Challenges Forum

Background Paper
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Partnerships and Peace Operations in Africa: Pursuing better UN-AU relations[1]

Abstract

The increasing role played by the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (REC/RMs) in deploying peace operations in Africa led to the establishment of strategic partnerships with other multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN). This was due not only to the increasing complexity associated with the modern conflict environment, but also due to the acknowledgement that no single multilateral actor could effectively tackle this challenge when working in isolation. This note reflects on some of the critical areas that should be addressed in strengthening the partnership between the UN and the AU.

Introduction

Africa has played a key role in United Nations (UN) peace operations, and has contributed a large percentage of total civilian, police and military personnel deployments. Complementarily, the continent has also developed a complex peace and security architecture that brings together the African Union (AU), the various Regional Economic Communities and mechanisms (RECs and RMs), as well as ad hoc security initiatives in support of multiple peace operations across the continent.

The increasing role played by the AU, REC/RMs and the UN in deploying peace operations in Africa necessitated the establishment of strategic partnerships with other multilateral institutions. This was due not only to the increasing complexity associated with the modern conflict environment, but also due to the acknowledgement that no single multilateral actor could effectively tackle this challenge when working in isolation.

1. This background note is partially based on an article authored by Gustavo de Carvalho in September 2020, entitled The Future of Peace Operations is African, and Demands Better Coordination published by the Global Observatory. Available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/09/future-peace-operations-african-demands-better-coordination/

ABOUT THE EVENT

The Virtual Challenges Annual Forum 2020 (VCAF20) will take place virtually from 7-11 December 2020. Hosts for this year's Forum are the Challenges Forum Partners: the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in South Africa, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. With the overarching theme "Framing Peace Operations in a Changing Global Landscape", VCAF20 proposes to reflect on how to sustain effective peace operations in a changing global context.

Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

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Accordingly, efforts directed toward identifying how these institutions can better work together, and craft meaningful complementary responses in support of peace and security in Africa, have become critical goals in and of themselves in recent years. The partnership between the UN and the AU is reflective of this growing recognition, and the partnership has notably improved in recent years. This can be seen by the ongoing operationalization of the 2017 UN-AU Joint Framework for Enhanced Cooperation in Peace and Security[2], amongst other key policy documents.

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Certainly the partnership has evolved during a period of significant global change, which has in turn brought on many unforeseen challenges and placed new demands on peace operations. Increasingly, peace operations are expected to be deployed in response to complex and often interconnected threats posed by a confluence of factors relating to violent extremism, asymmetric warfare, failures in governance, transnational organized crime, non-state actors, as well as climate change. Most worryingly, the modern conflict environment has clearly highlighted the limitations of traditional peace and security responses, in which we've witnessed the deployment of peace-keepers to regions in which there is no peace to keep.

Part of the reason for this trend relates to the inability of the UN Security Council to respond outside of its traditional peace operations arrangements and mandates. This opened the space for other regional organisations to complement the UN's primary peace and security mandate. Regional organisations often deploy in spaces where the UN is not able to do so, and have often been seen as "first respondents."

The emergence of ad hoc security initiatives in the past few years — which include the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin and the G5 Sahel — further underscores the nature of these challenges. While authorized and mandated by the Security Council, these efforts are often under-researched, and

2. Joint UN-AU Framework for enhanced partnership in peace and security. 2017. https://unoau.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/jount_un-au_framework_for_an_enhanced_partnership_in_peace_and_security.pdf

are generally viewed at the fringes of more conventional peace operations concepts. A key point of contrast here is that ad hoc security initiatives are composed of troops that operate within their own national borders, while maintaining the capability to conduct cross-border operations, especially in direct pursuit of belligerents.[3]

Beyond these types of initiatives, the UN presently maintains seven peace operations deployed in Africa, as well as three special political missions. Two of these peace operations, in Sudan and Somalia, were deployed specifically in partnership with, or in support to, AU.[5] The AU itself is not far behind, with five current operations deployed in across the continent. This includes the largest peace operation in the world, the African Mission to Somalia, in terms of total deployed personnel. REC/RMs and ad hoc security initiatives currently maintain another five currently operational initiatives.[6]

While significant progress has been registered in terms of continental and regional peace operations, these still require considerable support from the other international actors, and the UN in particular. Therefore, there is much that still needs to be achieved if rhetorical commitments are to be effectively translated into strategic, political and operational gains. This note reflects on some of the critical areas that should be addressed in strengthening the partnership between the UN and the AU.

