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East Africa's Fragmented Security Cooperation

Since the 1990s, East Africa has developed what appears to be an impressive security architecture. Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Johannes Riber Nordby warn, however, that appearances can be deceptive. The region's security institutions remain too nationalistic and self-interested for their own good.

By Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Johannes Riber Nordby for ISN

Increased confidence between and among states – not to mention a push from external donors for 'African Solutions to African Problems' – has, in recent years, led to the creation of an East African security architecture. Currently, there are three security institutions that co-exist across the region: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (formed in 1996), the East African Community (EAC) (2001), and the East African Standby Force (EASF) (2004). Each institution has a unique security focus: IGAD is primarily concerned with addressing drought and famine, EAC with enhancing economic cooperation, and EASF with military security. And while the existence of these regional security institutions theoretically provides opportunities for 'joined-up' activities, internal politics and geopolitical calculations sometimes prevent coordinated efforts.

Early warnings

In this respect, the establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2002, and the incorporation of the EASF into this mechanism two years later, should have presented unparalleled opportunities for coordination. However, the IGAD and EAC used the APSA to expand their security ambitions. This, in turn, led to overlap and competition.

A classic example of where cooperation has lost out to competition is the development of early warning systems for detecting and preventing regional conflict. At present, the IGAD, EAC and EASF all have very similar ambitions concerning the development of such a system. However, there are marked disagreements over where best to anchor regional early warning mechanisms. Disagreement eventually resulted in the IGAD and EAC developing their own early warning systems. To further complicate matters, the EASF remains determined to develop a standalone early warning system instead of utilizing information provided by the IGAD and EAC.

Nation before region

Failure to develop a 'unified' early warning system reflects concerns that there is the potential for East Africa's security institutions to be dominated by the region's more powerful states that may, in turn, use them to pursue national rather than regional security objectives. It is commonly held, for

example, that Ethiopia exercises considerable influence over the IGAD, whereas Kenya is a prominent member of the EAC. As a result, the region's security architecture has often been characterized as a site of competition between leading states that are nevertheless incapable of staking a claim to outright regional hegemony.

The region's aborted attempt at coordinating the establishment of the EASF into the APSA is a case in point. Taken at face value, this decision makes a lot of sense: in terms of membership, IGAD covers the majority of the East African region. However, its efforts to bring EASF into the fold were, from the outset, compromised by concerns over Ethiopia's perceived dominance of IGAD. Not only did Addis Ababa have a vested interest in several regional conflicts - most notably in Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia - additional concerns were raised that influential Ethiopian personalities may end up dominating the higher echelons of the EASF. As a result, the EASF remains on the 'outside' of East Africa's established regional security architecture and its activities subject to a memorandum of understanding.

The failure to better integrate the EASF into either the IGAD or the EAC also suggests that East Africa's security institutions will likely remain at the mercy of competition for the foreseeable future. Currently, Kenya's 'leading' role in the EAC is closely connected to its relatively strong financial position and the sea transportation opportunities that Nairobi can offer its landlocked neighbours. However, Kenya's monopoly on transportation routes is likely to be challenged over the coming years, most notably by Ethiopia and Djibouti who have plans to construct and offer alternative routes to the landlocked states of East Africa. Should this occur, Kenya is unlikely to favour further institutional integration and may look to increase the regional significance of the EAC. In an attempt to exclude Ethiopia from economic development opportunities, Nairobi may, for example, seek further interdependence with the likes of Rwanda and Uganda.

Looking inwards

As in other parts of the world, East Africa's smaller states often fear becoming small or insignificant players in institutions that are dominated by larger counterparts. Tanzania, for example, is particularly wary of increased interdependence among EAC member-states, which it views as a threat to its resources and farmland. However, Dodoma is also concerned that greater integration between the EAC and EASF may not only result in Tanzania becoming embroiled in security hotspots like Somalia, but regional security priorities that may differ from its own political outlook. This may explain why Tanzania currently dedicates very little time to the activities of the EASF but instead redirects its military effort towards the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Tanzania is by no means the only country that lacks the desire to overcome the inertia so often associated with East Africa's security institutions. In an interview with a senior policymaker, it became apparent that Uganda - a member of the IGAD, EAC, EASF and the Great Lakes Initiative - does not view the duplication of efforts or wasteful overlaps between the organizations as a matter of concern. Instead, Kampala is more interested in using its membership of each and every institution to maximize Uganda's regional influence. In a region where none of the leading organizations are capable of safeguarding security on their own, this might make a lot of sense. However, Uganda's, and indeed other states, reluctance to push for regional security coordination merely perpetuate the wasteful duplication and overlaps.

To the future

Indeed, a general reluctance to better coordinate activities may result in the emergence of a north-south divide within East Africa's security architecture, with the EAC more concerned with issues affecting the southern part of the region, and the IGAD with the Horn of Africa. This points to a future

in which the IGAD and EAC become sub-regional, rather than general trans-boundary organizations, that coalesce around the likes of Ethiopia and Kenya and their 'rival' security interests. But this might still be a cause for optimism.

Despite being on the 'outside' of the region's security architecture, the EASF nevertheless remains the only organization that spans the length and breadth of East Africa. This means that it could potentially act as a 'bridge' between the rival institutions. While this might lead to the EAC and IGAD competing for the military capacities that the EASF has to offer, it may also lead to East Africa's third security actor gaining a considerable degree of regional legitimacy.

Accordingly, while there are undoubtedly many challenges that stand in the way of coordination among and between East Africa's security organizations, the potential for cooperation still exists. However, if potential opportunities are to become reality, it is vital that the region overcomes the emerging north-south divide within its security institutions. Attempts to overcome fragmentation may also help to resolve the closely related problem of where best to anchor specific defense and security capabilities, not to mention the region-wide military capacities that currently exist within EASF. Resolving this conundrum may, in turn, allay region-wide fears that military capabilities could be used to support the ends and means of East Africa's more powerful states at the expense of regional stability and security.

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