Did You Say, "Central African Republic"?

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Africa has dramatically changed for the better over the past 10 years. Democratic processes, good governance, and economic development are making their way into many countries. Still, part of the continent is shaken by traditional ethnic polarization, widespread corruption, lack of education, poverty, and social inequalities: "These areas intersect and are frequently manipulated by politicians."[1] They often foster brutal violence and bloody regime change. Indeed, the 2013 conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) unveils a picture already witnessed in Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo (fig. 1), Côte d'Ivoire, and Libya, to name a few—specifically, that picture reflects centuries of mistrust between ethnic or tribal communities, as well as social fracture and poverty that affect a large portion of the population.[2]

Figure 1. Former twentieth-century French Equatorial Africa. (Courtesy of the author.)

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In December 2013, the country fell into political chaos and violence. Violations of basic human rights by uncontrolled militias and warlord-led armed groups who seek personal gain have triggered a major humanitarian crisis. In that kind of chaos, US Marines alongside their European allies and African partners are often asked to support security and stability operations as well as international humanitarian aid. The first question that planners and operators always want answered is, "What's going on?" CAR is no exception.

The following overview outlines the primary long-term factors of the CAR crisis of 2013. These factors can also serve as indicators for the way ahead as it relates to security and humanitarian operations. Although the situation on the ground in CAR today is the direct result of near-term chaotic events, many long-term issues underlie the latter. The overt and visible causes of the conflict are known: bad governance, poverty, social fracture, endemic corruption, and the overall absence of experienced political leadership. This situation is merely the tip of the iceberg, though. Under the surface lie three long-standing, complex, and intertwined cultural factors that contribute to the instability in CAR:

1. A ghost nation born from an artificial geographical construct.

2. A sham state plagued by the curse of an ancestral ethnic divide.

3. The shadow of neighboring Chad, the longtime "best friend, worst enemy" of CAR.

A Ghost Nation

Unable to overcome the consequences of its geography, CAR has been a ghost nation since its independence from France in 1960. From a geographic standpoint, CAR represents a heterogeneous entity. The area is in fact divided into two main entities tied to diverse regional, ethnic influences. The northwest and northeast dry-savannah plateau and highlands are natural connectors to southern Chadian and eastern Sudanese features. In the more equatorial south, the distinct rain forest along the Ubangui River basin ties the area to the geography of the Congo basin and to some extent to the northern Cameroon highlands in the west.[3] These natural geographical features foster two crucial cultural elements that have in fact undermined the entire nation-building process of CAR since its independence.

First, for centuries the natural relief has delineated diverse, specific ethnic cultures; lifestyles; and economic activities linked to land ownership. Consequently, geography has fostered internal, ethnic-based political and social conflicts between the southerners, often labeled the river group, and the northerners, also

