

AN AFRICAN GORDIAN KNOT? INSTITUTIONAL AND OPERATIONAL LIMITATIONS IN AU CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACE INTERVENTION INITIATIVES

BABATUNDE AFOLABI

babatundetafolabi@gmail.com

Regional Director of Anglophone & Lusophone Africa at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Nigeria). Previously worked at the Economic Community of West African States Commission and the Centre for Democracy and Development in Nigeria. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK. In 2017, his book 'Politics of Peacemaking in Africa: Non-State Actors' Role in the Liberian Civil War' was published by James Currey Oxford.

PINAR KADIOGLU CHEN

pkadioglu@gmail.com

Expert in Peace and Conflict Studies (France). Previously taught in various universities in Scotland, Cyprus, Turkey, Portugal and Guatemala. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK. Her work primarily focuses on Political Violence, Human Rights, Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding with a particular focus on socio-psychological dimensions of conflict and post-conflict peace processes. She has previously published on UN peace missions, war crimes, crime of genocide and conflict resolution in various areas. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9704-3071>

Abstract

This article provides an insight into the progress on the operationalization of African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) since its establishment over two decades ago with the ambitious task of offering 'African solutions to African problems'. It explores the extent to which APSA's critical components have been effective in promoting peace and security across the continent with a specific focus on the African Union (AU) conflict prevention and conflict response scheme. In doing so, followed by a historical survey highlighting the political developments leading to the establishment of the APSA, it offers a critical interrogation on the relevance and effectiveness of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), and the AU Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (AU-PAPS). These have been undertaken within a broader context of substantive political, operational and contextual challenges extant in the domain of conflict management. In conclusion, the article argues for the future operational opportunities to arise from structural change that involves the adoption of AU principles and instruments relevant to the current security challenges, the demonstration of political will, the conferment of greater supra-nationality to the African Union by African leaders, as well as the intensification of cooperation among the continental and international APSA stakeholders.

Keywords

African Union, APSA, AU-PAPS, AU PSC, Conflict Prevention, Conflict Response, African Politics.

Resumo

Este artigo fornece uma visão sobre o progresso na operacionalização da Arquitetura Africana de Paz e Segurança (APSA) desde a sua criação há mais de duas décadas, com a ambiciosa



tarefa de oferecer "soluções africanas para os problemas africanos". Explora em que medida as componentes críticas da APSA têm sido eficazes na promoção da paz e da segurança em todo o continente, com um foco específico no esquema de prevenção de conflitos e resposta a conflitos da União Africana (UA). Ao fazê-lo, seguido de um levantamento histórico destacando os desenvolvimentos políticos que levaram à criação da APSA, oferece uma interrogação crítica sobre a relevância e eficácia do Conselho de Paz e Segurança (CPS) da UA e do Departamento de Assuntos Políticos, Paz e Segurança da UA (AU-PAPS). Estes foram realizados num contexto mais amplo de desafios políticos, operacionais e contextuais substantivos existentes no domínio da gestão de conflitos. Em conclusão, o artigo defende as futuras oportunidades operacionais decorrentes de mudanças estruturais que envolvam a adoção de princípios e instrumentos da UA relevantes para os atuais desafios de segurança, a demonstração de vontade política, a atribuição de uma maior supranacionalidade à União Africana pelos líderes africanos, bem como a intensificação da cooperação entre os intervenientes continentais e internacionais da APSA.

Palavras-chave

União Africana, APSA, AU-PAPS, AU PSC, Prevenção de Conflitos, Resposta a Conflitos, Política Africana.

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Introduction

The current sociopolitical and security landscape across the African continent is arguably the gloomiest since post-independence. Despite the limitations of the OAU in addressing emerging threats to peace and stability during its nascent years, it was at least able to respond adequately to the mandate thrust into its laps as contained in its 1965 Treaty of Addis Ababa. The tasks of the day back then- to work towards a coordinated continental response to colonialism and apartheid were undertaken with much success. Today, with a new mandate enshrined in the AU Constitutive Act and related normative frameworks, one can safely conclude that the AU has for the past two decades of its renewed mandate been unable to adequately address many of the challenges that informed its existence, for various reasons, and some of which this article seeks to examine in detail.

