The geo-politics of the Great Lakes Region: Towards a Regional discourse of Peace and stability.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to critically examine the regional politics of the Great Lakes Region by focusing on Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It purports to interrogate the link between geographic space and politics in the region and how the power dynamics in each individual state are able to configure themselves on a broad regional scale. What is peculiar and noteworthy in the Great Lakes Region is the magnification of internal political crises into crises of regional proportions creating a panorama of chaos and confusion. In this blurring regional view what emerges is a kaleidoscopic array of factors which makes it impossible to construct a single narrative in the Great Lakes Region. The approach of this paper is diagnostic and prescriptive, attempting to locate the locus of conflict in the region and in the end build a holistic and comprehensive framework for the establishment of a regional discourse of peace and stability. It is imperative that a monolithic reading that conceptualizes the regional crisis in ethnic categories misses the pertinent issues and the many dynamics in the region such as the crisis of governance, weak state systems, weak political will and the absence of strong regional partnerships. In the light of this, this paper shall argue that the establishment of a regional discourse of peace should be centered on reforming the institutions of governance, strengthening state systems, regional integration and the evolution from a culture of fear and mistrust to mutual co-operation and co-existence.

Introduction.

Geographic space and politics have always had a symbiotic relationship. Geographic location of a state or nation normally bears a profound influence on political decisions and national strategy. During the apogee of the nation state in Europe geographic and territorial issues influenced the politics of Western Europe to a greater extent. The contest for geographic space especially in Eastern Europe following the decline of the Turkish Empire had an overpowering influence on European history during the period. As a concept geo-politics gained academic ascendancy at the beginning of the 20th century with the term being coined by Rodolf Kjellen, a Swedish political Scientist. Later Sir Halford Mackinder developed the concept into a full fledged academic concept in his description of power dynamics in Europe through his concept of "the heartland theory" As a term geopolitics has undergone a lot of evolutions across the ages to designate aspects covering a wide range of disciplines. In Darwinist philosophy the concept is impinged upon the notion of expansion on the basis of survival of the fittest and physical expansion of territory at the expense of the weaker ones.[1] Essentially and traditionally

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[1] P.G Ogoth, "Uganda's geostrategic significance since 1894", in P Ogoth, etal (eds), Uganda, A century of existence, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1995, p.3.

geopolitics concerns itself with the relationship between political power and geographic space. Hafeznia elaborately postulates this idea by stating that, "Geopolitics as a branch of political geography is the study of reciprocal relations between geography, politics and power and also the interaction arising from combinations of them with each other."[2]

In common usage, the Great Lakes Region is a referent to Central Africa's Great Rift Valley, stretching in a north south axis, along the Congo- Nile crest from Lake Tanganyika in the south to Lake Edward and the legendary mountain of the moon in the north.[3] Under a "minimalist" definition, the area should include Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern Congo and southwestern Uganda as the core of the interlacustrine zone.[4] This vast geographic space has many striking uniform patterns. It is a bloc that is inhabited by people with the same cultural and primordial ties. The region also has high population densities, with Rwanda for instance having a population density of 300/square kilometres, causing a drastic reduction of land deforestation and a severe environmental pressure.[5] All these demographic, ecological and ethnic patterns have shaped the geopolitics of the region creating in the end a complex conflict pattern.

The Great Lakes Region has always been a conflict prone region that has witnessed some of the most horrendous conflicts on the African continent. Chaos and violent upheavals have left in their path a deadly trail of destruction and blood shed. The region has created conflicts whose dynamic has not only embroiled the region but has caused massive and devastating effects for the continent. In Rwanda, a cycle of genocide beginning with the Rwandan Revolution of 1959 left more than a million people dead. In Eastern DRC four times as many people died during the period 1998-2000.[6] A survey from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) shows that nearly four million people were killed from war related causes in the DRC since 1998, the largest documented death toll in a conflict since World War 1.[7] In Uganda, the ravages of civil war have caused insecurity and displacement especially in the northern parts of the country. In Burundi the crisis generated by the assassination of democratically elected President Melchior Ndadaye in 1993 created a lengthy civil war that also had grievous consequences. Within the context of geographic proximity, weak state systems coupled with porous borders these conflicts have tended to merge giving rise to an expanding zone of insecurity and the export of wars to neighboring countries. The shifting geographic space of the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region has even created problems of continental proportions giving rise to "The First African World War"[8] in 1998.