called the savannah or highlands group (fig. 2). Herein lies one of the long-term roots of the 2013 conflict and its subsequent religious violence between Christian and Muslim communities. Undoubtedly, the physical geography has prevented the newly independent country from becoming a united nation.
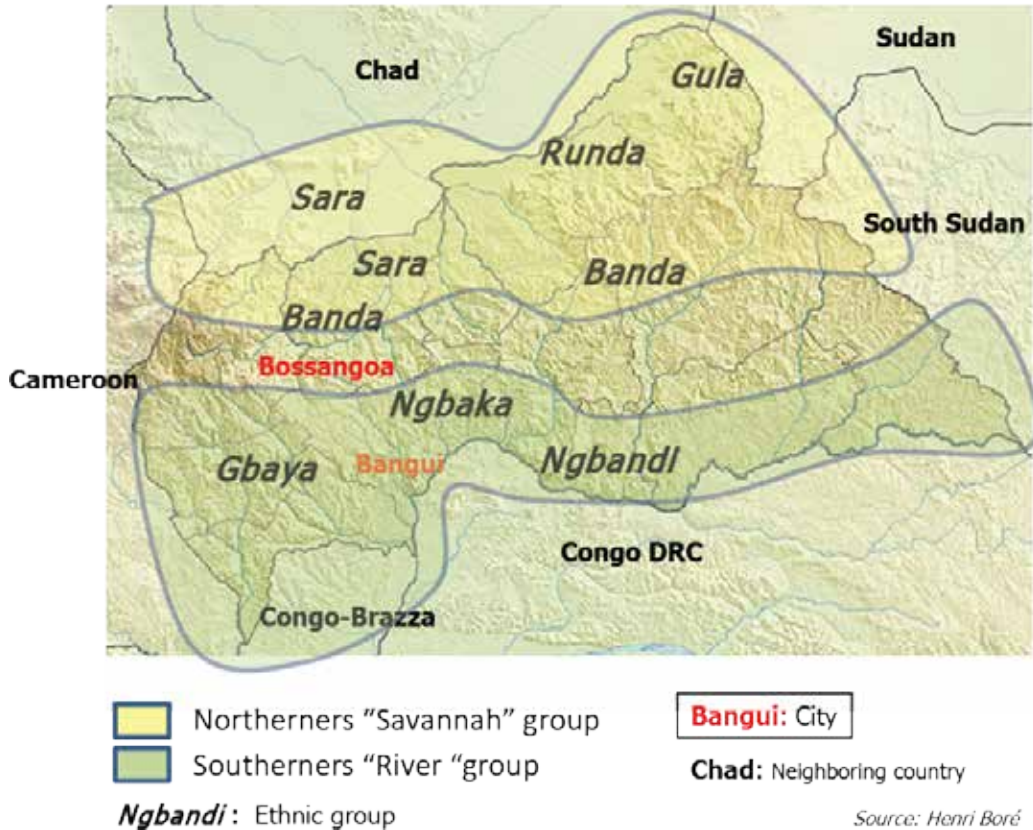
Figure 2. Major ethnic ensembles in the Central African Republic. (Courtesy of the author.)

Second, the country is an artificial construct born during the French colonial era on the eve of the twentieth century. CAR's borders are artificial, not originally drawn by France to delineate those of a future sovereign country. In fact, they were intended only as colonial administrative limits designed to improve control of the vast territory of French Equatorial Africa (half the size of the United States) that encompassed what is now Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Chad, and CAR (see fig. 1). In this colonial structure, Chad and CAR zones were part of one subadministrative entity (about one-third the size of the United States): the Ubangui-Chari

province named after the main rivers—the Ubangui in CAR and the Chari in Chad.

When the Ubangui portion of this territory gained its independence in 1960, the new state, CAR, adopted the former Ubangui-Chari colonial administrative limits as its new sovereign borders. Tragically, in so doing, the newly independent political leadership undermined the future of its own nation-building process. Because the French-colonial territorial lines were designed only as administrative limits of a larger region, their transformation into smaller national borders (CAR is about the size of Texas) has forced ethnic communities to live together although they had no common identity, let alone a shared national feeling. Moreover, the artificial nature of these borders, combined with the aforementioned natural geographic features of the region, has kept the cultural influences of Chad and Congo alive and well. After 50 years, CAR is still trying to develop a mature national feeling. The country has made progress although not enough to change the perception that it is a ghost nation.

A Sham State

Ethnicity has been the main driver of continuous political and social strife for more than 50 years. Therefore, CAR is often described as a "phantom state" that has chaotically survived since its independence.[4] Indeed, for many historians, the ancestral ethnic divide between the Ubangui River populations in the south and the savannah northerners is unlikely to shift overnight.

