

Theories of War and the African Context: Whither Strategic Theory?

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Abstract

This article explores the state of strategic theory in relation to the African context. It argues that the dichotomy between war in the Global South and the Global North, combined with the shift towards critical security studies, has hobbled the development of robust strategic thinking relevant to war on the African continent. It combines a literature review of theories of war, that have sought to either explain the occurrence of war or how to fight and end it, with a scoping review of African strategic thinking to highlight this gap. It concludes with a call for greater African strategic thinking and propositions for what African strategy should entail.

1. Introduction

After the Cold War, an attempt to illuminate and counter the Eurocentric nature of Strategic Studies went astray. By arguing that Strategic Studies is irrelevant to the Global South, because the security challenges faced in these countries were different, two decades of debating 'what security is' took the fore, and the fields of Critical Security Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies became the 'better' fit for understanding war within the Global South. Furthermore, the theories that emerged have tended towards the critical as opposed to problem-solving. While useful in illuminating the power dynamics within the knowledge system of security thinking, Critical Theory has not been able to promote robust alternative theories that are able to explain and solve the



security problems that continue to plague the Global South, and Africa in particular. An unforeseen consequence of this shift from Strategic to Critical Security Studies was, first, the further Westernisation of Strategic Studies. As studying strategy in the Global South was not in *vogue* strategic thinking continued to grow in the West without considering the African context. Second, the reification of the division between security, and specifically war, in the Global North and Global South continued.

Barkawi (2016) argues that wars in the Global South have been relegated to the abnormal through the use of terms such as “small”, “irregular”, and “dirty wars.” This is perhaps most evident in the work of Calwell (1994) who, writing for the British Colonial Empire conceptualised wars with colonies as ‘small wars’, because of the employment of ‘irregular’ tactics, organisation, and rules. His description of European and American war (‘regular’ war) is glaringly contrasted to his description of war in colonised spaces – the first is framed as civilised, rules-based, and orderly, and the second as ‘peculiar’ (suffice it to say his description of peoples in these contexts is blatantly racist) (Calwell 1994: 315–317). While some may try to argue that Calwell is a product of his time, this contrast in the narratives of war in the West and war in the Global South is pernicious, even today.

What would occur if this dichotomy between ‘legitimate’ (interstate) war and ‘illegitimate’ (intrastate) war was removed? This article argues that re-framing war and strategic thinking to remove this distinction between war and ‘other’ wars, would result in two important innovations in the theoretical literature:

- illuminating the arbitrary and misdirected barrier between Strategic Studies and other fields related to war
- allowing scholarship from the Global South on strategy to emerge and gain traction

It does so by first providing a literature review on the theories of war. As the starting point of this analysis is not to assume a division between war in the Global North and the Global South, this literature review will engage both the literature within Strategic Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies. It is, however, primarily interested in problem-solving theories as opposed to critical theories. This state of the art will then be superimposed upon the African context to assess where the literature and practice have kept pace with one another, and where gaps remain. In doing so, it will illustrate that while some strides have been made towards including African experiences and voices

in Peace and Conflict Studies, this has been less evident in the field of Strategic Studies. As a result, African strategic thinking has not been sufficiently theorised, and African actors have been reliant on either irrelevant strategic theory or forced to improvise their approach to war. This improvisation is often framed in a manner that reaffirms the narrative of war in the Global South as ‘irregular’, as seen in the ‘greed’ theories of the 2000s and current narratives on private military actors. The article concludes with a scoping review of some contributions to strategic thinking on the continent and some propositions for what African strategic theory should do.

2. Theories of war

This literature review is primarily interested in theories that have attempted to answer one of (or a form of) the below questions:

- a) What causes war?
- b) How do we prevent or end war, either through victory or creating peace?

The theories that have emerged in response to these questions are underpinned by a variety of ontologies and epistemologies. The primary division of concern in this literature review is that between positivist and post-positivist paradigms.

