-Cold War context. This is ironic as Kaldor’s seminal work, “New and Old Wars”, does elaborate on how to view these differences. In addition, it is peculiar that Hendriks does not take into account that there may be alternate explanations for the positive development of European states since the 17th century. To paraphrase Sheehan, war is a profound agent of historical change, yet it is not the fundamental driving force of history (2008: 216). Arguably, many other factors can be considered to explain state development, e.g. education, industrialization, natural resources, and so on.

In conclusion, it seems that the author made several unintentional but ultimately erroneous choices in writing “African Vultures”, which as I have explained originated from the misinterpretation and omission of several pivotal concepts. To the reader, these flaws are distracting and confusing, undermining the author’s arguments and overall message. Ultimately the reader is left with the impression that the subject matter could and should have been handled with more care.

War is a profound agent of historical change, yet it is not the fundamental driving force of history

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