For nearly a half century, successive military and civilian heads of state have taken CAR on a road to perdition. All of them, from the self-crowned Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa in 1965 to presidents David Dacko (1979), André Kolingba (1981), Angé-Felix Patassé (1993), François Bozizé (2003), and Michel Djotodia (2013), have been unable to establish effective political structures and processes that could have controlled the manipulation of cultural, social, and political divisions between the people from the Ubangui River in the south and those from the savannah in the north. President Catherine Samba-Panza, elected in 2014, faces the same challenge. Worse at times, disputes within one ethnic community and an odd alliance of convenience with rival ethnic groups contributed even more to plunging the country into a state of permanent tribal rebellion, military mutinies, and civil wars. In short, in CAR, "it's the tribes, stupid!" to quote Robert Kaplan, commenting on the situation in Iraq.[5]

In 1981 General Kolingba, a Yakoma from the southern river group, takes power through a military coup that overthrows President Dacko, himself a southerner. In 2003 President Bozizé, a Gbaya from the southwest, ousts president Patassé, a Sara northerner, even though these two had made an alliance in 1993 in order to overthrow Kolingba the southerner. In 2013 Bozizé is overthrown by a coup led by Djotodia and his coalition of northerners, the Seleka, which means *alliance* in the traditional Sango language.

As experts have observed, CAR "has become virtually a phantom state, lacking any meaningful institutional capacity at least since the fall of Emperor Bokassa in 1979."[6] The ancestral sociocultural divide between the black African Ubangui River people of the south and the black Sudano nomads from the northern savannah will likely continue to shape any process developed to restore security, political stability, and economic development in CAR.[7]

Despite all this, democratic structures do exist in CAR. Most of the presidents who took power through a military coup were later elected in national plebiscites. Most of the time however, allegations of massive fraud, corruption, widespread patronage, and nepotism stained almost every democratic election and institution. Consequently, the practice of democracy as it is understood in Western culture has turned into a charade and the state into a sham. It will take time and charismatic leadership to turn the tide.

For many Africa experts, another set of democratic elections may simply pave the way to another conflict. As Kaplan has also said about other places in the world, quelling anarchy "will require building on tribal loyalties—not imposing democracy from the top down."[8] Indeed, the concept of one man, one vote—a founding principle of Western democracies—often brings to power a single ethnic group due to the powerful loyalty of family and traditional lineages. Democratic elections in Mali, for instance, have always brought to power a Bambara leadership since this ethnic community represents 80 percent of the electorate. The other ethnic communities have been left with one alternative: get along or secede. For the past 50 years, many Tuaregs of northern Mali have chosen to secede. When the opposite situation occurs—that is, when one minority ethnic community controls 80 percent of the population from another ethnic group—then democracy often fosters a recurrent civil war, as seen in Burundi from 1970 to 2005. Experts have labeled this scenario the ethno-arithmetic democracy of Africa.[9] CAR is no exception to this phenomenon. Religious violence, for example, is just one visible element of "the shadow theater of ethnicity."[10]

The heavy weight of the ethnic divide between the river and the savannah groups explains why ethnic rivalries take precedence over religious dynamics. When more than 400 civilians were killed in two days of violence on 8 and 9 December 2013 in Bossangoa in the northwest (fig. 2), some observers quickly interpreted the massacre as a change in the nature of the conflict in CAR toward a bloody religious drift between Christians and Muslims. Others, with a longer cultural perspective, provided a different insight.[11] The attack was in fact the northerners' response to ethnic killing conducted by southerners during the bush war from 2005 to 2007 in the same northwest area. The southerner-led CAR army and particularly the Presidential Guard—essentially a southern unit serving President Bozizé, a southerner himself—conducted brutal operations in the north. Hundreds of civilians were executed point blank, and their homes were burned. Some 100,000 northerners were displaced.

Marine advisers familiar with sub-Saharan Africa are aware of the common saying in many cultures from Rwanda to Congo, CAR, and Côte d'Ivoire: "We forgive; we don't forget." As for CAR, the river people and the savannah people do not seem ready to forget centuries of mutual mistrust, animosity, and killings. Over the 54 years since independence, southerners have controlled the country for 44 years, from 1960 to 1993 and from 2003 to 2014. It will take another Nelson Mandela to change the dynamic and build a successful unification process. In CAR such a charismatic icon is needed, but he or she has yet to emerge.