2.1 *What causes war?*

The literature on the causes of war is vast. It originated within the positivist paradigm, seeking some universal explanation for war, and concluded within the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, with an understanding that war is too complex a phenomenon to attribute to a single cause. The literature has also been divided between those explanations that advocate for structural explanations (war can be explained through structural processes such as the international system or societal structures) and those that promote individualist explanations (war can be explained through actors) (Demmers 2012). This article does not argue that one epistemology has produced better theories. Rather, valuable insights have emerged from a variety of epistemologies.

One of the first robust efforts to synthesise and categorise explanations of war is Waltz’s book on *The Man, State and War* (Waltz 2018). Here, Waltz (2018) divided explanations for the causes of war into three images, the individual, the state, and the

system. He concludes that the most convincing argument why war occurs is to be found at the system level, in international anarchy (a structural explanation of war). In this argument, we see the privileging of *international* war and the Westphalian state system, and therefore a restrictive explanation. This explanation, however, birthed a host of positivist and structuralist theories that would dominate explanations for war for decades, such as power transition theories and offensive and defensive realism (Lebow 2010). The core question of ‘what causes war?’ remained extensively theorised and debated, but largely unanswered within these theories.

Another foundational work came from John Herz’s concept of the ‘security dilemma’ (Herz 1950). The security dilemma has served as the cornerstone for realist explanations of war for decades. The argument is that one actor’s efforts to secure itself (within an anarchic international system) could create insecurity for another actor, triggering a security response and a cycle of escalation (Herz 1950). Born of a rationalist epistemology and a deductive logic, this simple but elegant explanation for war encountered empirical challenges. As Lebow (2010: 28) states, ‘The security dilemma is ever-present and cannot account for variation in the frequency or intensity of warfare. Unit- and system-level theories alike require additional, auxiliary explanations, theories or propositions.’

In an effort to explain why the security dilemma led to war in some cases and not in others, a variety of theories emerged that sought to qualify and further explain these nuances, such as the balance of power and strategic culture theories (Barnett 2018: 162–165; Lebow 2010: 28–29). The field of strategic culture emerged, in this manner, to explain actors’ behaviour using their attitudes towards the use of force as an explanatory variable (Barnett 2018: 162–165). Following several years of study and debate on this issue, the consensus appears to be that strategic culture can at least provide context to decision-making, and is at most one of many variables that influences decisions to go to war (Adamsky 2022). It is in strategic culture that we see some of the first movements towards constructivism within strategic studies.

Similarly, deductive theories that assumed decision-makers engaged in a rational cost-benefit analysis when going to war, were forced to explain ‘irrational’ decisions to go to war using concepts such as indivisibility, distrust, and miscalculation (Lebow 2010). While these theories opened up room for more individualist as opposed to structuralist explanations, they remained firmly in the positivist paradigm, assuming that humans adhere to and act according to set rules.

The above theories, founded in Realism and Strategic Studies, legitimately came

under fire in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century for being Ethnocentric, primarily concerned with the Western experience, and for distorting and erasing the experiences and voices of non-Western actors (see Acharya 2011; Ayoob 1995; Barkawi and Laffey 2006). This critique occurred in parallel with an epistemological shift from positivism to post-positivism. The two together shifted security theory towards Constructivism (as a middle-ground approach to security) and Critical Security Studies. The theories that emerged (such as human security, Critical Security Studies, and securitisation theory), however, were more concerned with redefining security than explaining the occurrence of war.

In an effort to confront this Eurocentric perspective of war, Ayoob (1995) investigated what was at the time referred to as the 'thirdworld' to highlight how the state formation process in the colonial world has provided the foundations for intrastate war in postcolonial states. This was an important contribution for elevating the experiences of the Global South in security studies, but in some ways, it cemented the notion that security experiences of the Global South were other than those of the Global North, and permitted the dichotomy between external and internal wars to continue.