This article examines the conceptualization and operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which has been in place for a little over two decades since the AU evolved from the OAU, following the signing of the African Union (AU) Constitutive Act in Lomé in 2000. It undertakes an assessment of APSA's key conflict management and response mechanisms with a view to determining whether the challenge of adequately responding to the threats to peace and stability lies in the quality and content of the normative instruments themselves, or in the much-required political will and action, which reinforces every good policy. Put in simple terms, has the problem been with the inadequacy of the normative instruments and the structures developed to operationalize key instruments? Alternatively, on the other hand, does the problem lie with the much-required political will and action determined by political leaders? While the initial decade after the AU adopted its Constitutive Act was characterized by action and a concerted action to develop APSA, a gradual lull in the operationalization of the framework was observed subsequently. The AU's peace and security architecture and intervention must also be assessed through the lens of its ability to facilitate the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity. Given that the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), as building blocks and partners of the AU in its peace and security mandate, have



a critical role to play in delivering on the overarching mandate of ensuring peace and stability in Africa, an appraisal of their linkages and synergy with the AU must also be examined. Going into the future and in view of emerging threats to peace and stability on the continent, an assessment of this nature becomes important for contributing towards a realignment of the AU for the future.

1. The African Peace and Security Landscape: Historically Entrenched Patterns of Instability & The Genesis of Contemporary Continental Cooperation

The contemporary African peace and security landscape is marked by a substantial humanitarian crisis in effect with the rising armed conflicts in Northern, Eastern and Central Africa, as well as intensified terrorist activities in Sahel region and unconstitutional changes of government with conflict potential.¹ The locus of these regional and continental elements of instability is rooted in the mutually reinforcing structures of economic, social and political inequalities, most of which transcend concurrent subjectivities. The pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial legacies in extant political culture and inter-group animosities take a toll on the effective operationalization of the extant African peace and security framework. Thence, necessitates a nuanced and multifaceted understanding on historical patterns in African peace and security landscape brimmed with great human suffering in effect with episodes of collective violence ranging from inter-state and intra-state wars, inter-ethnic clashes, violent extremism, terrorism to genocides.

Although it is not possible to argue for *a priori* state of absolute peace, the inordinate scale and magnitude of collective violence and insecurity across the continent can be traced back to the rise of transatlantic slave trade and the natural resource extraction which was intensified in 17th century in effect with the high European demand for slave labour, reaching its devastating peak in 19th century.² This interaction with the outsiders gradually transmuted into forceful social, economic and political control over African people, eventually leading to the colonization of the whole continent by European Powers between 1833 and 1914.

Throughout the colonial era, along with the economic exploitation, Africa's experience was of racial humiliation and cultural dominance. African people were forced to live under the colonial rule as subjects, and under such conditions, aside from being subjected to arbitrary violence and political suppression, they were stripped from most basic cultural rights such as right to speak their own languages and exercise traditional religions. Borne out of the forced dispersal of millions through the transatlantic slave trade, the African diaspora, on the other hand, was also exposed to the equally dreadful structures of socio-economic and political inequality in elsewhere across the globe. All in all, this

¹ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary General on Promotion of Durable Peace through Sustainable Development in Africa*, A/79/226-S/2024/550, 23 July 2024.

² Frankema, E., De Haas, M. & Van Waijenburg, M. (2023) Inequality Regimes in Africa from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present. *African Affairs*, 122(486), pp. 57-94; Lovejoy, Paul E. (2000). *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge University Press



troublesome existence led to the emergence of Pan-Africanism in mid-19th century as a political and cultural movement calling for the liberation and unification of African people and the celebration of African identity.

The early Pan-African ideas were articulated by the formerly enslaved Africans living in Northern America and the Caribbeans on their quest against racial injustice, inequality and colonialism both in continental Africa and all places where people of African descent lived. At the turn of the century, the creation of a formal organization to institutionalize Pan-African ideals became a matter of vigorous endeavour. Between 1900 and 1927, a total of four conferences took place in United Kingdom (UK), Belgium, France, Portugal and United States of America (US) within which the advocates of Pan-Africanism voiced their demands for the abolishment of systemic and structural racial discrimination, injustices and inequities faced by Africans and people of African descent across the world. In 1944, several political organizations from the continental Africa and UK opened up talks for the establishment of the Pan-African Federation, which was actualized a year later during the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester with the calls for decolonisation and elimination of all forms of racism in Africa. Standing at a critical juncture in the history of the Pan-African movement, with this event the Pan-African leadership shifted to the African leaders, and the Pan-Africanist political cause to the continent itself.³

Throughout the 1950s, Pan-Africanism flourished as a driving force behind the decolonization wave in Africa. At the time, the African leaders of independence sought unity and solidarity among African peoples as a necessity "[...] for the rapid eradication of colonialism and for the continent's economic and political development."⁴ The first remnant, in this regard, was the independence of Gold Coast (later Ghana) from the British rule in 1957 under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, who was to state that "our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent"⁵ at the historic celebration of Ghana's independence.

