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A STITCH IN TIME WOULD HAVE SAVED NINE

Operationalising the African Standby Force

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The African Standby Force (ASF) was envisaged as a tool for timely response and intervention in post-cold war conflicts that were ravaging the continent. Initial attempts in 1995 and 1997 to bring the force into operation stalled, but renewed efforts were undertaken in 2003, when the ASF Policy Framework set timelines for the operationalisation of the force by 2010. Given subsequent delays, there are now concerns about when and whether the ASF will ever come into force. This policy brief reviews the salient factors affecting the progress made to date, and the policy challenges militating against the force's timely operationalisation. Its broad recommendations highlight policy options to realign the concept of the ASF, bring the force into existence, and reappraise what role and functions it should be organised and equipped to undertake and in what conflict situations. The brief does not cover training and other purely operational dimensions of the ASF project.

INTRODUCTION: THE ASF, A MOVING TARGET

The ASF was, and still is, supposed to be 'an implementing mechanism for the decisions of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU), providing a quick response to incidents of violent armed conflict in Africa. After more than 18 years since the need for the ASF was first realised, the force is still not operational, and now is only expected to become operational in 2015. By contrast, the European Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBGIG), the establishment of which was similarly motivated, became fully operational in 2000. It was disbanded in mid-2009 but, prior to this, played a lead role in the UN Mission in Ethiopia-Eritrea (UNMEE) in 2000 and later contributed headquarters staffing capabilities for the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in 2003.

What are the reasons for the delay in the operationalisation of the ASF so many years after the vision for such a force was realised? Why did several of the timelines – 2005, 2008 and 2010 – elaborated in two roadmaps for its establishment lapse without a clear conviction of when the force will enter into use? It is pertinent to note that even the new timeline of 2015 appears to have been moved from 2013.

The recurrent delays in the operationalisation of the ASF raise some fundamental questions: will the ASF ever become operational? What are the challenges that have prevented its timely operationalisation? And, if the ASF is to become operational by the new timeline of 2015, as elaborated in the ASF Roadmap III that seeks to fix gaps in institutional and operational expertise, capacities and capabilities, how are these challenges being addressed?

Further concerns that need to be addressed are: what will the functional role and tasks of the ASF be when it becomes operational? How effectively will these functional roles and tasks contribute to resolving the continuing incidence of complex humanitarian emergencies? How will the ASF be sustained to ensure that its use and employment are predictable in realising the strategic objectives of the AU?

STILL A RELEVANT POLICY TOOL?

At the end of the Cold War, rather than enjoying a much-anticipated peace, Africa was ravaged by intrastate conflicts that negatively impacted peace and security in the fragile states and economies of the continent. This retarded the continent's economic development and

provided a strong socio-economic motivation for the establishment of a continental force.

The idea of a continental force appears to have been imposed upon Africa due to disinterest in African conflicts on the part of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the body vested with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The Rwanda genocide (1994) was a clear example of the failure of the UNSC and the international community to respond in a timely and effective manner to mass atrocities in Africa.

African countries therefore took note of the findings by the UN's Panel on UN Peace Operations that the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) 'had not been planned, deployed or instructed in a way that would have enabled it to stop the genocide…' and that 'UNAMIR was also the victim of a lack of political will in the Security Council and by other member states, including Africans'. In essence, AU members resolved to demonstrate political will in 'finding African solutions to African problems', seeking to establish structures capable of interventions, to create conditions necessary for, and allow time for, the transfer of mandates to the better-resourced UN.

Had the efforts of the AU gained sufficient critical mass by 2005, the ASF would have become operational in 2010. Had that been the case, the ASF would have been the instrument of choice for the PSC in its intervention to hunt for Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), in the Great Lakes region. In addition, the mandate of the AU Mission in Somali (AMISOM, 2007) would also have been transferred to the ASF in 2007. The projected deployment of an AU force to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to deal with the pervasive civilian insecurity would also have been a job for the ASF.

One notable exception to the above ad hoc forces and missions is the belated deployment of an Eastern Africa Standby Force (EASF) component of a total of 231 police personnel to AMISOM – a senior leadership team of six, one each from Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Burundi and the Gambia, and a 225-strong contingent of personnel from Uganda (141, including one formed police unit of 140, and one individual police officer), Sierra Leone (40), Nigeria (29), Kenya (8) and Ghana (7). Albeit small in comparison with the deployment of about 1 340 police personnel in the AU Mission in Sudan-Darfur (AMIS), the EASF police mission is significant in the development of the police dimension of the ASF.