The expanding geographic space of the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region has contributed to a number of pertinent challenges to human security beyond the region caused by a massive influx of refugees. This has created what Barere Kerata Checha calls

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[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wikipedia/Geopoilitics, (accessed on 10 0ctober 2012)

[3] Rene Lemarchand, The geopolitics of the Great Lakes region, http://ua.ac.be/objs/00151008.pdf, (Accessed on 15 October 2012)

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid

[8] Susan Rice refers to the Second DRC War as the "First African World War" because it involved a lot of African States, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia who supported the warring factions in the war.

"a conflict system"[9], that is self-sustainable. Easily available low priced smuggled weapons have found their way into Nairobi and some parts of Kenya from the Great Lakes and have greatly contributed to insecurity. It is estimated that between 500 00 and 100 000 000 small arms were in circulation in 2001.[10] This dynamic oft leads to violence and magnifies the devastating effects of violence. In countries not at war these weapons create erosion of prospects for development, contribute to social disintegration and make the resort to violence more likely and deadly.[11] In addition a large movement of refugees from the region to Tanzania has created devastating ecological and environmental insecurity affecting households and creating critical food shortages.

The Geographic Space And The Regional Nexus Of Conflict.

There is a great geographic trajectory that links all the crises in the Great Lakes Region into a single discourse of violence that transcends geographic boundaries, in the end creating a single discourse of violence. In this discourse of violence what is more conspicuous are the regional fault lines that cut across national boundaries leading to a spill over of conflict from one arena to the next transforming ethnic solidarities into very powerful vectors of transnational violence. The escalation of regional conflicts is very much influenced by the presence of large numbers of refugees in each country with collective ethnic ties and memories of violence. Perhaps the starting point in this regional nexus of violence is the 1959 Rwandan revolution that created a lot of Tutsi refugees, who found refuge in Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Eastern DRC. In Burundi, a similar pattern of ethnic violence in 1965 which reached its peak in 1972 when a Hutu rebellion that started in Tanzania spread to the south of Burundi. The result was a massive Hutu migration into Rwanda radicalizing even more the Hutu-Tutsi strained relations in this country. During the 1986 Ugandan revolution spearheaded by Museveni's National Resistance Movement the displaced Tutsi refugees from Rwanda came to play an active part. The late Fred Rwigyema. Leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and Paul Kagame were amongst the 26 originals of Museveni's National Resistance Army in 1982. When Museveni took power in January 1987, Banyarwanda were estimated between 20 and 25% of the National Resistance Army.[12] Museveni prepared the Tutsi for an armed return to Rwanda which resulted in the 1 0ctober 1990 aborted attempt to seize power by the RPF and the subsequent 1994 genocide which created an influx of Tutsi refugees who crossed the border into eastern DRC in the Kivu Province. Following the victory of the RPF, hordes of the Interahamwe Hutu militias crossed the border into Kivu. This wave of refugee migration shifted the geographic space of Rwanda's political contest into the DRC. This created a dramatic evolution of what one scholar terms, "refugee generating crisis into crisis generating refugees"[13]

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[9] B Checha, "From conflicts to global terrorism", African Journal of International Affairs, Codesria, Vol7 No 3, 2004, p.59
[10] Ibid, p.68.
[11] Ibid, p.69.
[12] Philip Reyntjens, "The privatization and criminalisation of public space in the Geo-politics of the Great Lakes Region", http://journals.cambridge.org/S0022278X05001230a.pdf, accessed on 10 September 2012)
[13] Rene Lemarchand, "Patterns of state collapse and reconstruction in Central Africa: Reflections on the Crisis in the Great Lakes Region", http://africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/3/2htm (accessed on 18 September 2012)