Despite the consensus on the unity ideal, however, the questions of 'what entails African unity and how to achieve it?' surfaced as a matter of contest between the ideological camps to which the nascent immediate post-independence African leaders belonged. On the one hand was the more conservative, gradualist Monrovia Group, which favoured an inter-African economic, cultural, scientific and technical cooperation. The idea of political integration was seen as a premature venture which could compromise the newly attained sovereign rights of the African states. For Monrovia, whatever the unity would entail, it was crucial for it to be built on the principle of non-intervention. On the other hand, was the federalist Casablanca group that *ab initio*, favoured a 'United States of Africa' model, which would foster integration and de-emphasize national identities and other forms of delineations. Extremely wary of the prospect of external political and economic interventions, this group strongly advocated for the socio-political and economic

³ DuBois, W. E. B. (1921). To the World: Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress. *The Crisis*, 23 (1), pp. 5-11; Esedebe, P. O. (1994). *Pan-Africanism: the Idea and Movement, 1776-1991*. Howard University Press; Sherwood, M. (2011). *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa and the African Diaspora*. Routledge.

⁴ Muyangwa, M., & Vogt, M. A. (2000). *An Assessment of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, 1993-2000*. International Peace Academy, p. 4.

⁵ Kwameh, N. (1957). *Independence Speech*, 5 March 1957.



integration across the continent to prevent external intrusion in the future. At the onset in 1963, due to the reluctance of the Monrovia group to aspire to supranational ideal prescribed by the Casablanca group, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was birthed as an offspring of compromise.

1.1. The Organization of African Unity (OAU)

The OAU, whose treaty was signed in Addis Ababa in 1963 by 32 African states, was founded as an inter-governmental organization. The primary goal of the Organization was prescribed as the promotion of unity and solidarity of the African States through which member states would work together towards the eradication of all forms of colonialism from Africa, and to provide better life for people of Africa via harmonisation of economic, diplomatic, socio-cultural and security policies.⁶ Through concerted diplomatic and non-diplomatic means, the OAU achieved its key political goals, having championed the independence of African states that were still under the clutches of colonialism, and carrying out a successful fight against the apartheid rule in South Africa. Yet, overtime, it became clear that the Organization lacked the required institutional capacity to promote better living conditions for African people.

The peace and security issues in post-independence Africa were primarily by-products of ill-governance. The Pan-African dreams of socio-political equality and economic development were effectively crashed within a decade by the African leaders of independence, who were captivated by the pre-colonial/patrimonial traditions of political leadership and dictatorial aspirations. Consequently, millions were exposed to violent campaigns of political oppression, acute poverty and underdevelopment under the authoritarian kleptocratic systems of governance extant in various newly independent African states. In 1970s and 1980s, African continent witnessed high-intensity conflicts in the form of super power proxy wars and coup d'etats, along with the spark of secessionist insurgency directed against the suppressive regimes. The colonial inheritance of international borders in post-independence Africa, which separated the closely related ethno-linguistic groups into different regions, also surfaced as a driver in the regionalization of on-going conflicts in the form of border disputes.

In the absence of articulation on peace and security matters beyond elimination of foreign invasion, the OAU's approach to conflict was underpinned by the principles of non-interference, territorial integrity and inviolability of the colonial boundaries. The OAU Charter neither had a clause on exceptions to the sovereign equality of its member states, nor had any significant elements on peace and security matters. All governments, regardless of their method of acquiring political power, were recognized as legitimate members to partake in decision-making processes, while the domain of peace and security was exclusively left to domestic jurisdiction. The culture of impunity generated under the prevailing structure, thus, provided convenient conditions for much of OAU member states to perpetuate political tyranny. The OAU's strong focus on inviolability of

⁶ Organization of African Unity, *Charter of the Organization for African Unity*, 479 UNTS 39, 13 September 1963.



the colonial boundaries, which together with non-interference policy, also incapacitated the Organization to address issues arising from the secessionist/border disputes.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, in effect with liberation movements and post-independence conflicts, millions of Africans were forced to leave their homes to escape persecution, armed conflict and human rights violations. The OAU, in effect with its 1969 regional refugee convention which encompassed a capacious and inclusive interpretation with respect to refugee protection arising out of armed aggression and other kinds of violence,⁷ and its member states' generosity in accepting refugees served as a positive example for the rest of the world.⁸ The admirable success of the OAU in dealing with Africa's refugee problems, however, was not mirrored on its ability to address rest of the peace and security matters of the era. Thus, it could not prevent the Organization from attaining an unsavoury reputation for being notoriously ignorant towards the unfolding human tragedies of the era as the guardian of autocratic regimes.

The OAU Charter had no provision on conflict management but a claim on the commitment of its member states to peaceful settlement of disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation or arbitration. Consequently, the Organization's scope for peace interventions was limited. In comparison to the UN Secretary-General, for instance, the Executive Secretary of the OAU had no mandate to initiate peace interventions while the continental body was also limited in terms of its capacity to enforce its own resolutions.

