

PEACE AND SECURITY

# A COOPERATION OF VARIABLE GEOMETRY

The African Union and Regional  
Economic Communities

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August 2019



Africa's collective security system was born of the gap between continental ambitions and regional realities.



Cooperation between the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) is of a variable geometry.



With the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) beset by persistent political and operational challenges, AU member states seek the proper scope of action to counter a variety of threats – knowing that ad hoc coalitions weaken the AU-RECs relationship.



# Contents

Collective Security in Africa: From Continental Ambition to Regional Realities .....	2
AU and RECs: Cooperation and Competition .....	3
Filling the Operational Gap with Ad Hoc Cooperation .....	4
Find the Proper Scope of Action for Changing Geographic Threats .....	5
List of Abbreviations .....	7

## COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN AFRICA: FROM CONTINENTAL AMBITION TO REGIONAL REALITIES

In 2002, the African Union (AU) set out to update and consolidate a collective security system based in the OAU's continental ambition that had evolved to suit regional dynamics. The four phases of the OAU (later the AU) and the RECs cooperation continue to define their relationship concerning security.

Well before African countries gained independence, cooperation and regional integration were seen as indispensable for their development. Many economic groupings existed in 1963, when the OAU was founded. A report by experts counted more than 200 intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) in Africa.<sup>1</sup> In 1976, the OAU laid the groundwork for pan-African and regional organisations to cooperate by dividing the continent into five regions. This institutional division established a system of regional rotation for designating which African states sit on the United Nations Security Council. It also serves as a reference for selecting the 15 members of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the five members of the Panel of the Wise – two APSA components with representatives from each region. The Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos (1980) started a rationalisation process aimed at limiting institutional overlap, resource dispersion and quarrels over legitimacy amongst regional institutions. To stimulate continental unity, African leaders signed the Abuja Treaty (1991) establishing the African Economic Community (AEC), inspired by the European model. Africa's regional integration is based on the coordination, harmonisation and progressive integration of the RECs. Created as cornerstones of the AEC, to begin with there were 14 independent regional and subregional organisations, each governed by specific laws. In 2006, their number was limited to eight.<sup>2</sup>

Since most African countries belong to several organisations, the process of economically integrating each geographic area rests on two or more groupings: For example, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (known by its French acronym, UEMOA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC). The OAU was not able to streamline the organisation – as planned in the 1980s – by coordinating and harmonising activities so that just one REC is associated with each region. In 2006, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

(UNECA) confirmed extensive overlap: Of 53 African countries, only seven belonged to one REC, 27 belonged to two RECs and 18 others to three. This overlap, which makes the organisations competitors, is exacerbated when their security mandates are expanded.

The conflicts in Liberia (1989), Somalia (1990) and Rwanda (1993) tested the African states. Intensified fighting and the risk of spill over effects to neighbouring states stimulated RECs (ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community, SADC) to compensate for the OAU's failure. The OAU declared the 'Mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution' in 1993 but its efficiency is limited by political and operational constraints. Although the OAU had empowered RECs to act on their own, adding security development nexus to the agenda made the division of tasks more confused.

This practice of *forum shopping* illustrates a notion of regional integration based on cost-benefit analysis in which states seek to preserve certain political alliances and capitalise on the advantages of belonging to many groups. For example, in 2002, CEMAC's Multinational Force of Central Africa (which is known by its French acronym, FOMAC) was created largely because its French-speaking dimension and that France would support its roll-out. In 2003, ECCAS created a political organ, the Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa (COPAX), which gives it competence in security matters. But it wasn't until 2008 that the ECCAS Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic (MICOPAX) replaced FOMAC. Each region has its fair share of competition. However, it's interesting to note the rapprochement of the SADC, the East African Community (EAC) and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), a tripartite treaty (2008).

Overlapping memberships are often linked to a country's geographic or strategic position. Thus Angola, which ensures the security of Central Africa and is a southern African economic partner, is positioning itself as a pivotal state.<sup>3</sup> The Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa's second largest country, which is located at the crossroads of many regions, belongs to four RECs. Ad hoc coalitions have stimulated the practice of having multiple affiliations. Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali prefer to cooperate militarily with the G5 Sahel – although they belong to ECOWAS. Some organisations, such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) whose members were attacked by Boko Haram, gained enough political traction to serve as frameworks for military operations in spite of their weak capacities and general lethargy. Far from being considered 'empty shells', regional groupings are tools that states can activate at a particular moment. However, resorting to ad hoc coalitions negatively affects AU-RECs relations.