1. Strategic and political UN-AU engagements on peace and security

The UN-AU partnership on peace and security is largely driven by the relationship between the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC). Both institutions still need to further interrogate how to further enhance coherence and coordination between member state bodies on the UNSC, the AUPSC, and the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC).

These challenges mainly relate to imbalances between the two Council's in terms of authority, institutional mandate, and capacity. Despite this, either Council does maintain certain comparative advantages in authorising, implementing and over-seeing peace operations, which can be better leveraged toward

3. Institute for Security Studies. Ad hoc security initiatives a potential force multiplier for the AU. ISS Today. 01 September 2017. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ad-hoc-security-initiatives-a-potential-force-multiplier-for-the-au
4. The African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur is currently in the process of transitioning from a peace operation to a special political mission, called United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS).
5. SIPRI. Multilateral Peace Operations 2020. Available at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/mpo20_fill.pdf
6. Ibid.

common goals. This can only occur, however, if there is greater and sustained attention on improving the effectiveness of the UNSC-AUPSC working relationship — and the strategic and political-level engagements between each Council's respective member states.

In recent years working methods between the two councils have become far more institutionalised, with regular annual interactions between both Council members. Meetings between the two Councils have focused on a number of key strategic issues, including the ongoing conflict in Libya (and the deadlock around the deployment of a joint UN-AU Special Envoy), developments in South Sudan, and the implementation of the political agreement in the Central African Republic.

Moving forward, both institutions need to better identify their own comparative advantages, and how these could be leveraged toward common goals and objectives, as well as the nature and substance of both Council's ongoing official annual engagements. The three elected African members of the UNSC (the A3), could play a particularly important role in strengthening the partnership agenda. The A3 members have increasingly been active players in providing unified positions in the Council, particularly when they are based on previously agreed-to decisions at the AU level. However, there is much to be developed in terms of how the A3 can play a more consistent role in bridging the UNSC and AUPSC.

Given the AUPSC's broader mandate on issues relating to post-conflict reconstruction and development (which is largely analogous to the UN's concept of peacebuilding and sustaining peace), engagements between the UN PBC and the AUPSC also require sustained attention. Considering the increasing appetite by international actors to deploy peace operations which provide political support and broader engagement to peacebuilding processes, such interactions would be highly beneficial in strengthening coherence between both organisations.

2. Operational and working-level UN-AU engagements

The operational and working-level partnership between the UN and AU is underpinned by various mechanisms and nodes of engagement that have become increasingly systematised in recent years. These include the Joint Task Force on Peace and Security (since 2010), 'desk-to-desk' meetings among working-level officials (since 2008), as well as the UN-AU Annual Conference (since 2017) for high-level officials from across the

two institutions — including the UN Secretary-General and AU Commission Chairperson. Additionally, UN Country Teams as well as the joint UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affair's (DPPA) Peace and Development Advisors have come to play an increasingly valuable role in strengthening the partnership at an operational and working level.

In spite of these wide-ranging mechanisms for greater co-operation, the operational partnership between the two organisations suffers from a number of bureaucratic and institutional challenges. Again, imbalances between the UN and AU in terms of capacity plays a role. But these challenges are further informed by the need to overcome a dependence on interpersonal working relations between key officials, and moving these toward more responsive and coherent institutionalised engagements — with the necessary levels of follow-up and monitoring.