Throughout the Golden Age of Strategic Studies and into the post-Cold War era, a series of correlational studies, founded on an empirical as opposed to rationalist epistemology continued to engage the question of 'what causes war?' These studies, however, were similarly unable to produce a conclusive result (Lebow 2010: 58–62). One of these studies did give rise to the greed theory, which argued that war in the Global South was driven by opportunity for financing rebellions (i.e. 'greed') due to the high instances of war in states with factors such as high commodity exports rather than political grievances (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Criticism for this theory was extensive, especially from the Global South. Laurie Nathan (2003), a South African scholar, challenged this theory's methodology and choice of proxies.

In addition, a variety of multi-disciplinary theories that fall under the broad church of Peace and Conflict Studies, have emerged to confront the question of what causes war. Some explanations for war centre around the role of the state and state formation in managing and creating conflict, respectively. The failed states thesis correlates violence and conflict to the absence of a functioning state (Rotberg 2003). This theory has been widely critiqued, however, for its stereotypical depiction of the non-Western world, exemplified in the seminal work that fueled the failed states narrative, Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy*, and for legitimising interventionism (Demmers 2012: 67–79; Duffield 2001; Kaplan 1994). It has also been challenged for being blind to the

role of historical and colonial histories in state fragility (Ikpe 2007: 88). Ayoob's work on state formation (1995) provides some of this historical context.

There is also a division within the theories of causes of war between identity-based explanations and economic explanations (Sen 2008). Identity explanations for conflict can predominantly be found within the constructivist realm, but disagreement persists on the importance of elite manipulation versus social meaning in war and conflict (Demmers 2012). The greatest critique of identity explanations for war, however, is the manner in which popular discourse of identity-related conflicts reduced war in the Global South to 'tribalism'. It is interesting to note that similar narratives have not been applied to Western histories of identity-related conflict, from the Thirty Years War to World War II. Rather, western engagement in war is framed as the result of a rational cost-benefit analysis of the global geopolitical game for power.

Economic explanations for war emerged as a counter-explanation to identity and dominated in the late 1990s and 2000s. These explanations resurrected modernisation explanations for war, promoted resource-based arguments for war causation, and explored a multitude of ways in which economic indicators can be used to predict or explain war (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Koubi et al. 2014; Khadiagala and Motsamai 2014; Stewart 2010). None of these theories have provided a convincing theory of war. The greed versus grievance debate also perpetuated the dichotomy of narratives between the Global North and Global South. Economic reasons for war in the Global North are framed within the rationality frame of realism and geopolitics, while economic drivers of conflict in the Global South were framed as 'greed' and 'warlordism'.

So, the question of what causes war has been approached from positivist and post-positivist epistemologies, from structuralist and individualist ontologies, using deductive and inductive logic, and from multiple disciplines. The question, however, remains unanswered. Currently, there appears to be a consensus that war can be caused by a variety of overlapping structural and proximate causes, and the mechanisms through which these causes lead to war are highly context-dependent.

2.2 How to prevent and end war

The need to understand the causes of war was driven, at least within the Peace and Conflict Studies field, by the assumption that understanding the cause of war can assist in ending it. This goal to end war stemmed from a normative imperative. On the other hand, realism did not seek to explain war to ensure its ending but to give statesmen

the understanding and tools to navigate it. Any goal for preventing or ending war was linked to achieving victory and protecting interests. This goal occupied strategic theory for centuries. Strategy, however, is important for peace. The preoccupation with mediation and peacebuilding, while essential, has been erroneously disaggregated from strategy. Peace is a political goal, and while pacifists may disagree, force is sometimes needed to achieve this goal.

Strategy has often been defined along the intersection of political objectives and military force (Lonsdale 2016). In other words, strategy guides when and how to use force to achieve political objectives. It has also been defined using the formula of 'ends + means + ways = strategy' (Meiser 2017: 82). Classical strategic thinking is dominated by writers such as Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Modern thinking on strategic theory includes a large corpus of American and European twentieth century thinkers commenting on the Cold War experience. Exceptions can be found in the writings of guerrilla or revolutionary leaders in the Global South, such as Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. Noticeably absent in both classical and modern strategic thinking, is thinking stemming from the African continent. This does not indicate a lack of strategic thought or practice. After all, African history contains military thinkers who revolutionised or optimised armed forces for political gain, such as Shaka Zulu, Sunjata, and Menilek II (Reid 2012). Rather, strategic thinking on the African continent is less recorded and recognised due to the power dynamics within knowledge systems that have ailed most disciplines.