The presence of hundreds of thousands of Hutu militias in the Eastern DRC masquerading as refugees and frequently launching cross border raids into Rwanda was a pertinent human security concern for Rwanda. Uganda at the same time was greatly worried about the presence of The Lord's Resistance army rebels who were finding safe sanctuary in the DRC. The result of this geo-strategic picture was the First Congo War of 1997, itself a progeny of converging regional security concerns. The AFDL was a regional coalition consisting of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda that finally overthrew Mobutu Seseko from power and installed Laurent Kabila. No sooner had the Kabiliste insurrection succeeded that hostilities renewed again, resulting in the Second DRC War that began in 1998 and ended formally with the signing of the Lusaka Peace Agreement in 2002, a war that ended up involving external actors such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Sudan and Angola.

Diagnosing The Regional Malaise

It is often very tempting to impose upon the general pattern of the Great Lakes Region a certain form and order which although plausible does not help matters. It is quite agreeable that the crisis in the Great Lakes Region has assumed regional proportions because of ethnic fault lines that transcend national boundaries, especially the Hutu-Tutsi dynamic. It is a dynamic that has been used to explain the geo-politics of the region. The Tutsi-Hima conspiracy theory has been smuggled to try and explain regional politics, and Huntingdon's' "clash of civilization" has also been used to sickening proportions to explain violence in the region especially in Eastern DRC. A lot of academic paraphernalia has been arraigned to come to the defense of this defective analysis. One such defective analysis is Mamdani's "citizenship and indigeneity" that conceptualizes everything in identity formation in the region and the ethinification of citizenship.[14]

Ethnicity as a factor in the Great Lakes Region has simply catalyzed, or been catalyzed by certain more profound and critical issues, as Lemarchand notes, the contours of ethnicity in the region are shifting as are the human targets against which it is directed. Communities seen as allies one day are viewed as enemies the next and new coalitions are built for short term advantages only.[15] He adds.

 In this highly fluid political field conflict is not reducible to any single identity
  marker. It is better conceptualized as involving different social boundaries
  activated at different points in time in changing political stakes.[16]

The regionalization of conflict thus transcends ethnic identity, and its inherent logic is located in the institutions of governance in the region. The regional malaise can best be viewed as a series of local national conflicts, which have nothing in common but tend to merge and intertwine through the weaknesses of the state system in the region.[17] The

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[14] See M Mamdani, When victims become killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the genocide in Rwanda, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2001
[15] Rene Lemarchand, "The Geopolitics of the Great Lakes region"…
[16] Ibid,
[17] Morten Boas, Uganda in the Regional war zone: Meta-narratives, Past and present in R Southall etal, (eds) Journal of Contemporary African Studies Vol 22, No 3, September 2003, Carfax Publishing..p.284.

regional nature of the conflicts has much to do with the availability of weak institutions of governance in the region which are so fragile and precarious that they are highly contagious to conflict vectors. In this region of weak and failed states in geographic proximity local crises are able to metamorphosize into crisis of a cataclysmic nature because of the absence of solid state systems capable of checking conflict generation. The weaknesses of the Zairian State, coupled with its occupation of the geographic center of the region have played a crucial part in the regional conflict system. The fall of the Zairian state after the end of the cold war created a new power configuration in the region, with its vast geographic extent and rich mineral wealth the vacuum left by its decline created a "black hole" and led to what Phillip Reyntjens terms "the privatization and criminalization of public space"[18] The virtual disappearance of the state, the absence of territorial control, porous borders, very poor communication between the centre and the periphery were noteworthy aspects of the Zairian state. Just like nature, geopolitics abhors a vacuum, and the space left after the decline of the Zairian State was filled by other non-state actors, warlords militias and "entrepreneurs of insecurity."[19] The result was the satellisation of entire provinces, the fragmentation of provinces from central authority and the emergence of new forms of privatized governance. Achilles Mbembe explains:

> New forms of organized power resting on the control of the principal means
> of coercion (armed force, means of intimidation, imprisonment, expropriation, killing)
> are emerging in the framework of territories that are no longer fully state, borders
> are poorly defined or at any rate change with the vicissitudes of military activity.[20]

In the absence of a solid state system, the DRC became a safe haven for regional entrepreneurs of insecurity, militia movements such as the Interahamwe, the LRA, and thus a security threat to its neighbors. Even the Kabiliste State that succeeded the Mobutu State failed to assume the essential attributes of a state. In this regard, the DRC fragility as a nation state has created a whole host of regional problems. The inability of the DRC to move towards a more cohesive nation-state will always create problems for the region. Lacking the morphology of a nation state, the DRC has largely remained "a sociological and political deception lacking multinational political community since its creation in 1885"[21]

Weak state have always created a wide array of security concerns and in Closson's conceptualization of the weak state in security terms, he sees it as an arena for operation of Trans-territorial networks locked in a struggle for resources.[22] The resource rich Zaire has attracted a lot of regional, local, and continental players creating a resource war characterized by looting and pillaging of resources in the end extending the frontiers of the conflict system. Conceptually state failure and state weaknesses are a danger to peace and stability at both the local and regional level. The disappearance of state sovereignty

[18] Phillip Reyntjens, "The criminalisation and privatization of public space"….

[19] Ibid,

[20] Ibid

[21] Mwayile Tshiyembe, " The need for a democratic state in the DRC" in M Lebedev and M Tatu (eds) African Geopolitics, Summer Fall 2002, No 7-8, p.283.

[22] Sabelo J Gatsheni, Weak states and the growth of the private security sector, monograph No 139, Nov 2007, http://iss.co.za/indexphp?link_id=&slink_id_591&link_type=12&slink_type=12tmpl_id=3, (accessed on 17 November 2012)

and legitimacy creates and attracts a host of non-state and external state actors to contest not only the geographic space, but the political space as well. Marina Ottaway and Stefani Mair explain this further:

> Failing and failed states present a grave danger to international stability as well as
> to the well-being of their population. Internationally, they can become safe havens for terrorists
> Organizations, centers for drugs and arms, and breeding grounds for dangerous diseases.
> Regionally they can spill instability well past their borders and create a conflict dynamic
> affecting neighboring countries…[23]

In Burundi and Rwanda, the shrinking power and legitimacy of the state also created its own local dynamic, which later imploded regionally. The main aspect of the erosion of state power in Rwanda and Burundi was the exclusionary political institutions built paving way for the creation of ethnocratic states that had no universal mandate or legitimacy but mere constructs of certain ethnic groups. In such bi-ethnic and vertically structured societies such policies are lethal in as far as they denude state legitimacy and shrink the political base of state authority.[24] This was the case with Rwanda under the Habyarimana regime, where the state had ceased to exist and was little more than "a caricature of the neo-patrimonial polity."[25] This generalized system of patrimonialism creates an acute degree of disorder, a lack of institutionalization and a universal resort to personalized, and vertical solutions to societal problems, the state in the end becomes an instrument of patronage than an independent public utility dedicated to general service.[26] In Burundi power became a monopoly of the Tutsi-Hima elements from the South in Buriri, a situation that was even reflected in the military echelons. In such exclusive political systems conflict is more likely. Rothchild and Groth sums it up: Because state institutions are fragile and lacking in effectiveness and legitimacy, they

> are a poor vantage point to mediate the struggle between competing groups. Unable
> to channel participation along predetermined lines, the overlord state becomes isolated
> and aloof from society, unable to structure relations between social interest…[27]

With the state therefore failing to regulate social relations what emerges is a conflict structure that is monolithic and immune to peaceful coexistence. In Rwanda and Burundi, the construction of hierarchical structures of governance between the Hutu and Tutsi has bred feelings of superiority and hatred. In such diarchies with bipolarity it becomes difficult to construct multiple alliances in the resolution of conflicts.[28]