Tasked with the coordination of peaceful settlement of the disputes between the member states, the Commission on Mediation, Arbitration and Reconciliation was commanding the OAU peace and security agenda. Although, the very existence of this organ signaled commitment and value to institutional mediation, the operationalization of this framework was jeopardized by the OAU's strict non-interference policy, leaving the Commission impotent to prevent and respond effectively to intra-state conflicts. Furthermore, the Commission had no compulsory jurisdiction over the settlement of disputes, which eventually led to the collapse of the framework as the member states were wary of transferring their sovereign rights. The deadlock on the matter was attempted to be resolved gradually through the establishment of ad hoc committees, and later a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution which lacked enforcement authority in furtherance of the futility of the Organization's peace and security framework.

2. The African Union & The Quest for Continental Peace and Security

In the early half of the 1990s, the inability of the United Nations to prevent and stop the Rwandan genocide, *inter alia*, state collapse in Somalia, the eruption of civil wars across several parts of Africa, as well as human rights violations orchestrated by states, created an impulse for the revival of Pan-African consciousness. Deriving from these ideals

⁷ Organization of African Unity, *Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa*, 1001 UNTS 45, 10 September 1969.

⁸ Crisp, J. (2006). Forced Displacement in Africa: Dimensions, Difficulties and Policy Directions. *New Issues in Refugee Research*, RP No 126, UNHCR.



emerged the desire for the promotion of better living conditions for African people, hitherto lost with the rise of dictatorial and corrupt regimes in the immediate aftermath of the decolonization. The zeitgeist of the era was equally potent in shaping the African leaders' perceptions on the necessity for African governments to play a proactive role in combatting emergent threats to peace and security across the continent. Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations had called for the adoption of relevant principles to the UN Charter to enable humanitarian interventions for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts⁹. Annan also made a call for the UN Security Council's reinforcement for involvement of the African regional and sub-regional agencies in conflict prevention and management initiatives in cooperation with the UN.¹⁰

Drawing on revived Pan-African ideals and the vivid pre-Responsibility to Protect (R2P) debates in global level, the African Union (AU) assumed a pioneering role by embracing human security understanding and affirming regional and international collaboration as a requisite for the promotion of peace, security and stability in the continent. This epochal moment was defined by the adoption of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol in 2002¹¹ which established the first continent-wide peace and security system in Africa with the objective of offering 'African solutions to African problems', the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).

The transformation of the OAU into the AU portrayed the continental body's readiness to tackle some of the weaknesses inherent in the old order. The OAU's scorecard was replete with its inability to play a significant role in such major situations as the border dispute between Algeria and Morocco in 1963, the Biafra war in Nigeria from 1967-1970, the Chadian Civil War in the early 1980s, the collapse of Somalia in the early 1990s and consequent state decay. Other occurrences that brought the OAU's limitations into the fore included the civil wars experienced in West Africa in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Cote d'Ivoire in the 1990s, as well as the devastating genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Departing from the old ways, the AU Constitutive Act, specifically Articles 2 and 3, emphasizes the need to promote continental peace and stability, democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance, sovereign equality and interdependence.¹² Quite importantly, to banish the ill-effects of the 'non-interference' principle, the Constitutive Act was explicit in its principles which spell out important elements such as the sovereign equality and interdependence of African states, the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State under grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and war against humanity, and the right of a Member State to request intervention from the union in order to restore peace and security. Of particular significance was the creation of the organs and instruments of the Peace and Security

⁹ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization*, UN Doc. A/54/1, 1 October 1999.

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1197 (1998) [Africa]*, S/RES/1197, 18 September 1998.

¹¹ African Union, *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union*, AU Doc. 9/7/2002.

¹² African Union, *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/23.



Council, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the Panel of the Wise, as well as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOCC).¹³

These systems and structures were mandated by the Constitutive Act to adequately operationalize the new continental peace and security architecture which embraces a comprehensive peace and security agenda that includes conflict prevention, early warning and preventive diplomacy, peace-making, peace support operations, peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian response and disaster management, as well as the promotion of democracy, good governance and respect for human rights. The operationalization of this continental framework is supported by the assignment of stakeholders such as United Nations (UN), the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs) and civil society organizations.¹⁴ The coordination of the APSA in collaboration with the stakeholders, on the other hand, is centralized around the PSC, the apex body of decision-making responsible for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts, supported by four institutional instruments, namely, the Panel of the Wise, Conflict Early Warning System (CEWS), the African Standby Force (ASF) and the Peace Fund.