<sup>1</sup> Meeting of experts on the rationalization of the regional economic communities (RECs), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), 27–31 March 2006, Consultative Meeting of Accra and Lusaka: Consolidated Report.

<sup>2</sup> They include: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); the East African Community (EAC); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); and the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA).

<sup>3</sup> This term designates states with key geographic and/or demographic positions and strategic economic, military and cultural assets. They are called pivots because they are caught between overlapping spheres of power and influence, and covet such advantages.

Figure 1

The continent divided into five regions by the OAU



## AU AND RECS: COOPERATION AND COMPETITION

Although the AU co-opts the OAU's achievements and objectives regarding security, it aims to become a major player in maintaining peace, security and stability in Africa. APSA's creation was the occasion to put in place 'clear blueprint and neatly assembled structures, norms, capacities, and procedures'.<sup>4</sup> Far beyond creating new mechanisms, one AU challenge is to successfully transpose a two-tiered model for regional integration – that did not function economically – into the security field. Given the role that some RECs played in conflict management in the 1990s (ECOWAS and SADC), the AU accords them key roles in implementing APSA.

In its capacity as a system of collective security, APSA consists of the:

- Peace and Security Council (PSC), a political body modelled on the United Nations Security Council, which meets at least once a month;
- African Standby Force (ASF), which has five pre-positioned regional forces;
- Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) for collecting and analysing data;
- Panel of the Wise (PoW), who have a preventive and mediatory role;
- Military Staff Committee, which advises the PSC on military issues; and the
- Peace Fund.

<sup>4</sup> Salim Ahmed Salim, former Secretary-general of the OAU (1989–2001), 'The Architecture for Peace and Security in Africa' speech at The Third African Development Forum in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), 3–8 March 2002.

Since 2002, considerable progress has been made regarding APSA's operationalisation (recruiting staff, purchasing equipment, and reforming administrative and financial procedures).

However, the APSA Roadmap 2016–2020 is a reminder that the lack of coordination between the AU and RECs continues to be one of the main hindrances to effectively preventing and managing conflicts.

Before reviewing the main challenges, some advances in strengthening the AU-RECs relationship deserve mention. Liaison offices have been opened in the RECs and liaison officers from six RECs are present at AU headquarters to promote regular exchanges and share information; the results are encouraging. Following President Paul Kagame's report (2018), the first mid-year coordination meeting of the AU and the RECs was held in July 2019. Three factors account for why the AU-RECs relationship oscillates between cooperation and competition: the lack of an agreed definition of the cooperative framework, regional mechanisms identical to those of APSA and rivalries exacerbated by simultaneous military arrangements.

First and foremost, the nature of the AU (OAU)-RECs relationship is all the more difficult to define because it is governed by numerous texts: The Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos (1980); the Abuja Treaty (1994); the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (2003); the Protocol on Relations between the AEC and the RECs (signed in 1998 and updated in 2007); the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security between the AU, RECs and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of Eastern and Northern Africa (2008). Yet none of them presents definitions for subsidiarity<sup>5</sup>, comparative advantage<sup>6</sup> and regional and continental complementarity – principles that are interpreted differently by the parties. Simply affirming standards does not generate a coherent common approach. To be sure, AU member states have adopted a Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP). Nevertheless, their priorities and considerations are still dictated by national political strategies. As for the RECs, after being given the means, they prioritise developing instruments and policies to reach their own goals without seeking to coordinate with the AU.

Cooperation between the AU and the RECs meets with another obstacle that is linked to the way the political, military and diplomatic structures imitate each other institutionally: Each REC has a political organ that is identical to the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC). For example, the SADC has an Organ on Politics Defence and Security that is managed on a Troika basis, while ECOWAS has its Mediation and Security Council and ECCAS its Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa. The military sector and mediation also have regional mechanisms identical to the AU's MSC and PoW. Cooperation is at best sporadic; more often, competencies and activities overlap.

