

CHAPTER 4

THE AFRICAN UNION AND THE REGIONAL MECHANISMS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION

At a Council of Ministers meeting in 1976,⁴¹ the OAU made the decision to divide Africa into five regions, aligning with a number of existing regional economic communities (RECs) and prompting the establishment of others. While Africa's regional organisations were originally designed as centre points for regional economic development, regional bodies and leaders quickly acknowledged that the insecurity and instability endemic in their regions served as a major impediment to integration and development.⁴² With the exception of the Arab Maghreb Union, all of Africa's RECs have subsequently developed security mechanisms (albeit with varying competencies) to operate within the context of a broader regional integration agenda. (See Annex 3 for an overview of the peace and security mechanisms and mandates of Africa's most prominent and active regional organisations.)

The 1991 Abuja Treaty, which sought to rationalise the pan-African and regional agendas, stressed that the RECs would form the constitutive elements of a pan-African integration agenda. The AU has retained this organisational structure. Within the realm of peace and security, Article 16 of the PSC Protocol and the CADSP stress that the regional mechanisms will form the "building blocks" of the AU's peace and security architecture, including the ASF. The PSC Protocol reinforces this relationship by emphasising the importance of harmonisation, coordination and cooperation between the AU and the regional mechanisms, and ensuring effective partnerships between the regional mechanisms and the PSC.⁴³

The prominent role the AU has assigned to the RECs will allow the AU to build on their comparative advantage, experience and established frameworks and mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution. Regional organisations' proximity to the conflict provide them with a better understanding of its dynamics, key players, and context-specific management and resolution options. At least in theory, this proximity also allows regional organisations to initiate faster and less expensive responses to conflict than the UN.⁴⁴ Regional leaders and organisations may also be considered more accountable and legitimate than pan-African and international organisations

and may have a greater stake in finding a peaceful solution to conflict than more distant powers.⁴⁵

Yet there are a number of challenges confronting African regional organisations and their efforts to fulfil a peace and security mandate. These shortcomings will have important implications for the creation of a continental peace and security architecture, including an ASF, that builds on regional capacities. While proximity to conflict may facilitate (comparatively) rapid and less expensive responses to violent conflict on the part of regional organisations than is possible through the AU or UN, it can also compromise the neutrality and impartiality of this response. Ambassador Sam Ibok notes that “proximity generates tension and undermines the spirit of impartiality between neighbors, sometimes to the extent that neighbors become part of the problems”.⁴⁶ This neutrality may be further undermined by the existence of a regional hegemon. For example, Nigeria and South Africa provide their respective regions with the requisite resources, capacity and political legitimacy to execute a regional response to conflict.⁴⁷ However, at the same time, the dependency of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and SADC on a regional hegemon means their peace and security agendas may be shaped by the domestic problems and national interests of these powerful states.⁴⁸ Reliance on regional powers also raises profound questions about how to fashion regional responses to conflicts in which the dominate state is party to the conflict.⁴⁹

African regional organisations also suffer from enormous resource and capacity constraints (albeit to varying degrees) that have impacted / will continue to impact on the extent to which they are able to commit meaningfully to conflict prevention through both regional and continental initiatives.⁵⁰ These organisations are also confronted by a lack of capacity to organise as coherent entities owing to the uneven political and economic development of member states, differing political and security agendas and visions, and competition between states.⁵¹ These factors inevitably undermine the consensus required to pursue a collective security mandate and execute effective responses to conflict through regional and continental initiatives. In addition, the broad differences in the peace and security mandates of regional organisations, including ECOWAS' tradition of intervention versus the strong non-intervention norms in East Africa, will complicate a coherent pan-African approach to conflict. As will be discussed in more detail below, these broad differences are augmented by donor-driven peace and security capacity-building initiatives, which are not always well coordinated and tend to favour some regions and member states over others. This contributes to the asymmetrical development of regional organisations. In addition, donors

like the EU provide support to regional organisations with overlapping membership. This can undermine the rationalisation and integration efforts of the AU.⁵²

Finally, the construction of a continental security architecture built on regional capacities may be undermined by the fact that the AU and RECs have not been able to formalise a clear division of labour and responsibilities for conflict prevention, management and resolution on the continent.⁵³ This is due to a resistance on the part of member states to confer greater decision-making authority to the AU in some cases, in part because regional organisations provide an alternative forum to exercise influence and leverage greater institutional support for specific political agendas than might be possible in organisations with a larger and more diverse membership. Moreover, ECOWAS and SADC actually have more experience in executing military responses to conflict than the AU, which – with the exception of AMIB and the nascent AMIS – has only undertaken observer missions. It is not difficult to understand why some regional organisations and regional leaders are hesitant to share responsibility for regional security with the AU, rather than assuming primary decision-making authority in their immediate spheres of influence and/or coordinating closely with the UN.⁵⁴