2.1. AU Conflict Prevention Scheme

Devoted to establishing the capabilities that would enable the AU's ability to anticipate and predict potential crises, ensure the timely intervention of conflict, as well as the ability to resolve prevailing tensions or to avert conflict relapse, the AU conflict prevention framework derives from its overarching APSA. It primarily functions through the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the activities carried out by the Panel of the Wise (PoW). This framework comprises five highly respected African personalities from various segments of society who have made outstanding contribution to the cause of peace, security and development on the continent,¹⁵ and it serves as an advisory body to the PSC and the Chairperson of the AU Commission. The five Panel members, who represent the East, Southern, West, North and Central parts of Africa, are appointed as peace mediators even as the AU can also rely upon special envoys and committees for the matter. The PoW, thus, carries out its primary function through the preparation of special reports on issues such as election-related violence and vulnerabilities of women and children in armed conflicts.¹⁶

Prior to its recent internal reforms as part of the merging of the AU Political Affairs and Peace & Security Departments into one, a critical component of the APSA framework was the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). CEWS, a proactive component in APSA's

¹³ African Union, *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/23.

¹⁴ African Union, *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security Between the African Union, The Regional Economic Communities and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of Eastern and Northern Africa*, 26 September 2008, Article IV (iii).

¹⁵ African Union, *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union*, AU Doc. 9/7/2002, Article 12.

¹⁶ African Union, *Report of the AU Panel of the Wise: Election- Related Disputes and Political Violence*, 2010; African Union, *AU PSC & Panel of the Wise Expert Report on Eliminating Vulnerabilities of Women and Children in Armed Conflicts*, 2014.



conflict prevention scheme, had the mandate of data collection and analysis to detect situations that are likely to escalate into armed conflicts at an early stage, with the mandate to prepare reports to the Chairperson of the AU Commission and the PSC. Part of CEWS' functions was also to undertake its missions out in the observation and monitoring centre in Addis Ababa, also known as *the Situation Room*, which directly operates on the data collected from AU liaison offices, AU field missions, AU early-warning officers and monitoring-observation units in RECs and RMs. The CEWS no longer exists as we know it and it is the firm belief of the authors of this Paper that a critical element of the AU's peace and security architecture has been sacrificed to institutional reforms. Yet, prior to this recent development on the CEWS, the entity had suffered from the active coordination with RECs early warning structures, which limited its ability to obtain information that would have reinforced the AU's ability to carry out its early warning and early response functions. The limited political will by AU member states and reluctance to act on 'internal matters' form part of the problems in the effective functioning of the APSA. This disconnect between early warning and early response comes alive with the PSC's decision on not taking preventive action in 2012 despite being informed about a possible outbreak of conflict in Mali and Guinea-Bissau by the CEWS staff.¹⁷

The AU Conflict Prevention Scheme also encompass two voluntary processes: the Country Structural Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment (CSVRA) and the Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy (CSVMS) within the CEWs. Since its adoption in April 2013, the PSC has been repeatedly encouraging the utilization of these mechanisms by AU member states for the structural prevention of conflict in Africa.¹⁸ Yet, as important as they are in helping member states to evaluate their structural vulnerabilities, identify resilience factors and develop risk mitigation strategies, and doing so, strengthening the AU capacity in addressing the challenges in early warning and early response nexus, the continental uptake on CSVRA and CSVMS have been extremely slow, limited to the participation of Ghana (2017), Côte d'Ivoire (2019) and Zambia (2020) out of the extant 55 AU member states.¹⁹

2.2. AU Conflict Response and Intervention Mechanism

AU Conflict Response and Intervention mechanism under APSA primarily functions through the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC), and the African Standby Force (ASF) which is a peacekeeping force with international and continental components inclusive of military, police and civilian contingents. Envisaged as a multipurpose instrument, the PSC holds the mandate to authorize ASF observation and monitoring missions, peace support missions and humanitarian interventions in AU member states. Despite the ambitious scope of this framework, however, the ASF lacks the rapid deployment capacity, which is central to its operational capability. Equally, if

¹⁷ Noyes, A. & Yarwood, J. (2013). The AU Continental Early Warning System: From Conceptual to Operational? *International Peacekeeping*, 20(3), p. 256.

¹⁸ PSC/PR/COMM.2 (DII) ; Assembly/AU/ Decl.1-2(XXXV) ; Assembly/AU/4(XXXVII).

¹⁹ African Union Peace and Security Council, *Press Release: National and Regional Consultations on Country Structural Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment (CSVRA) of Ghana*. 3 November 2017; African Union, *Key Decisions of the 32nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union (January 2019)*, 12 February 2019.



not more critical, is the importance of Member States conferring more supra-nationality to the AU, by providing the required political backing needed to put the ASF into readiness and action.