Coordination faces a third difficulty: competition between the security apparatuses. Each REC is responsible for creating its regional component of the ASF. Since 2003, despite the partners mobilisation (staff, logistics and finance), this has not been sufficient to compensate for operational deficiencies. In 2013, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) could not be deployed to Mali in a timely manner – although it had been certified in 2010. In order to conceal its difficulties managing the crisis, the AU suggested an interim mechanism – the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) until the rapid deployment capability (RDC) of the ASF would become fully operational in 2015. Tailored to AU needs, ACIRC excludes the RECs from the political decision-making process that is needed to deploy the ASF. The ACIRC project also points up the rivalries between the RECs, who claim their historical legitimacy, and the AU, which asserts its primacy in conflict management. With the ESF ruled out and the ACIRC lacking any practical application, the G5 Sahel member states decided to launch their own joint force in. However, its attempts to respond to the Sahel crisis face the same operational obstacles regarding deployment and severe political constraints.

APSA was a new type of structure in Africa that fell victim to its notoriety. Unreasonable hopes caused it to be targeted for unequalled amounts of support by numerous technical and financial partners (TFP). Amongst its main backers was the European Union (EU), which has provided nearly EUR 2.7 billion since the African Peace Facility (APF) was created in 2004. The gap between the objectives and the means to achieve them has only been partly filled by a succession of capacity-building programmes. APSA's multitude of actors have made it a framework for cooperation that is too complex to adapt in real time to the challenges to human security that require considering multiple factors of insecurity (political, economic, social, environmental, health, etc). The conflagration in the Sahel and its regional and international repercussions, such as migration and violent extremism, are devastating for the African states and their partners who have long been committed to getting APSA off the ground.

## FILLING THE OPERATIONAL GAP WITH AD HOC COOPERATION

In the end, the choice of whether to put the AU, a regional organisation or an ad hoc coalition on the front line appears to result less from the lack of a clear strategy than from the opportunism of certain states who want to exert influence at the regional and/or continental level. These political strategies, along with institutional constraints, are detrimental to establishing a coherent cooperative framework for the AU and the RECs. Ad hoc cooperation frameworks are used to compensate for the lack of the logistic, human and financial capacities needed to manage conflicts in Africa, but ultimately their complexity undermines their effectiveness.

In view of the lessons of the operations in Mali and the Central African Republic, practice finally superseded theory. The interventionist model with the deployment of one REC, that

<sup>5</sup> The principle of subsidiarity means that a superior decision-making authority is favoured if the level below cannot do it more efficiently.

<sup>6</sup> Comparative advantage assumes that if many organisations are involved, their strengths and weaknesses must be compared in order to identify which of them can most efficiently and competently prevent and resolve a conflict.

was first replaced by the AU and then the UN force to take over, seems to illustrate the principle of comparative advantage. Alternating between partnership and competition, the political players' lack of coordination made managing some conflicts more complicated. This was the case for the ECOWAS and AU relationship in Ivory Coast and Mali, as well as that of ECCAS and the AU in Central Africa, SADC and the AU in Madagascar, and IGAD and the AU in Sudan. Burdened by bureaucratic and political ponderousness – for which they are partly to blame – states decided to defend their national interests by (re)using less restrictive frameworks. In 2015, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin and Chad created a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to fight Boko Haram. Although it was the AU that authorised the initiative, the force is supported by the Lake Chad Basin Commission, which finally overcame its lethargy. Other structures are created ex nihilo, like the G5 Sahel, which has come to represent.

Starting as a simple group of states aiming to coordinate their development and security policies, between February 2014 and December 2015, the G5 Sahel was legally established as an international organisation whose member countries – Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad – pledge their readiness to deploy troops to jointly fight insecurity at their borders. They agreed to pool their real and mutual advantages to confront transregional threats. The decision to create a new ad hoc coalition expresses their wish to stand out in the already crowded landscape of Sahel institutions (ECOWAS, Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region – CEMOC, the Nouakchott Process, etc). The hype about the G5 Sahel is reminiscent of the early excitement about APSA. Although the G5 Sahel is considered to be the most appropriate framework for responding to security challenges, the decision of its institutionalisation raises questions.