In Uganda, the failure of the state to build an all-inclusive political structure created numerous problems. The Museveni regime failed to go beyond the regional divide in Uganda between the Bantus and Nilotes. As a result the Uganda State has forged a strong partnership with the Nilotes to the exclusion of Bantus. The divide by the colonial administration where the centre and the south were areas where the bureaucratic elite

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[23] Ibid,

[24] Rene Lemarchand, "Patterns of state collapse and reconstruction in Central Africa: Reflections on the crisis in the Great Lakes Region, http://Africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/3/2htm, (accessed on 17 November 2012)

[25] ibid

[26] J Cilliers, "Resource Wars: A new type of insurgency" in J Cilliers and Christian Dietrich (eds) Angola's War economy: The role of oil and diamonds, Institute of Security Studies, Pretoria, 2000, p.8.

[27] Rene Lemarchand, "Patterns of state collapse and reconstruction in Central Africa…."

[28] Ibid,

were enlisted, with Northern Uganda regarded as a reservoir of for labour has been perpetuated, with the Acholi in the north marginalized. This has created a culturally, politically and economically divided Uganda polity and sown the seeds for conflict. The ADF based in the Ruwenzori Mountains of Uganda emerged in 1996 as a localized threat in opposition to government. In the North resentment to government rule created The Lord's Resistance Army that created a huge zone of insecurity. In early 2002, it was estimated that over 500 000 people had been internally displaced, a situation that threatened democratic reform and perpetuated the abuse of human rights.[29] In Northern Uganda war had become an integral part of every day life, a mode of production and Acholiland a vast wasteland and a source of instability. In the North east of Uganda, the Karamojong, a semi nomadic minority of about 100 000 people have amassed firepower which they use for cattle and vehicle raids deep into Kenya. In the absence of a strong democratic platform, it is likely that political space in Uganda will always be subject to violent contestations. Museveni must reform Uganda's institutions of governance and create a broad based and all-inclusive national vision that is not regionalized.

Post genocide Rwanda has also failed to move away from a restricted political mentality that is informed by the fears of the past, and this has slowed the sustainable stabilization of Rwanda. Elizabeth Sidiropolous writes:

> The political and military thinking of the Rwandan government is still informed by the1994 genocide. Despite the strong trend towards democratization and openness in many civil matters, the military establishment continue to be regarded as critical to the survival and protection of the state.[30]

In this context sustainable peace is not achievable. Kagame won the presidential elections in 2003 for a 7-year term. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch published extremely critical reports denouncing the systematic destabilization of the opposition and lack of freedom of expression.[31] In this context Rwanda has failed to move away from the same construct that caused the civil war and genocide, a situation which may have dire consequences. Sidiropolous comments that, "The commitment of the current regime to ignore the scepter of ethnicity that continues to permeate much of society is both short sighted and lacking in a trustful assessment of the costs in the future."[32] Kagame's government has actively entrenched the hegemony of the Tutsi at the expense of creating democratic institutions of governance, and in this way creating conditions for ethnic hostilities. As long as the impetus for democratic reform in Rwanda remains weak willed, the Rwandan state will fail to go beyond the discourse of genocide, build sustainable institutions of government, a failure which will have catastrophic results not only for Rwanda but for the region as well.

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[29] S Streleau. "Uganda: Halfway to democracy"in E Doxtader and C Villa-Vicencio (eds) Through fire with water: The roots of division and the potential for reconciliation in Africa, Africa World Press Inc, Asmarra, 2003, p.242.