Another pertinent exception may be the ECOWAS initiative currently underway to intervene in Mali with the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) to restore legitimate authority in the country, rather than using ad hoc forces.

Operationally, some UN missions continue to show disparities between the higher intent expressed in UNSC mandates and the political-security realities and missions' resources on the ground. In Sudan in 2011, these disparities resulted in the failure of the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) to fulfil its mandate in protecting civilians. In early 2012, the same gaps contributed to the lack of firm action by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) during the tragic cycle of conflicts between the Muerle and Lou Nuer Dinka, for instance, and the north-south conflagration over Heglig in mid-April 2012.

In 2011, such gaps also led to the parallel deployment of French forces for joint operations with the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) to resolve the stalemate over the outcome of the elections between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara. Again, similar gaps in the 19 000-strong UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) have informed the decision of the AU to deploy an African force to undertake pacification operations against 'M23' insurgents in the eastern part of the country.

CONTRASTING POLICY OPTIONS, TENSIONS AND GAPS

In policy terms, the establishment of the ASF is predicated on the provisions of the Constitutive Act of the AU (2000), particularly in the context of the 'right of intervention by the Union in grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity', as well as 'the right of member states to request for intervention'.

The establishment of the ASF is legally based on the provisions of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the PSC of the AU (Article 13), as the 'standing decision-making organ for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts' and a 'collective security and early warning arrangement to facilitate timely and efficient response to conflict and crisis situations in Africa'. However, tensions appear to have arisen between the AU Commission (AUC) and the regional economic communities and regional mechanisms (RECs/RMs) over the prerogative of the PSC as the sole 'legitimate authority' for mandating interventions. Some RECs/RMs, such as ECOWAS and SADC, tend to prefer UNSC authorisation for deployments; SADC in particular may deploy its standby force on an AU or UN mandate, but only on the authority of its summit.

This creates problems in the implementation of memoranda of understanding on the regional arrangements, more so in light of the fact that the legal framework workshop to resolve legal quagmires over the ASF architecture is yet to take place. In effect not even the PSC or the Assembly can mandate the deployment of the ASF under the current system. In addition, the UNSC tends to caution against regional interventions without its appropriate authorisation, whereas the AU has interpreted its policy objectives and the political status of the PSC as a 'legitimate authority' within the framework of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter relating to Regional Arrangements.

New threats, more scenarios?

The delay in the establishment of the ASF has seen the emergence of new threats, such as terrorism and piracy, particularly in the wider Horn of Africa and in West Africa. In the on-going development of the ASF there has been a tendency in some policy and academic circles to call for a review of the six conflict and mission scenarios originally intended to be used for ASF deployments (see Table 1).

Table 1 Conflict scenarios to be used for ASF deployments

Scenarios	Deployment timelines (from PSC decision)
Scenario 1. AU/Regional Military advice to a political mission	30 days
Scenario 2. AU/Regional observer mission co-deployed with a UN mission	30 days
Scenario 3. Stand-alone AU/Regional observer mission	30 days
Scenario 4. AU/Regional peacekeeping force for UN Chapter VI-type and preventive deployment missions	30 days
Scenario 5. AU peacekeeping force for complex multidimensional peacekeeping missions, including those involving low-level spoilers	90 days, with the military component being able to deploy in 30 days
Scenario 6. AU intervention, e.g. genocide situations where the international community does not act promptly	14 days with robust military force

Source: Policy Framework Relating to the Establishment of the ASF (2003).

This poses a serious dilemma to the operationalisation of the ASF. If the ASF is established on the basis of the six missions above, ranging from monitoring to complex interventions, including situations affected by spoilers and genocide, how feasible is it for the AU to add more complex and resource-demanding missions of a type not even undertaken by the UN, but by international coalitions and multinational forces?

Another aspect of the delay to the establishment of the ASF relates to its strategic and operational level management capabilities, notably devolving on Planning Elements (PLANELMs) at the AUC and at each REC/RM, as well as a mission-level headquarters management capability. In this regard, there is clear evidence of serious disparities in the levels of 'mission readiness' of these structures. At least from the time of the deployment of AMISOM in 2007 until about mid-2010, the AUC was in the habit of establishing ad hoc management units for each deployed mission, such as the Darfur Integrated Task Force (DITF) and the Strategic Planning Management Unit (SPMU) for Somalia, besides a separate ASF Unit and the PLANELMs. Such structural divisions of functional responsibility served to undermine continuity in building coherent, integrated planning and management capacity and expertise. It was indicative of the degree of disconnect between the policy tracks of managing and resolving real conflicts, and strategic institutionalisation for future interventions.