Underpinned by rationality and modernism, strategic theory of the 20th century approached this question of how to end war in a calculated, reason-based manner. As Freedman (2008: 24) indicates, 'It was an attempt to transform the exercise of political power by making it subject to the managerial revolution and so turn states into rational decision-makers, maximizing utilities.' The question of how to prevent war was first explored within the context of the balance of power. Realists were preoccupied with identifying the 'correct' balance of power to ensure international stability and reduce international war (Lebow 2010: 28–31). However, it was deterrence theory that came to dominate as the panacea for preventing war. Whether through nuclear arsenal, posturing, or other forms of political messaging, to prevent an actor from attacking you, you must make it clear that the costs would be too high (Lebow 2017: 3–11). Successful deterrence could manage conflict and avoid war, most infamously exemplified in the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction. Most applicable to international wars, the theory has even been applied to terrorism in recent years (Bowen 2004).

In relation to ‘unconventional’ war in the form of terrorism and insurgency, the scholarship on strategies of and in response to these forms of warfare has developed within its own pocket of strategic studies, often divorced from the high politics of traditional strategic thinking. First, modern writings stemmed from colonial rule and were fraught with the narratives of civilisation adopted by colonial powers, like that of Calwell above. In the Global South, written from the perspective of the insurgent, Mao Tse-Tung’s work *On Guerrilla Warfare* created a template for revolutionary warfare, which compellingly linked the political to the military (Mao 2000). To provide the counter-insurgent’s perspective, in 1964, Galula (2006) provided a systematic study of insurgency, to developing robust laws, strategies, and tactics for counterinsurgents. Similarities to Galula’s work can be seen in the policies developed in the 21st strategy to counter-insurgency and terrorism during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. For example, Galula’s first law of counter-insurgency states that the ‘support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgent and insurgent’ (Galula 2006: 52). This is reminiscent of the famous ‘winning hearts and minds’ strategy of the US in Iraq.

Insurgency, however, is not stagnant. Strategies have evolved, and counter-insurgent strategies have been racing to keep up. Perhaps most prevalent today is the melding together of conventional and unconventional strategies, in what is termed ‘hybrid war’ (Hoffman 2007). The combination of the regular and the irregular, the conventional and the unconventional, is forcing greater communication between these two camps in strategic studies. Yet, studies on hybrid war remain largely occupied with case studies of relevance to the West, particularly Russia’s use of this form of warfare. It is also being presented as something novel in warfare. But what would a study of war in the Global South reveal? The DRC, Sudan, and South Sudan have witnessed partnerships between government forces and irregular militia forces for decades. What strategic lessons can be garnered from these cases, particularly when one sees what a partnership between state and militia forces has wrought in Sudan?

Of course, the above theories focus on strategies of parties to the conflict. What of peace operations, whose aim is to support or, more lately, enforce peace? Liberalism underpins much of peacekeeping theory, through its foundations in collective security and its assessment of how to ensure peace through democracy (Williams and Bellamy 2021). Cosmopolitanism has driven some of the more recent peacekeeping innovations by supporting greater use of force and blurring the lines of impartiality in peace operations (Williams and Bellamy 2021). Bellamy and Hunt (2015) identify three trends in peace operations, that bring about their own challenges: the growth in protection of

civilian mandates, the ‘robust turn’ in peacekeeping that allows tactical use of force, and stabilisation operations that seek to reassert legitimate authority in a territory. These trends have been driven by innovations and lessons learned in the policy space, and less so by theory. The strategic theory of peace operations is, therefore, of a more ad hoc nature.