Therefore, on such critical issues, it is paramount to separate the short-term explanation of a crisis—that is, the tip of the iceberg—from the long-term roots that usually hide under the surface. Taking into account this major ethnic factor are the planning and execution of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration operations to restore security and support humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) for the purpose of helping some 400,000 displaced populations and security cooperation (SC) programs rebuild the national armed forces in CAR.

Chad: The Region's Long-Standing Best Friend and Worst Enemy of the Central African Republic

Chad has been a constant and active player in the region, especially in neighboring CAR. Chadian national forces (fig. 3) deployed to CAR as early as 1997 as part of the first African multinational force (MISAB) that intervened with heavy French military support to restore peace and stability in the war-torn capital city of Bangui.[12] Over the past 17 years, Chadian soldiers have conducted several operations in CAR. CAR is in fact in the strategic backyard of Chad. For a variety of reasons, domestic instability in Bangui can easily pave the way to a

brutal regime change some 1,000 miles away in N'Djamena, the capital city of Chad. Therefore, the internal political stability of Chad and that of CAR have intertwined for a half century.

Figure 3. Chadian soldiers, Chad, 2008. (Courtesy of the author.)

From a Chadian strategic standpoint, CAR is a key security piece on its southern flank because of the common ethnic makeup between southern Chad and northern CAR populations. Thus, Chad's troubled history has been tied to CAR for the past 50 years. Ties can even be traced earlier in the 1800s when the Arabo nomads from today's northern Chad used to raid what is now CAR to capture slaves for their clans or trade them with the Arabo-Mediterranean kingdoms in present-day Libya and Egypt.[13] According to historians, this Arabo slave trade that lasted for many centuries "involved at least as many victims as the Atlantic slave trade" run by the Europeans.[14]

The Arabo slave trade may no longer exist in Central Africa, but the modern histories of Chad and CAR continue to collide for another reason. The border between the two countries is inhabited with the same Sara ethnic group, a black African community essentially consisting of Christian farmers. CAR and Chadian Saras support each other in all matters—even in politics. Culturally and politically, the Chadian Saras, for instance, have been traditionally hostile to the Arabo-nomad clans of northern Chad, who have ruled the country since 1980. In

CAR the Saras often align themselves with other northerners such as the Banda, Ranga, and Gula against the political dominancy of the southern river group in Bangui.

Consequently, over the past 30 years the governments of Chad and CAR have had in common the fact that they saw the Sara community and their allied ethnic groups as a threat to domestic stability. Chad has actively supported the access to power of southerners in CAR. Each time the CAR government fell under their control, the southerners—the Yakoma and Gbaya—made an alliance of convenience with Chad to undermine the power of the Sara group and its northern political allies.

Chadian Interference: A Mix of Hard and Soft Power

When Chad gained its independence in 1960, France empowered the Sara. The subsequent civil war that shook Chad for 20 years brought back to power the northern Arabo-nomad clans. For a decade, the Sara kept fighting back, either through conducting armed insurgencies or by capitalizing on rivalries among the northern clans.[15] In this realm, the Chadian Sara insurgents were always backed by their Sara brothers who inhabit northern CAR. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, the Sara community of northern CAR provided permanent rear bases and safe haven to a Chadian Sara insurgency fighting the Chadian northern-led governments, including President Idriss Déby's Zaghawa clan regime since 1990.

Déby actively helped set the domestic political stage in CAR to undermine the Sara stronghold on his southern border. For instance, he decisively backed General Bozizé's coup in 2003. Chadian forces also backed Bozizé's heavy military operations in the northern provinces of CAR between 2005 and 2006. President Bozizé took advantage of the situation to brutally crush the political opposition presented by his northern savannah group. In 2012 Chadian forces intervened once again in northern CAR to support Bozizé's forces against the northerners and their Seleka armed coalition. President Déby was also interested in conducting counterinsurgency operations in the area against his own nephew, Timane Erdimi, who tried to align himself with the Saras and Sudanese mercenaries of the Seleka to regain momentum after his failed attempt to overthrow his uncle in N'Djamena in 2008. The point in all this is that for all these years, Chad—in particular under President Déby—has been actively interfering in CAR's internal politics in supporting the river southern ethnic group.

