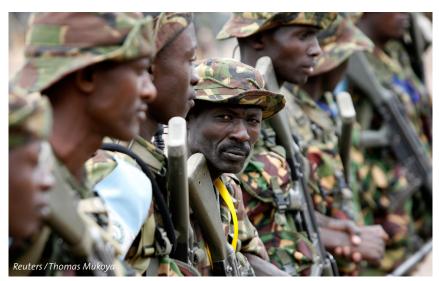# THE AFRICAN STANDBY FORCE PUT TO THE TEST

Demand for international peace operations remains high while the willingness of the international community to intervene is declining and defence budgets continue to shrink. The notion of greater regionalisation in security thus continues to enjoy growing appeal. In Africa, after years of preparation, the African Security Force is about to become a reality. However, considerable difficulties remain, and peacekeeping in Africa will continue to require external support for the foreseeable future.

Reuters / Thomas Mukoya

Kenyan troops participate in an international exercise of the Eastern Africa Standby Brigade, December 2009.

Africa continues to be the site of many of the world's deadliest conflicts. In the past 25 years, there have been an estimated 3,800,000 to 6,899,000 conflict-related casualties. Today there are more UN peacekeeping troops in Africa than on any other continent. UN deployments have increased tenfold over the last decade. Africa currently hosts eight UN peace operations and over 80 per cent of all deployed UN peacekeepers. Bringing peace and security to the continent thus remains a paramount challenge. A crucial task in meeting that challenge is building up the continent's own peace capabilities.

The regionalisation of peace operations is not a new idea. Articles 52 and 53 of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter encourage regional arrangements to engage in the pacific settlement of local disputes and allow for the possibility of regional enforcement action under the authority of the Security Council. However, the division of the world into bipolar blocs during the Cold War era prevented an effective regionalisation of peace operations. It was only after the end of the bipolar stand-off that the political landscape finally allowed for greater regional responsibility, while the rising number of conflicts simultaneously created growing demand for such burden-sharing arrangements.

Nonetheless, the concept of security regionalisation is not uncontested. Sceptics argue that the impartiality of regional organisations is adversely affected by their ties with the respective conflict parties. The impartiality, and thus also the legiti-

macy, of the regional organisation may be further undermined by regional hegemons who have the power to shape the organisation's agenda to their advantage. This applies to regional powers such as South Africa and Nigeria. Although these two states provide their respective regions with the resources, capacity and political clout needed for regional conflict management, the dependency of, respectively, ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on a regional hegemon is also the source of political tension.

A weighty argument against the regionalisation of peace operations is that the continent's regional and sub-regional organisations face severe resource and capacity constraints that may not allow them to execute operations effectively. Critics of greater regionalisation point out that the willingness to intervene must be matched by the capacity to do so. The problem is further aggravated by the fact that, often, regional organisations are called upon only if the conflict situation is too intricate or risky to be dealt with by the UN. This contributes to the weakening of regional organisations by involving them only when the chances of success are poor. In a similar vein, the 2008 joint AU-UN Panel Report commission under the leadership of Romano Prodi noted that 'there is a growing anomalous and undesirable trend in which organisations lacking the necessary capabilities have been left to bear the brunt in terms of providing the international community's initial response, while others more capable have not engaged.'

The case for more regional responsibility

Yet, despite these problems and shortcomings, the case for more regional responsibility is strong. The idea of regionalising responsibility for peace and security should be seen as part of an emancipative effort that gives greater ownership to regional actors. Especially in the last decade, Africans have developed the political will to take greater responsibility for their continent's troubles. The argument that regionalisation leads to more local ownership carries additional weight in view of the rising international business involvement of powers such as China, Brazil, or the US on the continent. This has led to fear of a new "scramble for Africa". Many Africans would therefore prefer that intervening troops come from their own region.

The regionalisation of security must also be seen in the context of the international community's decreasing willingness to intervene. Slumping public support for military operations abroad and tight defence budgets in the West mean that in the future African nations will increasingly have to conduct their own peacekeeping operations. It is therefore imperative to build up greater regional capabilities for managing peace and security on the continent.

Regionalisation, however, is complementary to international efforts under the auspices of the UN and by no means as a simple substitution for them. This requires good coordination and a clear delimitation of responsibilities between the UN and the regional organisations involved. Experience has been gained in this regard in past operations, for instance in Liberia.