Managing the scale of either organisation's peace and security operations, and gearing these toward common objectives, is also a particular point of frustration that requires greater attention. Ensuring the necessary levels of coherence between the UN's various peacekeeping operations, special political missions, country teams, and the deployment of envoys and peace and development advisors, with the AU's various peace support operations, PCRD and stabilisation initiatives, and deployment of envoys, mediators and special representatives, all highlight the immense scale of these administrative challenges.

These are further complicated given the integration of the continent's RECs/RMs into the AU's peace and security architecture, which have increasingly taken the lead on their own peace and security initiatives. Interrogating the UN-AU partnership at this level, accordingly requires making sense of this inherent inter-institutional complexity.

3. Reflecting on areas for more meaningful and impactful partnership: common thematic and country-specific priorities

In spite of this growing complexity, both organisations remain largely aligned in their prioritisation of certain thematic and country-specific focus areas. UN peace operations and AU peace support operations contain a considerable number of shared mandated tasks that speak a common language and prioritise issues relating to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and PCRD. Similarly, both organisations have shown an increasing

shared commitment to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda, and the need to devote greater attention to broader governance and developmental concerns — within the context of targeted peace and security interventions.

These collective priorities are illustrated to varying degrees across key policy documents including the 2017 UN-AU partnership framework agreement, the AU's Agenda 2063 and Silencing the Guns Initiative, and the UN's sustaining peace and peacebuilding approach, amongst others. Moreover, shared country-specific priorities are often informed by a convergence of member state interests that cut across the agendas of the UNSC, AUPSC, and the UNPBC. These shared thematic and country-specific priorities arguably provide some of the greatest opportunities to substantively strengthen the partnership, and for the partnership to evolve (at both the strategic and operational levels) in a more coherent and coordinated manner. Understanding the partnership from this perspective accordingly necessitates a stock-taking of shared thematic and country-specific priorities, in order to identify tangible opportunities for common initiatives and interventions. In recent years, these efforts have led to a renewed focus on the potential for joint country assessments and analyses, in order to inform the design, substance, mandate, and oversight of new and ongoing peace operations.

4. Resolving the Achilles Heel of UN-AU partnership: sustainable and predictable funding

One of the greatest challenges facing peace operations in Africa relates to the difficulties associated with predictable and sustainable financing. The UN Security Council has, for years, been divided on resolving the issue around the use of UN assessed contributions to fund regional peace operations. African member states have supported the argument that since many African issues are considered to be threats to international peace and security, the UN has the responsibility to provide sustainable and predictable support, especially when it's not able or willing to deploy its own operations. Despite these arguments, negotiations have, for many years, been frustrated by a lack of member state consensus on how UN assessed contributions could be administered by the AU, and the particular conditions that should be attached to the use of these funds.

The incoming US administration could, however, signal potential opportunities to resolve this deadlock. This would help

reduce the continent's dependency on unpredictable and unsustainable support, and at the same time it would increase the global commitment to resolving peace and security issues in the continent. This will be is essential in ensuring the creation of sustainable frameworks that enable multiple international partners to effectively work together, in structures that are predictably defined with jointly agreed upon rules of the game. Therefore, while the ability to adapt is critical, without predictable and sustainable funding, effective regional operations will be destined to fail.

Conclusion

Some of the most critical challenges and opportunities confronting modern peace operations can be found in the way in which multilateral organisations align and jointly implement their respective efforts toward common peace and security goals. While the future of peace operations will be intrinsically linked to Africa's future, this does not mean that the UN will lose its central role. African solutions to African challenges is not referring only to those responses led by the AU or the RECs. With 28 percent of the overall membership of the UN coming from Africa, the UN is already an integral part of these African solutions. And in navigating a complex and changing global order, the UN-AU strategic partnership on peace and security is an absolutely critical coordination mechanism that has to be fostered as a means to enhance multilateral responses to common problems.

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