The capacity development of its permanent secretariat reassures technical and financial partners but could cause the G5 Sahel to lose its flexibility and rapid decision-making – advantages that set it apart from other well-established institutions like ECOWAS and the AU. Its survival chances in the security jungle depend as much on external support and the »personal equation« in between its member states. The history of the AU, like that of the RECs, shows that institutionalisation is no guarantee for long-term effectiveness. Instead it accentuates centralised decision-making mechanisms, bureaucratic heaviness and dependence on international funders. Following the principle, »He who pays the piper calls the tune«, it also does not prevent member states that contribute the most financially from seeking to influence decision-making.

Strengthening the capacity of African states at the national, regional and continental levels has created a surplus of staff (recruiting and financing positions by technical and financial partners), logistics (purchasing equipment), policy (seeking visibility) and funding. The creation of coalitions shows that priority is given to military operations whose profitability is easier to calculate (the number of military ac-

tions, groups or individuals neutralised, contingents formed, money spent etc). Even if the cost in human lives remains high, needs for funds, training, equipment and the like are shared, covered by complicated financial arrangements and/or borne by international partners, as in the case of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), created in 2007. Ad hoc coalitions, like the operations carried out in the APSA framework, are all similar: African states and their partners tinker with institutions in order to find the »proper scope« for responding to conflicts that have no geographic limits.

## FIND THE PROPER SCOPE OF ACTION FOR VARIABLE GEOGRAPHY THREATS

Criminality, jihadism and piracy all challenge the OAU's regional division of Africa. In reaction, many variations have been considered in the framework of APSA, or outside it. Firstly, UN missions took over AU operations after interventions by RECs in Mali and Central African Republic. ECOWAS and ECCAS also stepped up their interregional collaboration to combat maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. Finally, ad hoc frameworks for action that are considered more flexible were revived (LCBC and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region) or created from scratch (G5 Sahel). Although cooperation frameworks differ, all these initiatives have one thing in common: They are seeking a compromise between a national response, which is ineffective if confined within a state's borders, and regional or continental solutions, which still lack the collaborative spirit needed.

It is always difficult for institutions to make an organisation's geographic perimeter coincide with that of the threat. As the multitude of strategies for the Sahel shows, the definition of the contours changes with the actors. ECOWAS has been »disqualified« from participating because Chad and Mauritania are not members. What should be done if the jihadi threat spreads to the African coast – make the G5 Sahel bigger? Create a new ad hoc coalition of Sahel G5 countries and coastal countries? Create a cooperative forum for the G5 Sahel and another organisation like the Conseil de l'Entente? However the question is posed, the discussion seems more than ever to be about coordinating regional initiatives. That is why building ad hoc coalitions puts consideration about strengthening relations between the AU and the regional associations back on the agenda. Some recommendations can be formulated about how the cooperation might evolve with regard to the nature of the security landscape.

## DEVELOP ROADMAPS FOR THE AU AND EACH OF THE 8 RECS

Most of the texts that refer to the cooperation between the AU and the regional organisations use the term »RECs« generically although they do not constitute a homogeneous group. Regional groupings, including RECs, develop in dif-



ferent policy, economic and social environments that affect their relationships with the AU. In consideration of this variety, the AU could draw up a roadmap for each of the eight RECs and the Protocol of 2008 updated in line with the commonalities that come to light in the eight documents. This approach could then be applied to regional mechanisms that are likely to cooperate with APSA. That would permit ad hoc coalitions to be part of this category, as mentioned in the Protocol of 2008, and trigger thoughts about how to plan long-term work in keeping with APSA. Each roadmap would serve as a framework for REC representatives to the AU and the AU in the regions: defining the activities, objectives and priorities for cooperation. Annual joint AU-REC summits would provide the opportunity to evaluate the results every year at the political level.

### ANTICIPATE THE POSSIBLE END OF REC STATUS AFTER 2028

Behind the issue of AU-RECs cooperation lurks a question that no state wants to address so as to not disturb the status quo: With more than 200 African IGOs, why do eight regional groupings have special status? The RECs were created to serve as pillars for establishing the AEC in 2028. It is high time for African states to think about what will become of them after that date.