The ASF in the African Security Architecture

The ASF constitutes one of the most important and ambitious elements of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Upon the creation of the African Union (AU), the African Peace and Security Protocol was adopted at the 2002 summit in Durban. As part of the continent's new peace and security architecture, it established the AU Peace and Security Council as its centrepiece, the Continental Early Warning System, the Panel of the Wise, the Peace Fund and the African Standby Force. A major impetus for the creation of the ASF was the international community's failure during the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

The ASF is by far the most robust component of the APSA. With its Military Staff Committee, the ASF was conceived to conduct, observe, and monitor peacekeeping missions and support operations. Its tasks include operations across the entire spectrum of missions, ranging from peacekeeping to peace enforcement, as summarised in the six mission scenarios (cf. box). The ASF will be able to draw on both military and civilian contingents.

The ASF does not entail the establishment of a standing multinational force, but is built around a standby arrangement where states earmark and train specific units for joint operations and then keep these units ready for rapid deployment at appropriate notice. The ASF comprises stand-by brigades in each of the five regions (south, east, north, west, and central Africa): the Southern African Development Community Brigade (SADCBRIG), the Eastern Africa Standby Brigade (EASBRIG), the North African Standby Brigade (NASBRIG), the Economic Community of West African States Brigade (ECOBRIG), and the Economic Community of Central African States Brigade (ECCASBRIG). Each of these brigades is to have around 5,000 members, for an overall strength of 25,000 to 30,000 personnel in the ASF. The five Regional Economic Communities (RECs) serve as regional pillars of the ASF.

Many attempts at establishing some sort of Pan-African military force preceded the creation of the ASF. Most of these attempts failed because states felt threatened by the inevitable surrender of some aspects of their sovereignty and control over national capabilities. Through its unique reliance on regional frameworks, the ASF represents a major improvement in this respect. Its decentralised character ties states and RECs into a common framework co-ordinated by the AU and gives them greater ownership in building a continental security architecture. This increases the stakes of all actors involved in the process and creates constructive peer-group pressure among them.

Operationalising the ASF: Progress and problems

While the initiative was initially slow to take off, considerable progress has by now been achieved towards the goal of making the ASF fully operational by the end of 2010. The ASF Doctrine, a training policy, an ASF Logistics Concept, a Command and Control Plan and the Standard Operating Procedures have been finalised and approved in March 2008. These documents provide the tools for operationalising the ASF.

However, some problems with the operationalisation of the ASF remain as a result of regional differences, questions about the mandating procedure and the political process. The readiness of the five brigades varies considerably and the persistence of conflicts in several regions makes progress difficult. While EASBRIG, EASBRIG, and SADCBRIG are making good progress, both

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Mission Scenarios for the African Standby Force

Scenario 1:
❙ Regional military advice to a political mission (e.g., Cote d'Ivoire).

Scenario 2:
❙ AU regional observer mission co-deployed with a UN Mission (e.g., OAU/AU liaison mission in the border area between Ethiopia and Eritrea (OLMEE) or the Verification Monitoring Team (VMT) in Sudan).

Scenario 3:
❙ Stand-alone observer mission (e.g., AU missions in Burundi (AMIB) or the AU Mission in the Comoros (AMIC)).

Scenario 4:
❙ Stand-alone peacekeeping mission under Chapter VI of the UN Charter and preventive deployment of troops for peace enforcement (e.g., AU Mission in Burundi (AMIB)).

Scenario 5:
❙ Peacekeeping mission in accordance with a complex, multidimensional peacekeeping mission.

Scenario 6:
❙ (Military) intervention of the AU in grave emergencies, e.g. for prevention of genocide, when the international community fails to intervene.

African Union (Roadmap for the Operationalization of the African Standby Force)

the northern and central brigades (NAS-BRIG, ECCASBRIG) are still lagging behind.

Moreover, a sound burden-sharing arrangement between the AU and the regional organisations will have to be found with regard to the use of ASF capabilities and of the regional brigades. The provision of both adequate personnel and sufficient financial resources, as well as the improvement of logistical capabilities to conduct ASF missions are also vital challenges. The evaluation of "Exercise Carana", which was held by the AU at the end of October 2010, is expected to yield further insight into the current strengths and weaknesses of the ASF.