[30] Elizabeth Sidiropoulous, "Democratization and militarisation in Rwanda", published in the African Security Review, Vol 11, No 3, 2002, http://iss.co.za/asr/11no3/sidiropoulos.html, (accessed on 18 November 2009)

[31] Collete Braeckman, "Rwanda's elections" in M Lebedev and M Tatu (eds) African Geo- politics No 13, Winter 2003 , p.181

[32] Elizabeth Sidiropolous, "Democratization and militarization in Rwanda"…

The Failure Of Regional Co-Operation

One magnitude of the Great Lakes Region crisis that is notable is the failure to create strong regional mutual partnerships to deal with the regional problems. Because conflicts in the region are interlinked, regional approaches are necessary to resolve them. Although there have been quite a number of inter-state partnerships, these have largely been aggressive and not constructive. Regional integration in this region remains largely elusive. Because of this lack of a regional framework of co-operation, what exists is a regional framework of conflict. The earliest attempts to establish a regional body was by the late Mobutu Seseko. With the chief aim of reshaping the regional processes and influencing the region he succeeded in getting Chad and the Central African Republic to agree to the creation of the Union of Central African States (UEAC) in April 1968. This was followed by the CEPGL whose objective was economic development. This was notable for its successes such as the freedom of movement in the region through the CEPGL card, the building of the Ruzizi dam and other agricultural programs, creation of an informal regional trade network that connected local markets in Rwanda, Zaire and Burundi to each other.[33] After the CEPGL, no serious efforts have been put in place to strengthen regional partnership. In the absence of a regional platform of co-operation, the conflict patterns in the region have been exacerbated by various sectional interests. The regional nature of the crisis has always required a regional approach as security concerns transcend geographic boundaries.

Rwanda's development cannot be sustainable without the presence of peace and stability and democracy in Burundi and DRC. Even the development of Rwanda and Burundi which are landlocked and resource poor is regional as their improvement depend on their integration on a larger socio-economic spaces and the establishment of peaceful constructive relations with neighboring countries with greater development potential like DRC. There is therefore the imperative for a "regional discourse" across a wide divide of many areas of potential co-operation in the region including the strengthening of good governance, co-operation on ecological challenges, creation of regional strategies for peace building that address the conflict dynamics in the different countries, cross border regional co-operation in disease control and any other pertinent areas of concern.

Rwanda is more likely to be a key player in the reshaping of these modes of regional security. The presence of a Rwandan diaspora in DRC has created enduring stakes in Kigali as a bet against continuing insecurity in the region. Even if the FDLR threat is to fade completely, it is unlikely that Rwanda will remain indifferent to the political fate of the old and new Rwandese migrant population in Kivu. What is more encouraging is the evolution of new forms of regional political relationships that are enhancing regional stability. The decision by the DRC and Rwanda to create a partnership for cross border raids against militias and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two are positive developments that are praiseworthy.

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[33] Hans Hoebek and T. Stevens, "Politics of regional integration in Central Africa", http:// iss.co.za/dynamic/administration/file_manager/file_link/M155CHAP8.PDF? link_id=22&slink_id=7060&link_type=, (accessed on 15 November 2009)

Conclusion: Creating A Regional Discourse Of Peace And Stability

This paper has argued that the crisis in the Great Lakes Region is located within institutions of governance, the failure of states in the region to envisage more broad based political constructs. It is imperative to note that the dynamic of conflict in the region is not located within the ethnic fault lines that cross geographic boundaries, but within the lack of cohesive states strong enough to foster the noxious and divisive tendencies of ethnicity. The erosion of state power and state legitimacy, the retreat of the state has all compounded to create a regional conflict system. In addition, the absences of regional co-operation and peaceful co-existence have made latent conflicts assume frightening proportions.

In this context, what is needed in the Great Lakes Region is the creation of a discourse of peace- a move away from the discourse of conflict and violence. This discourse has to be hinged on several fundamentals which are key to achieving peace. There is great need for institutional reform, creation of democratic and all- inclusive structures of government, strengthening of civil societies, erecting broad based and enduring political structures. There must also be strong regional partnerships in conflict and non-conflict areas, including strengthening weak states, addressing regional security threats and economic integration. Only through a broad based and systematic restructuring of perceptions at a regional level can sustainable peace be achieved in the Great Lakes Region.

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