The PSC's role in operationalizing APSA requires an African Union Commission whose mandate is to ensure that the structures and processes align. Prior to 2018, the AU Commission had two separate departments with mandates on political affairs and peace and security respectively. However, by November 2018, the 11th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly, had ratified the merger of two separate departments, namely Political Affairs and Peace & Security into the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS). PAPS' mandate covers four AU Commission priorities- political affairs, peace and security, economic integration, and Africa's global representation and voice, and in line with the AU Agenda 2063,²⁰ which aspires to a "An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, Respect for Human Rights, Justice and the Rule of Law"²¹. Effectively, this merger of the old departments into a single new department commenced in 2020 and has remained work in progress since then. The core functions of the department include the monitoring of peace and security trends, support to conflict prevention, capacity building and training of Member States and RECs on relevant political, peace and security issues, and the coordination of the development of Common African Positions on relevant political, peace and security issues. Also included in the new Department's mandate is the responsibility to ensure complementarity and synergy in the implementation of African Governance Architecture (AGA) and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), as well as supporting post-conflict reconstruction and development policy and strategy development.²²

Ideally, the merger of the two departments into one present numerous challenges which will require time and resources to tackle. These will include a reorientation of relevant personnel to ensure a shared sense of purpose and vision, a realignment of human resource needs and the stock-taking of existing capacity, as well as the luxury of time to allow the new department to evolve. Merging the two departments has, according to AU sources, been chaotic and problematic because of the lack of clarity of mandates, competition between the personnel of the old departments, some of whom keep their loyalties to the old set up.²³ According to a senior AU staff who chose to remain anonymous:

"The old set up of having separate departments for peace and security and political affairs was better. The biggest mistake was merging peace and security with political affairs as things are being done in a chaotic manner. Peace and security were dedicated to peace interventions while political affairs did political stuff such as elections, democratic governance issues and human rights issues. The thinking behind the merger was that since most of the

²⁰ African Union (n.d.). *PAPS Mandate*.

²¹ African Union Development Agency (n.d.), *Aspiration 3: An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, Respect for Human Rights, Justice and the Rule of Law*.

²² African Union (n.d.). *PAPS Mandate*.

²³ Personal interview with a senior staff of the AU PAPS Department.



*threats to peace and stability were political in nature, a unified set up would boost the AU's work"*²⁴.

3. Responding to the Most Pressing Threats to Peace and Stability across Africa

The continental landscape is dotted with several conflict, humanitarian disasters and political instability. Some of the threats to peace and stability include interstate conflicts, ethnoreligious conflicts- identity based conflicts, climate change-derived conflicts, and political contestations/coup d'états. Given its mandate to deal with peace and security matters, the AU is expected to respond to the current threats and manifestation of instability and conflict across the continent. Over the past two decades, the AU has played an active role in dealing with such challenges as the political crisis in the Comoros, the Darfur war, post-election crises and upheavals in places such as Cote d'Ivoire in 2010-2011, and arguably more recently, the Tigray conflict through the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA).²⁵

The limitations by multilateral organizations to successfully initiate dialogue processes and arrive at a peace agreement has been severely limited in recent times for a number of reasons. While the geopolitical battles between the US and China and the US and Russia account for the stalemate at the Security Council, for the AU, it is a bit different. The inability to galvanize 'frontline states' who are usually seized with peace and stability concerns for the entire continent has created a leadership vacuum. The era of committed regional hegemons- Algeria for North Africa, Ethiopia for East Africa and the Horn, Nigeria for West Africa, South Africa for Southern Africa, who were at the forefront of initiating peace interventions and developmental policies, is now in the past. The most protracted conflicts no longer feature on the agenda of the bi-annual Summits of AU Heads of State. Part of an era gone by was the ability to foster a consensual approach to the peace and security challenges that beset the continent. This leads to an examination of the AU's response to the prevailing threats to peace and security, manifesting in the devastating conflict in Sudan, the perennial conflicts in the Oromia and Amhara regions of Ethiopia, the AU's host state, the dangerous developments in the Horn between Ethiopia and Somalia, leading to an alliance between Eritrea, Egypt (Ethiopia's adversary over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)), violent clashes in the Sahel by extremists, especially in Burkina Faso, as well the manifestation of the same in Nigeria and Mozambique.

As mentioned briefly in the introductory section, the hallmark of effective collaboration between the UN, AU and RECs was the respect for the two principles of subsidiarity and complementarity. Adherence to these principles helped in the sharing of responsibilities and in ensuring a collective approach to peace and security matters. On key issues pertaining to West Africa for example, ECOWAS would normally act and obtain the ratification of the AU and the UN, with the sub-regional entity acting in a timely manner

²⁴ Personal interview with a senior staff of the AU PAPS Department.

²⁵ The Tigray conflict ended with a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) signed in Pretoria in 2022.



and without waiting for interventions from Addis Ababa or New York. This did not mean the non-involvement of the AU. Rather, the AU would be content with backstopping the sub-regional effort and offer advanced legitimacy. In reality, this manifested in the AU often co-chairing an International Contact Group (ICG) or 'Friends' arrangement, as was done during the political dialogue and democratic transition process in Guinea from 2008-2011. On rare occasions, when the impartiality or capability of a REC to respond to threats and manifestations of conflict was in question, the AU would step in to coordinate a joint AU-REC effort, as was done following the decision to constitute an AU High-level Panel on the post-election crisis in Cote d'Ivoire between 2010-2011.