### MAKE THE APSA A FRAMEWORK FOR CONSULTATION

To avoid further weakening the AU-RECs relationship, African states must coherently articulate how their ad hoc coalitions relate to APSA because using such coalitions instead of RECs turns the states into competitors. With states' different interests sometimes winning out, it is hard to establish a climate of trust for discussing a collaborative framework: Their levels of engagement reflect regional power

balances. In turn, the lack of cooperation causes states to disengage from the RECs and the AU in favour of non-binding frameworks for action. APSA is well suited to be a platform for networking the various regional initiatives. The AU has real added value in its numerous tools and standards that African states can put to good use, while the AU's special relationship with the UN makes it indispensable for deploying peace-support operations (PSOs). Finally, it is necessary to reflect on practical ways to coordinate with technical and financial partners. African states could propose a 'coordination hub' like the one the EU proposed in its policy for Sahel regionalisation in order to have a forum for verifying that partner offers respond to African needs, and that they propose solutions – and avoid duplication.

### THE IMPOSSIBLE (CON)QUEST OF THE PROPER SCOPE OF ACTION

There is no internationally accepted definition for the Sahel or any other region of Africa. Nevertheless, colonising countries, African heads of state, and regional and international organisations have tried to define its contours. Each actor perceives the boundaries of the regional space differently according to their needs, interests and perceptions. At first, resorting to ad hoc coalitions may appear to be the best way to respond to security challenges. However, this solution is illusory because it is tied to the agenda of states and their partners who focus on over-militarization of instruments used to manage conflicts. This option obscures the reality that some border-states are fuelling local violence. Technical and financial partners should pressure African states to invest in conflict prevention – in accordance with their original commitments. This involves closing the persistent gap between information gathering and rapid response, and including local communities in the mechanisms. Civil society could help the AU and the RECs draft scenarios to pre-empt regional threats that go beyond traditional state-centred analytical models.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACIRC</b>	African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises
<b>AMISOM</b>	African Union Mission in Somalia
<b>APSA</b>	African Peace and Security Architecture
<b>ASF</b>	African Standby Force
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>CADSP</b>	Common African Defence and Security Policy
<b>CEMAC</b>	Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa
<b>CEN-SAD</b>	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
<b>COMESA</b>	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
<b>COPAX</b>	Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa
<b>EAC</b>	East African Community
<b>ECCAS</b>	Economic Community of Central African States
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>ESF</b>	ECOWAS Standby Force
<b>FOMAC</b>	Multinational Force of Central Africa
<b>IGAD</b>	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
<b>IGO</b>	Intergovernmental organisation
<b>LCBC</b>	Lake Chad Basin Commission
<b>MICOPAX</b>	Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic
<b>MNJTF</b>	Multinational Joint Task Force
<b>MSC</b>	Military Staff Committee
<b>OAU</b>	Organisation of African Unity
<b>PSC</b>	Peace and Security Council
<b>REC</b>	Regional Economic Community
<b>SACU</b>	Southern African Customs Union
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>TFP</b>	Technical and Financial Partners
<b>UEMOA</b>	West African Economic and Monetary Union
<b>UMA</b>	Arab Maghreb Union



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## IMPRINT

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## A COOPERATION OF VARIABLE GEOMETRY

### The African Union and Regional Economic Communities



At its creation in 2002, the African Union (AU) set itself the task of updating and consolidating the political and economic project begun by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The African Peace and Security Architecture, better known by its acronym ›APSA‹, presented the opportunity to organise the normative instruments adopted between 1963 and 2001. The AU does not follow the OAU's policy of investing in prevention, however: It prefers costly peacekeeping operations.



The AU's main challenge is not to create new mechanisms but rather to introduce a type of two-tiered regional integration – that had not worked economically – into the security sector. In the 1990s, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which were intended as the pillars of regional economic integration, became indispensable in managing conflicts. With the AU and the RECs oscillate between partnering and competing, their lack of coordination has made it harder to prevent and manage some conflicts. APSA was supposed to redefine their relationship but has instead become a system of collective security that goes all out building human, logistical and financial capacities. So states concerned about protecting their interests prefer to work in ad hoc coalitions.



A national response is ineffective if confined within a state's borders on one hand, while international partners support institutional ›deals‹ on the other. Attention must therefore be given to the challenges specific to the AU-RECs relationship and the ›proper‹ scope of action for responding to changing threats.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<https://www.fes.de/en/africa-department>