When good relationships between Chadian northerners and CAR southerners take a negative turn, the former always win. Chad the best friend becomes

the worst enemy of CAR. The 2013 crisis in CAR is a case in point. It was no secret that President Déby lost confidence in President Bozizé's ability to establish and sustain long-term political stability in CAR—that is, to control his northern provinces. For many observers, Déby paved the way to the military success of the Seleka coalition in 2013 by ending his support of Bozizé. Political gambit or not from the astute Chadian president, the short-term effect of his decision has been to return to the northern Saras the power they had from 1993 to 2003. Whether or not President Michel Djotodia would fit in the Chadian strategic plans remained unknown in December 2013. President Déby himself brought the answer one month later when he orchestrated Djotodia's exile to Benin at the summit of the regional Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) held in the Chadian capital city of N'Djamena on 11 January 2014.

Chad also uses soft power to strengthen its influence in CAR. Personal networks and third-party mediators work extensively behind the scenes everywhere in Africa.[16] The mediation of the president of Burkina Faso, for instance, is often critical in the peace process in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. In CAR the long-standing personal relationship between President Déby and President Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazza) is no secret. Déby's forces decisively supported the military coup that brought Nguesso to power in Brazzaville in 1997. President Nguesso also symbolizes the traditional cultural ties that geography has naturally set between Congo and the southerner river group of CAR as mentioned earlier. Therefore, in light of the traditional African consensus through third-party mediation, Nguesso represents a powerful ally of President Déby in the conflict-resolution process in CAR. In October 2013, the 10 nations of ECCAS met in N'Djamena to address the security issues in CAR at the request of President Déby, who is also the current chairman of ECCAS.

In other words, from US Africa Command's strategic and operational perspective, Chad and Congo-Brazza are key African players to take into account and associate with for two reasons: (1) to effectively plan and conduct any potential support to SC and HADR operations to help CAR get back on its feet, and (2) to set the conditions for long-term stability in the country and in the region. It is no coincidence that a Congolese general officer, Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko, took command of the entire African Union Force in CAR (MISCA) in 2013, bringing with him 500 Congolese soldiers—a significant number for the army. On the ground, Chadian and Congolese tactical courses of action also tend to support each other regardless what other nations may intend to do.

Conclusion

Marines understand that just about any foreign environment is "a cultural iceberg, with what we initially understand as merely the visible tip."[17] The 2013 crisis in CAR is a perfect case in point. The recent chaotic events are a combination of near-term strife and long-term factors. It is essential to understand what is most readily visible, but it is equally important to know the long-term cultural issues that underlie these events. As they framed the 2013 problem, planners uncovered three paramount factors that have dramatically contributed to long-term instability.

First, geography plays a key role in preventing the country from becoming a united nation and a modern state since this ethnic divide remains alive and well in modern times. In other words, to borrow the delightful title of anthropologist James D. Faubion's review article, "Kinship Is Dead. Long Live Kinship."[18] Second, although the conflict appears to be simply a religious divide between Christians and Muslims, it has broader roots in the ancestral ethnic rivalry between the southern black river group and the northern-savannah Arabo communities. Third, geography and history are strategic force multipliers that have consolidated the influences of neighboring Chad and Congo-Brazzaville on the CAR national leadership over the past 30 years.

The overt and visible causes of a conflict are often the tip of the iceberg. The cultural reading of long-term issues provides planners with a more realistic understanding of the factors of instability. In so doing, they can better articulate effective courses of action. CAR is no exception. Difficult political and military decisions are yet to be made as a means of effectively tackling the 2013 crisis. Decision makers must take account of what lies beneath.

Notes

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