There also remain some unresolved questions about the mandating procedure. Although it is not established as a legal requirement for the AU, at the policy level the Policy for the Establishment of the ASF provides that 'the AU will seek UN Security Council authorisation for its enforcement actions.' So far, the AU has sought the support of the UNSC for all its missions, not only in cases of enforcement action. This gives AU missions a greater sense of international legitimacy. The practice has also been established to enable the AU to access the financial resources of the African Peace Facility, which are provided by the European Union and are conditional upon UNSC authorisation. However, since decisions of the UN Security Council can take a long time to be implemented, some have argued in favour of AU mandates taking precedence where urgent action is required.

A particular case arises with respect to mission scenario 6. For this type of scenario, the legal authority derives from the Constitutive Act of the AU, which, in its famous Article 4(h), codifies the "responsibility to protect" and thus provides for a right of intervention that goes beyond the provisions of the UN Charter. Should the AU request an UNSC authorisation when acting under the terms of Article 4(h), it is therefore somewhat doubtful from a legal point of view if the UNSC could give authorisation for the AU on a matter in respect of which the UN does not itself have authority under the UN Charter.

But the vital factor will be the political process. There is a need to ensure political consensus among nations before an operation can be approved and deployed. The AU's Peace and Security Council is a political body composed of member states that pursue their respective national interests. Its decisions regarding the deployment of an ASF Mission will therefore depend, among other things, on the interests and political dynamics of members of the PSC and the strength and diplomatic skills of the Chairperson of the PSC in any given crisis situation. The PSC's ability to forge a consensus will be critical to the speediness and legitimacy of its decisions and, therefore, also of the deployments themselves.

Crucial external support

There is widespread international support for the operationalisation of the ASF. By far the largest donor of AU peace and security initiatives is the EU. As part of the joint Africa-EU Strategy adopted in 2007, the partnership on Peace and Security supports the functioning of the APSA and also specifically the operationalisation of the ASF. The EU has financed many aspects of the emerging force through its EUR 250 million African Peace Facility (APF). It has also been active in the field of training, where the EU has taken over the French capacity building programme *Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix* (RECAMP) and established "AMANI Africa", a training programme that aims to develop a long-term management capacity for the ASF by evaluating and enhancing the decision-making competencies of senior military, civilian and police officials of the ASF.

Similarly, the US has been placing more and more emphasis on regional capacity-building for peace operations. This commitment to African conflict management capabilities results from a growing awareness that persisting conflicts in Africa are a direct threat to a range of US interests. The continuation of conflict in Western Africa poses significant risks to major US investment in the region's oil production and refinery infrastructure and thus to reliable oil supply. Central and Eastern Africa, on the other hand, are a particular concern in the fight against terrorism. State failure and continuing instability in the region provide fertile ground for groups such as Al Qaeda and other Islamist organisations to flourish. Since the US is reluctant to deploy its own troops to these trouble zones, lending support for the strengthening of African conflict management capabilities has become an important means to try to protect the growing number of US interests on the continent.

Finally, successful co-operation with the UN will be crucial for the future of regional peacekeeping in Africa. UN DPKO has established a liaison team to the AU's Peace Support Operations Division in order to offer expertise and tailored support to the operationalisation of the ASF. While there is broad agreement that available peacekeeping capacities for the UN and in Africa need to be mutually reinforcing, achieving this is easier said than done. The mixed experience of the most recent mission, UNAMID in Sudan, underscores the complexity of achieving an approach that is satisfactory to both parties. On the one hand, the AU was instrumental in persuading the Sudanese government to accept the establishment of the mission and, albeit with difficulties, to facilitate its deployment. But at the same time, UNAMID has illustrated the difficulties associated with conducting hybrid peace operations.

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There are good reasons why the establishment of the ASF is a desirable development that has been supported by a range of international actors. Given the overstretch of international crisis management capabilities at a time of tight financial resources, the build-up of regional institutions and capabilities for peace operations in Africa is an important task. It is also to be welcomed from the perspective of giving greater responsibility and ownership to regional actors. The decisive factor for the success of the ASF will, however, not only be the availability of sufficient resources and adequate institutional structures but also the common political will needed to make effective use of this new capability.

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