One of the fundamental aspects of the above-mentioned disparity is in the structure and staffing levels of PLANELMs. While ECOWAS, SADC and ECCAS have established PLANELMs within their respective regional protocols, the eastern Africa region has crafted an entirely different regional arrangement, the EASF, yet to be domesticated within a fully-fledged regional mechanism. On the other hand, the Arab Spring (2011) has set the Northern Africa Regional Capabilities (NARC) back and little progress can be expected in the years ahead. In the south, SADC has deviated from ASF policy implementation by failing to establish skeletal headquarters, and is to do so only in the event of deployment. A lack of standardised staff skill sets for the different components of the PLANELMs has further degraded their functional mission planning competencies, with implications for their effective use.

These disparities are compounded by further challenges in the levels of 'mission readiness' of the military, police and civilian components that are all at vastly different states of establishment. It has been difficult to verify pledges by

contributing countries, and establishing rosters for some of the multidimensional elements has proven to be rather problematic. (These rosters are required to accommodate 60 civilians, 720 individual police officers and six formed police units, each 140 strong, as well as 300–500 military observers, and an approximately 5 000-strong brigade-size force.)

The civilian component is perhaps facing the greatest challenge, as the AUC and RECs/RMs have been slow to mainstream peace support operation (PSO) civilian functions into existing departmental functions at the respective headquarters. It is expected that the police- and civilian-focused Exercise NJIWA, to be conducted in October and November 2012, will help to enhance the capabilities of the two components, although more efforts will be required to sustain their capabilities, after Exercise AMANI II, to mark the ASF's 'full operational capability'.

In sum, the disparities continue to result in lapses in component roles and functions, and have serious implications, above all, for the mechanism of designating each ASF REC/RM on a six-monthly standby basis to lead on the mobilisation and deployment of the ASF.

In terms of logistics, including rapid deployment capabilities, communication and information systems, strategic lift, and mission sustainability, the ASF has been delayed by tensions over logistical bases vis-à-vis ASF deployment timelines ranging from 14 days' notice in genocide situations, to 30 days' notice for the less complex missions, and 90 days for complex missions. Other tensions have also arisen over the establishment of one-plus-five central and regional logistics bases. Given its prevalent resource constraints, can the AU afford to establish such infrastructure when, invariably, the pre-positioned assets at these facilities will have to be moved again across the continent to respective mission areas?

The gaps and tensions in policy processes have largely influenced the continuing ad hoc approach to interventions in which missions are established and deployed while making little or no use of the emerging, nascent structures of the ASF. The AU has thus missed critical opportunities to craft the ASF by using various conflicts to test relevant ASF policy tools, and refine its structures and mechanisms through lessons learned and best practices developed as a result of those interventions.

This situation may be attributed to the erroneous notion that the ASF can gain 'full operational capability' through the conduct of map and command post exercises. However, actual deployments are the best vehicles for identifying and correcting gaps in the ASF architecture. This operational practice, coupled with other efforts, will build the structures of the ASF within a sustainable framework.

TOWARDS GREATER COHERENCE IN POLICY PRACTICE

Is there still sufficient African political will for the establishment of the ASF, without further delays? The empirical evidence suggests that the rationale for the establishment of the ASF is still valid. In spite of a decline in the number of conflicts within Africa, the morphology and impact of violent armed conflicts are likely to continue to pose serious threats to peace, security and stability on the continent. It is therefore more urgent now than before to bring the ASF into operation, and even more so in light of the significant resources that have been invested in the project.

Renewed political will to deal with the relevant issues and challenges is vital to overcoming the challenges to the operationalisation of the ASF. This should be one of the key objectives of the new AUC Chairperson, in order to create sustainable peace, security and stability within Africa.

The AUC should deploy further strategic efforts to bring the ASF into existence, not merely review its role and functions. These efforts should be based on the careful identification and analysis of the relevant challenges facing the ASF. One urgent aspect of this effort should be to resolve intra-African tensions in the political command and control of the ASF and its deployments, as well as between the AU PSC and the UNSC. Unless this is done, it will be difficult to establish the ASF as a 'unified command' of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), even if the ASF is composed of regional forces.