It is evident that strategic thinking has a robust history, but that this history is littered with issues of Eurocentrism and in certain cases, racism. This is relatively well-known. But, instead of countering this challenge with strategic thinking from the Global South, security literature in and on the Global South has pivoted towards studying peacebuilding, mediation, human security, and other issues within peace and conflict studies and Critical Security Studies. Strategic studies on the continent have largely leaned towards case studies and attempts to apply the above to these contexts. While important, the African context requires strategic thinking to confront the complex conflicts and wars on the continent and provide theories that confront this reality.

3. The African context

In 2023 alone, there were 10 377 battles, 3 079 instances of remote violence or explosions, and 9 736 cases of violence against civilians by an organised armed group in the African continent (ACLED 2023). In 2022, Africa far outpaced other continents by the number of state-based armed conflicts, almost double that of Asia (the region with the second highest level of state-based conflict) (UCDP 2023). Beyond the state, non-state violence in the form of herder-pastoralist and inter-communal conflicts is also a pressing problem. The peacebuilding projects of the 1990s and 2000s have not succeeded in building lasting peace. Furthermore, the dynamics of violence and conflict are complex and shifting. New conflicts, or old conflicts with new iterations, have emerged in Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique. Recurring conflicts, such as that in South Sudan, the DRC and Mali, grow more complex and dynamic. Insurgencies are not clearly delineated between government and insurgents, often with dozens of militant actors active within one political space. Radicalisation is a pressing problem. Forty-eight per cent of deaths associated with terrorism occur in sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP 2023). Meanwhile, the geopolitical terrain in the Horn of Africa is increasingly sensitive, with more extra-regional players seeking influence (ICG 2018; USIP no date). Robust and flexible strategic thinking is needed to confront these challenges.

Peace operations are also prevalent on the continent. Of the 64 multilateral peace operations across the world in 2022, 24 were located in sub-Saharan Africa, and of the ten largest operations, 8 were located in Africa (SIPRI 2023). Beyond the number of peace operations, Africa has also acted as the laboratory for several transitions in peace operations, including the Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC, stabilisation missions in the DRC, Central African Republic, and Mali, and a hybrid AU-UN mission in Darfur. These innovations are driven by a combination of lessons learned in previous peace operations, increasingly complex conflicts, and multilateral politics. The prevalent trend in response to these, however, remains one of trial and error, rather than employing robust strategic thinking to confront these issues. Furthermore, the rise of violent extremism has resulted in a ‘conceptual and practical muddle between peace and counter-terrorism operations’ (Ismail 2013: 224). What is evident is that peace operations are increasingly engaged in hostilities as parties to the conflict, and therefore require sound strategic thinking and doctrine that can suitably confront the complex conflicts on the continent.

4. The problem of strategy in Africa

What does existing strategic theory provide that can assist in confronting these challenges, and where are the gaps? In classical strategy, the writings of Sun Tzu are likely the most relevant to the African context, in contrast to Clausewitz. Clausewitz pioneered thinking on war through a trinitarian conception of war. His theory identified three core elements of warfare, the government (associated with reason), the military (associated with probability), and the people (associated with passion) (Clausewitz 1943). This conception assumes the actors involved in war fall within the Westphalian conception of the state, where a social contract exists between the governed and governing, and the state holds the monopoly of force. In the postcolonial context, such an interpretation of war is problematic precisely because the social contract is limited to non-existent, and the state rarely retains the monopoly of force. So, while some of Clausewitz’s concepts, such as friction in war, may be useful, the overarching explanation of war is limited in its ability to explain the African context. Sun Tzu, on the other hand, provides principles for warfare that are not restricted to a state-based understanding of war and are therefore more flexible in their applicability. These principles are multiple but focus on information, understanding one’s enemy, and maximizing the comparative advantage (Mahnken 2019: 66). These principles, however, are quite broad and not

sufficient to explain current realities.