In terms of the capacity to respond to violent extremism, whether it be in Nigeria, the Sahel, and in places such as Mozambique, the AU has been active through the application of subsidiarity principles and, in the case of Somalia, the deployment of a peacekeeping force with an expanded mandate to use force to repel non-state armed groups (NSAGs). In response to the threat of violent extremism, the AU has worked with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) Against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin area of the continent. In Somalia however, the AU's deployment of a continental force, the AU Mission in Somalia, initially to stabilize the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), implement a national security plan, and to train the TFG forces, and the subsequent expansion of its mandate to support the Somali government efforts, has been the practice since 2006. While the flexibility is commendable, it remains to be seen whether there is any meaningful effort by the AU, RECs and the various ad-hoc arrangements such as the MNJTF, to adopt an intervention that seeks to understand and tackle violent extremism from its root cause. Gaps also exist in terms of the AU's capacity to respond to conflicts occurring or manifesting at the sub-state level but with repercussions for regional peace and stability. Climate change-derived conflicts are often mixed with identity-based issues and occurring through disputes over shared natural resources such as water sources, land and farmer-herder disputes, and are limited to interventions by sub-state level actors and NGOs. With the havoc that these conflicts may constitute for regional stability, given the propensity for widespread violence across borders and various regions in Africa, this constitutes another obvious gap that sub-regional and regional arrangements are unable to deal with.

3.1. Progress & Setbacks in Peace Intervention Efforts

Beyond the aforementioned limitations of the AU to effectively prevent and respond to conflict issues, additional obstacles to effective conflict management and resolution efforts include the following:

3.1.1. Limited Supranationality of the AU

Expectations were that the principle of 'non-indifference', enshrined in the AU Constitutive Act, would replace one of the cardinal principles of the defunct OAU's principle of non-interference. While 'non-indifference' exists in the normative instrument, the reality is the frequent retention of the right to withdraw the AU's right to intervene



where necessary. An AU senior official²⁶ refers to this as 'the constant invocation of sovereignty by Member States in crisis'. The popular refrain is for member states to reiterate their independence and sovereignty, and to label conflicts of concern in their member states as internal matters. This act limits the capacity of the relevant departments within the organization to make bold pronouncements on conflict issues in member states. It also reveals the limitations of the Commission to identify and engage in conflicts early before they escalate, especially in member states that wield power and influence within the Commission. For example, a largely unspoken reality is the AU's reluctance to tackle conflict issues in Ethiopia, a powerful member state, and the host to the AU, due to the host member state's enormous influence within the organization and beyond.

3.1.2. Inability to Tackle Conflict Root Causes

he AU's limited staying power and ability to address the root causes of conflict and to deploy long-term measures required in tackling them. There is the penchant for facilitating inconclusive peace processes or peace agreement implementation, or peace processes with limited participation of conflict actors. An example is the Pretoria Agreement of 2022, which effectively ended the devastating Tigray conflict, but which did not address the root causes of the conflict in itself, nor involve the participation of Eritrea, an active conflict party, in the peace talks. The recent threats to peace and stability in Ethiopia and the consequent concerns over the unravelling of the Pretoria Agreement have come about because of the *ad hoc* nature of the Agreement.

3.1.3. Identifying and Pursuing Peace and Security Priorities

For various reasons, attaining a unity of purpose and a shared vision and direction for the AU has been a struggle. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the AU, a fifty-five member state organization with a broad mandate. Even the EU, with half the membership of the AU, and with many years of advancement, has this challenge. However, the AU has in recent years, struggled to attain harmonized position and a set of key priorities.

3.1.4. Short Intervention Lifespan and Placing Conflict Management Over Transformation

Linked to the above, is a limited attention span on key conflict issues, and the frequent 'flipping of channels' from one conflict to another. Due to the myriad challenges that the AU has to grapple with, there has been the tendency to move too quickly from one conflict issue to another. The tendency to 'fire-fight' overwhelmingly supersedes the tendency to prevent conflicts from occurring or escalating. There is a sense that some of the current conflicts and political crises that have escalated in recent times- whether it be in the DRC, the Sahel region, Mozambique, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Sudan- could have been

²⁶ Interview with a serving AU official who wishes to remain anonymous, 10th September 2025, Nairobi, Kenya.



prevented from degenerating into full-scale conflict, or crisis. When the default approach to conflict issues is a conflict management approach, rather than transformation, any temporary reprieve or Band-Aid that stops the haemorrhaging will do.