Noting the above, it is imperative for the AU to be cautious about any notion of using the ASF as a substitute for UN missions. Incidentally, this appears to be a natural outcome of successful AU deployments, such as in Darfur (2004–2007) and Somalia (2007–present), in spite of the lapses and challenges entailed in these deployments. ASF 'substitution' missions impose a double jeopardy on AU member states that are major contributing countries to UN missions, and pay assessed quotas for UN peacekeeping budgets. The AU cannot, and should not, be expected to meet additional budgets in excess of US$460

million and US$680 million for the missions in Darfur and Somalia, for instance.

To avoid the possibility of a stillborn idea, the AU should adopt the UN approach of incrementally building the structures and capabilities of the ASF over a period of time, starting from the existing conflict and mission scenarios. The tendency to add conflict scenarios such as terrorism and piracy, for instance, leads to 'mission creep' and will prolong the delay in operationalisation.

On the other hand, it should have dawned on the AU that in practical terms, the ASF should possess such backstopping capabilities as those deployed by EU forces, including the French-led Operation Artemis, in the DRC (2004, 2006) and in Chad/CAR (2007–2009), in areas where the UN is not willing to go, such as Somalia, or where its deployed missions lack the capacities and capabilities for robust mandate implementation, such as the DRC. These backstopping capabilities will include coherent rapid deployment capabilities, which the AU should coordinate.

To ameliorate the burden of the ASF as a substitute for UN missions, the AU PSC ought to coordinate closely with the UNSC and seek to leverage it to meet three objective criteria, namely: UNSC acceptance to deploy in conflict situations in Africa that pose a threat to international security; deployment of capable forces with appropriate mandates; and, in situations where the UNSC declines to undertake these responsibilities, to provide full logistical and funding support to AU-mandated operations, on a reimbursement basis.

The AU/AU PSC should therefore expedite the long-standing consultations with the UN/UNSC to achieve a clearly defined, predictable framework for UN and other external support. The AU-UN consensus in this context should be based on the understanding that the ASF exit strategy will involve creating conditions for a UN takeover of the mandate, ideally after two years, and certainly not as long afterwards as the five years that AMISOM has had to lead on a regional intervention that now looks more like a long-term operation and a substitute for a UN operation.

In regard of the foregoing, ASF missions planning should be coordinated between the AU Peace Support Operations Division (PSOD) and RECs/RMs PLANELMs, on the one hand, and the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)/UN Office to AU (UNOAU), on the other. The AU should perhaps give serious thought to the creation of a 'standby police capacity'. As noted by the UN General Assembly in the 2005 Outcomes Document on the UN's standing police capacity, this will be a useful tool to '… provide coherent, effective and responsive start-up capability for the policing component of the AU missions and … assist existing missions through the provision of advice and expertise', as provided for in the ASF Policy Framework document.

These broad policy recommendations will be easier to achieve if the AU undertakes conflict scenario modelling exercises to inform the development of forward-looking contingency plans by the ASF structures. These plans should provide for a mix-and-match of regional, UN and other external resources, to achieve rapid response. In theory, going forward, strategic ASF planning assumptions should be calibrated to include non-military missions involving purely police or civilian monitoring missions. It should not be taken as a given that ASF missions should all the time rely on the military.

In order to obviate the dilemma of ad hocism, future AU deployments should not only be planned and managed by ASF structures but should also seek to use REC/RM forces already earmarked within the ASF framework. This is a more effective way of testing the mechanisms for force generation and deployment, and how their capabilities should be tailored to specific mission scenarios.

CONCLUSION

The continued delay in the operationalisation of the ASF is a major policy setback to the strategic objectives of the AU. It is incumbent on the AU, especially the newly elected AU Chairperson, to not only recognise this, but also demonstrate and garner concrete political will to make PSO a mainstream function of the union.

In reality, the AU will continue to be saddled with the responsibility of deploying African missions in a layered manner, that is, on behalf of the UN, with external support, to create conditions for the transfer of mandates to the UN. This imperative calls for concerted efforts to resolve key bottlenecks, involving decision-making; political command and control of ASF structures and missions, including tensions over the central and regional logistics bases; resource and functional gaps in mission-readiness; and predictable funding and mission sustainment, among others.

The realities of regional disparities and weak institutional capacities, coupled with a lack of resources, underscore the need for the AU to consider and return to the original option of speedily creating a multidimensional force,

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around a military brigade-sized force, under AU command and control. This will minimise structural, funding and logistical burdens, and provide time for the full development of the regional standby force infrastructure.

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NOTES

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