Similarly, of the wide array of modern strategic thinking, the works of Mao and Guevara are likely most transferable to the African experience. However, they were a product of a specific setting (twentieth century revolutionary wars), that cannot translate fully to the current trends on the continent, where two-actor revolutionary wars are less common compared to dynamic, multi-actor, fragmented and complex conflicts that dominate the continent. Meanwhile, the strategic thinking that emerged in the West during the twentieth century, was pre-occupied with Cold War geopolitics. While important contributions such as deterrence, grand strategy, the paradoxical logic of strategy, the indirect approach, and more were made (Lonsdale 2016; Luttwak 2001), they are designed to explain the actions of and provide guidance to states engaged in conflict with other states. This is rare on the continent.

What is more common on the continent is warfare that would fall most neatly into what is termed insurgency, asymmetric warfare, or unconventional warfare. Since 9/11, there has been a growth of strategic thinking on these types of warfare, particularly within military institutions in the West (British Army 2009; US Army 2014). This thinking is by its nature geared towards advising American and European actors on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Much of this thinking has been tested within the Global South, with little success, most famously in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Furthermore, offensive peace operations that encounter these forms of warfare, while on the rise, are not guided by a clear doctrine or 'theory of war' (Garcia 2018). There is consensus, however, that peace operations do not have the capacity and resources to apply these types of counterinsurgent strategies (Garcia 2018: 41).

To what extent then can African states, regional organisations, and the UN adopt the counterinsurgent and counterterrorist strategies developed in the West? Foreign engagements on the continent, as seen in foreign advisors, training and support to African states, are often reliant on these and other traditional strategic thinking that can be viewed as 'substandard and/or irrelevant' to this context (Barlow 2016; Loc 3287, 3289, 3768). Furthermore, the internationalisation of the African security context has the potential to worsen the security situation, as explained by Ismail (2013) concerning violent extremism and radicalisation. He states that 'the absence or non-inclusion of an indigenous African [...] perspective or counter-narrative about radicalisation and violent extremism uncritically fuses and conflates the strategic interests of major powers with the local realities in Africa' (Ismail 2013: 211). This conflation occurs in various ways. First, African political elites 'exploit international strategic concerns'

to advance political goals (Ismail 2013: 222). Second, this combines with the support provided by external actors who promote a militarised approach to counter-terrorism that erodes democracy and civilian control of the military (Ismail 2013: 226–227). Third, the presence and visibility of external actors, particularly from the global North, can trigger further frustration, anger, and violence (Ismail 2013: 227–228). At the same time, radicalisation on the continent is also thought to be supported by other external actors, such as Gulf states (Ismail 2013: 226).

Galula's (2006) work on irregular warfare is predicated on a stronger conventional force (a state-resourced military) combatting an irregular force. His work, however, does not consider the complexities of the post-colonial state, and its complex relationship with global power structures, that is often engaged in counter-insurgency. The structures, resources, and relationship with the society of the postcolonial state cannot be compared to that of the Western world. One example is the presence and exploitation of 'alternatively governed' ('ungoverned') spaces within these states (Ismail 2013: 223). Furthermore, the Hobbesian and Weberian notion of the state, whereby the state of nature is overcome through the formation of a social contract and the allocation of the legitimate monopoly of force to the state is a mirage in the post-colonial world. While the European Westphalian state built their internal legitimacy through engagement with external threats, the external formation of the African state has created a continual struggle for internal legitimacy (Dannreuther 2013: 137–146). Winning hearts and minds as a government of a state that is externally legitimised with a fractured social contract is no easy feat.

Compounding this challenge is the issue of resources. In some states, the state military can by no means be considered the 'stronger' actor (see Somalia and South Sudan). African states also rarely have robust military industries, requiring military contracts with external actors, which is often complicated and delayed by bilateral politics (Ndalolo 2024). This is one factor that has driven these states to engage private military contractors (PMC's), which are able to provide the necessary support and technologies at a faster rate (Ndalolo 2024). Even the recent study of private military contractors has been done through the lens of great power interests, particularly with the growth of the Russian Wagner group (see Marten 2019; Pokalova 2023). In popular and academic discourse, PMC's are often portrayed as malicious and less legitimate than national armies (Abrahamsen 2011). This is likely due to the pervasive nature of the Westphalian concept of the state having the only 'legitimate monopoly on the use of force'. Many African states, however, have never truly commanded this legitimacy

and their use of PMC's may be viewed as a form of strategic decision-making, as a way to maximise resources and power. Current strategic thinking does not provide the opportunity to engage these nuanced considerations for post-colonial states.