3.1.5. Division of Labour with the Regional Economic Communities

We had earlier alluded to the blurring of lines in terms of the sharing of responsibilities between the AU and the RECs. While there remain good working relations between the multilateral organizations that are the building blocks of the AU (the RECs) and the AU, there is perception in some quarters that with the AU's backing, some of the conflicts and crises could be better managed by the RECs where the countries in conflict are domiciled²⁷. On the other hand, some AU personnel believe that RECs already have too much power and have arrogated some of the AU's responsibilities to themselves. This difficult topic is rarely discussed in the open but is a palpable reality that informs action or inaction on the part of the AU²⁸.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The adoption of the continental APSA, widely acknowledged as a comprehensive regional plan, and which captures the realities and ambitions of attaining sustainable peace and stability in Africa, represents a good starting point for attaining regional peace and stability. However, what makes for a normative instrument, or a viable peace and security architecture is the political will granted by decision makers to operationalize such frameworks. Closely linked to this is the important role that RECs have to play in furthering the peace and security agenda in their sub-regions and in collaboration with the AU and other partners. This aspect of the collaboration between the AU and its building blocks warrants a distinct study of its own. RECs not only have parts of their mandates deriving from the AU, but they also seek an endorsement of their action from the AU and from the UN. Over time, there has been a blurring of lines in and clarity on what guides action, and who should lead dialogue processes across board. Going forward, with the emergence of new actors, such as the Gulf countries and the likes of Turkey, who have joined the established global powers in seeking to influence domestic politics in parts of the continent such as the Horn and the Sahel among others.

In a recently-published report reviewing the progress made by the African Union on its 'Silencing the Guns' Initiative, Dersso & Hailu (2025) shared a gloomy if not damning scorecard of the AU's efforts at conflict management. They noted thus:

The AU is in crisis. Nothing more highlights this crisis than its increasing loss of leadership in peace and security. There is nothing more central to the mandate of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the AU than Silencing the Guns. It constitutes the raison d'être for the very existence of this Council and indeed for the AU itself...from Sudan to

²⁷ Interview with anonymous personnel of the ECOWAS Commission, 15th July 2025, Abuja, Nigeria.

²⁸ One of the Authors has experienced these tensions while serving as a Political Affairs Officer with ECOWAS and in the course of his frequent exchanges with AU personnel.



DRC, from Mozambique to the Sahel, Ethiopia and South Sudan, the peace and security situation of the continent has deteriorated exponentially.

a. The Conferment of Meaningful Supranationalism on the AU

Having described some of the challenges hindering the AU from fulfilling its mandate, it is important to stress that the AU Commission can only be as effective as the Member States want it to be. Indeed, the AU Chairperson and the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace & Security both elected officials of the Commission, are mandated to lead the AU's peace efforts, but require the backing of the AU's higher organs, the Assembly and the Peace & Security Council. The conferment of supranational powers on the AU will ensure its independence of action and reduce the political interference by Member States.

b. Revisiting Subsidiarity and Complementarity Principles between the AU, RECs and the UN

Given that the attainment of continental peace and stability is a shared responsibility between the UN, the AU and the RECs, a review of shared functions and the adherence to the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity will be a positive step forward. It will help in attaining two main objectives- a clear division of roles and responsibilities, and increased coordination between the AU, RECs, and Member States. Of particular importance is the operational synergy between the AU and its building blocks- the RECs, given the sheer impossibility of the AU to tackle every threat to peace and stability on the continent.

c. Revisiting the AU Reforms with Particular Emphasis on Peace & Security

The AU's internal reforms, especially the merging of the two Departments responsible for Political Affairs, and Peace and Security, into one, which has effectively led to lesser functions for such important organs as the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), especially on its operationalization. While this piece does not afford the opportunity to undertake an appraisal of its functions, future research on the ability of the AU Peace Fund, mandated in the 1993 PSC Protocol to cater to operational peace interventions, will be beneficial to scholars and practitioners alike.

d. Increased Capacity to Understand Evolving Geopolitics and New Threats to Peace and Stability

Some of the most devastating threats to peace and stability on the continent today include large-scale intercommunal conflicts, violence emanating from hate speech and social media misuse, as well as the impact of geopolitical tussling between powerful states and emergent powers. The ability to identify the root causes of the conflicts is critical to devising solutions to them and this requires new engagements and analyses



that are more sophisticated than what currently obtains. It may therefore require a revisiting of existing early warning indicators and mechanisms for tackling conflict.

e. Towards a Longer-term Political Dialogue Processes, More Comprehensive Peace Processes, and Gender Inclusion

The shift from a 'fire-fighting' and reactive approach to undertaking structural conflict prevention initiatives can only be attained if the AU is provided with the required tools - a supranational status with less interference in its operations by member states, as well as the financing required to undertake longer-term political dialogue processes. Inclusion of critical actors such as women, youth and marginalized groups are also critical for the maximum delivery of its mandate to the people of Africa.

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