5. African strategic thinking

African actors must then look towards African strategic thinking, which has been given limited attention in the academic space. A few examples are illustrative. Executive Outcomes founder Eeben Barlow (2016) uses his experience in the private military space on the African continent to develop a theory of composite warfare that, notably, uses the term anti-government forces (AGF) to refer to non-state militant groups (as opposed to insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists, etc.). This both allows for the inclusion of a multitude of types of warfare within this theory, as well as removes some of the normative and emotive connotations that traditional terms have given to non-state actors. His theory is also attached to what he identifies as the seven pillars of the state—namely, intelligence, law enforcement, armed forces, governance, economy, populace, and perception. This allows for an understanding of warfare that is able to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the postcolonial state and its interactions with warfare. Furthermore, his work makes note of the complex relationships with the external in the form of bilateral relations as well as multilateral actions for peace (Barlow 2016). Barlow's theory, however, still retains a dichotomous view of warfare between the state and anti-government forces, and does not sufficiently engage the complexities of states that have partnered with militant forces and spaces with a multitude of AGF or other types of local militias (e.g. self-defence militias) engaging in violent conflict.

It must be noted that the development of African strategic thinking does not mean throwing out the proverbial 'baby with the bath water'. It also entails 'speaking back' to traditional theory. British scholar Freedman's (2008: 30) analysis of the relationship between power and strategy concludes that power is 'the capacity to produce effects that are more advantageous than would otherwise have been the case'. Notably, Freedman (2008: 31) also criticises the dichotomy between the external and internal in strategic studies, noting that internal disorder makes one 'more vulnerable to external pressure'. Much has been raised around the question of 'African agency' in the global system, a guise for questioning how Africa can exert power. How have African state and non-state actors innovated power in a disadvantageous position of power, by every

traditional measure thereof? Alao (2019) explores some of these questions in his book, *A New Narrative for Africa: Voice and Agency*, in which he highlights cases of African agency, including in the security sector. This includes regional innovations (such as ECOWAS), and successful community-based policing innovations (Alao 2019). While not necessarily pioneered by state actors, these innovations are inherently strategic. They entailed an actor successfully deploying force or the threat of force to achieve political objectives, and they did so with limited financial resources. Their ability to utilise non-material resources (such as knowledge of context [Alao 2019: 109]), in addition to material resources (military force), to develop a feasible response to a threat embodies the ‘ends + ways + means’ definition of strategy.

Similarly, deterrence theory, framed as a (usually) bilateral engagement between two actors (usually states), is difficult to apply in the African context. The relationships between states, societies, militant groups, international actors and international organisations are far too complex to reduce to the current theory of deterrence. However, efforts to prevent violent conflict through conflict-early warning systems have been woefully inadequate. Is there space for regional organisations to strategically think about how to prevent escalation of conflict to violence using deterrence? In South Sudan, for example, rebellion is well-accepted as a viable path to power, due to the default power-sharing approach to peace (Theron 2022: 155–156). How can such rebellions be deterred, by making such an approach to power unviable and costly? Stabilisation missions are also on the rise. Stabilisation refers to peace operations that seek to reassert state authority in conflict zones (Williams and Bellamy 2021: 200). A critical part of re-establishing state authority requires deterring further rebellion. Have these missions strategically engaged this question? Can stabilisation missions in themselves send a signal to militant actors in other states of the risks of rebellion? Currently, this does not appear to be the case, and strategic thinking in these missions appear limited.

A good example of this ‘speaking back’ to traditional strategic theory can be found in Barlow’s (2016) work. Clausewitz’s concept of the centre of gravity is modified towards a ‘trinity of gravity’ in anti-government forces. Clausewitz developed the concept of the centre of gravity to identify that which should be targeted to strike a defeating blow to the enemy. His concept was formed by studying interstate wars in Europe and the following centres of gravity were identified (in order of importance): the army, the capital city, a key ally, the leader, and public opinion (Mahnken 2019: 63). Barlow argues that the centre of gravity of anti-government forces, aside from its early stages

where the leadership may be considered the centre of gravity, is not made up of a single centre but a more complex and resilient trinity of gravity—the leadership, popular and moral support, and financial and other support (Barlow 2016). Another example is how Omeje (2020) acknowledges but also challenges Ganor's conceptualisation of terrorism for its strict boundaries between concepts such as terrorism, guerrilla warfare, combatants, non-combatants, and more, highlighting how these concepts are dynamic in many situations, such as where terrorism and insurgency combine, or where terrorist organisations transition into political actors.

Olonisakin's (2000) concept of 'peace creation' similarly speaks back to the dominant understandings of peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Her extensive study of ECOMOG presents a new conceptual framework and model for peacekeeping. By combining peacekeeping and peace enforcement, she argues that peace creation should involve an integrated approach whereby the mediator uses peace operations not only to keep the peace after the agreement but also as a tool during mediation to enforce peace. Notably, she highlights the interdependence between the political and military components of peacemaking (Olonisakin 2000: 13). This speaks to the heart of strategy—the use of force for political goals. Olonisakin's work not only documents the, at the time, revolutionary approach to peace operations of ECOMOG, but provides a strategic framework to guide using force to make peace. While the use of force in stabilisation and enforcement missions has grown, the importance of maintaining the interdependence of the political and military has been lost. A case in point is the DRC. While a revolving door of enforcement and stabilisation deployments continues to turn (from the Force Intervention Brigade, to the EAC mission, to the current SADC deployment), these missions are not strategically used to find a political solution to the perennial crisis.

Similarly, approaching African strategic thinking in this manner ('speaking back') would help dismantle the dichotomy between conventional inter-state war and unconventional intra-state war, which has not produced relevant strategic thinking. For example, Garcia (2018) uses manoeuvre theory from conventional strategic theory, to develop a new theory for offensive peace operations to achieve success, using pre-emption, disruption, and dislocation. Understanding that strategic thinking and concepts are not solely the purview of state actors, nor wholly the realm of the internal or external, nor only relevant if produced through the European experience of inter-state war, is essential.

Certain themes emerge from this scoping study of African strategic thinking. First,

African strategic thinking stems from the experiences and experimentation that have occurred on the continent in the absence of robust strategic theory relevant to the context. Second, the history and complexities of the African state must be understood to both explain war and develop strategies to engage in war (as a state, regional organisation, or other non-state actor). Third, stringent conceptual frameworks and reductionist strategies are not fit for purpose in this context.

What then should African strategic theory do? To return to the original questions of this paper, how to explain war and how to end war (through victory or otherwise), strategic theory in Africa should expound on these questions. In doing so, it must be cognisant of the following:

- the realities of the configuration of the African state
- that states are not the only strategic (or legitimate) actors on the continent
- the complexity of war in Africa
- the blurred distinction between the domestic, regional, and international
- that Africa's security and strategic context is intricately entwined with global power dynamics, within an historical context of unequal power relations
- African epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems

6. Conclusion

While the critical turn in security studies of the 1990s and early 2000s played a pivotal role in opening up the space of strategic studies, the arbitrary division it created within the field of security studies has, in some ways, hampered the growth of strategic thinking from the Global South and Africa. This article has provided an overview of existing theories of war in order to problematise strategic theory in the African context. While important strategic innovations have emerged and continue to emerge in the strategic field, the complex strategic environment on the African continent requires a re-thinking of strategic theory and promotion of African-relevant strategic thinking. This is necessary not only to explain war on the continent but also to find solutions to it.

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