

# Conference Report

Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2019

sef:

## Peace and Security in Africa. Pathways to more regional ownership

Mischa Hansel

These are eventful times for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). With its reform agenda, the African Union (AU) has pledged to build more functional and efficient mechanisms and increase ownership, both financial and political. At the same time, new ad hoc coalitions are emerging at the subregional level as alternative guarantors of security, to a large extent bypassing the regional institutions. And lastly, the international context has been transformed, with China, India and Russia exerting growing influence on the African conti-

ment. How can African actors capitalise on these dynamics and develop a shared peace agenda? How can they strengthen their hand in their dealings with international partners? What kind of capabilities do they need for this purpose, and which conflicts must they overcome? These were the key questions explored at the Potsdam Spring Dialogues on 16-17 May 2019.

### Past and present

The current crises and conflicts have a long history. The same applies to the opportunities for, and limits to, conflict management and prevention. Arbitrarily drawn borders and the externally imposed “Westphalian” state system continue to obstruct effective peace and reconciliation processes even today, said Professor Tim Murithi from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town. The current crises in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes region all spill across borders and must therefore be addressed through peace dialogues at the regional level. Professor Murithi criticised what he called “dependency syndrome” among African elites: their tendency to outsource responsibility for peace and security to international partners amounts to self-sabotage, he said. He expressly welcomed the African Union’s efforts to mobilise more African funding for peace support operations and to introduce tax on imports specifically for this purpose.



Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2019: Jakkie Cilliers, Ute Lange (Chair) and Sophie Desmidt (l.t.r)

## Sharing responsibility, setting the right priorities

What is the nature of the current conflicts? Which causes and catalysts need to be considered in peace support? These key political questions directly relate to the APSA's fundamental principles and must be the starting point for all reform efforts. His Excellency Dr Badr Abdelatty, Egypt's Ambassador to Germany, emphasised that his country intends to focus strongly on conflict prevention during its chair-



Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2019: Emma Birikorang and Zhang Chun

manship of the AU. The greatest challenge, he said, is to create employment prospects for young people, requiring international investment. Guaranteeing security is another high priority and must, if necessary, take precedence over free elections. "Security first" as the maxim for action has been unsuccessful for far too long, retorted Dr Jakkie Cilliers from the Institute for Security Studies at the University of Pretoria. By spending billions on conflict management, the African Union is setting the wrong priorities. The fundamental issue is not security but the dual challenge of democratisation and development. There is a growing wave of urban uprisings and protests against the lack of economic prospects and illegitimate governance. The AU should respond by strengthening the independence and resourcing of election observation commissions and by monitoring compliance with governance standards, for example.

If Africa is to set its own priorities in these and other areas, the first step is to expand the sources of funding and build appropriate capacities. According to Sophie Desmidt, Policy Officer at the European Centre for Development Policy Management in Maastricht, the current AU reform process offers a "window of opportunity" to reduce financial dependence on external donors and thus end the self-sabotage that Professor Murithi had criticised. The "hardest nut to crack" in moving towards a functional and efficient APSA, however, is the division of

responsibilities between regional organisations and national governments, she said. Dr Cilliers added that the existing multi-tier system simply does not work and that organisations are constantly squabbling over resources. Instead, an integrated system is needed, with clearly defined responsibilities.

Many of the questions and comments from the audience also concerned the division of responsibilities. As one of the participants pointed out, more African ownership should not mean reducing support for the continent: after all, peacebuilding is, in essence, a global public good. Other participants criticised the top-down perspective in the international debate and called for local actors to play a greater role in peace processes. Sophie Desmidt agreed, but drew attention to a fundamental dilemma: as soon as international partners and regional organisations support specific local actors, the latter's representativeness and autonomy are called into question.

## The crisis in the Sahel

Since the crisis in Mali in 2012 and the subsequent hostilities in the Sahel, the region has come to be regarded as a flashpoint for ethnic conflict, jihadist violence and transnational organised crime. One often-heard criticism is that the APSA's cumbersome decision-making structures are unsuitable as a means of combating these "new" and fluid forms of violence. At present, the G5 Sahel, a subregional alliance, is being discussed intensively as a potentially more responsive and flexible alternative; its member countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – use the G5 Sahel as a framework for the coordination of police and military operations.

What kind of results has this cooperation produced? Has it increased security and the prospects of sustaining peace? Will the G5 Sahel's successes undermine the APSA? In the view of Professor Winrich Kühne from SAIS Europe in Bologna, the coalition is overrated: it is, he said, merely a symbolic policy instrument created by Europeans to appease the public at home and limit direct regional intervention. His critical verdict: "The Europeans do not take the G5 Sahel seriously."

Dr Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde from the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen took a closer look at the coalition's strategic and tactical direction. She voiced criticism of the numerous human rights violations committed by the armed forces of the G5 Sahel member states. In her view, the border security measures by the military and police are counterproductive as they destroy local economies that are heavily dependent on small-scale cross-border trade. A further problem is the highly diverse array of actors supporting the G5 Sahel countries – not only France but also Russia and Saudi Arabia,

for example. This enables the G5 Sahel members to go “forum shopping” and cooperate with whichever partner demands the least far-reaching reforms, e.g. in the security sector. The management of the Sahel crisis is perhaps symptomatic of the crisis of “liberal peace” as a whole, one member of the audience remarked.

Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, Director, Dakar Office, Institute for Security Studies, called for a more nuanced view. Subregional ad hoc coalitions like the G5 Sahel will not necessarily lead to an erosion of the APSA or obstruct moves towards a sustainable peace. On the contrary, with the right blend of flexibility and regional ownership, they offer a tool that is responsive to rapidly changing security conditions. The work of the G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat should not be overlooked: its development plans for the region attract very little international support, yet have the potential to mitigate some of the major structural causes of violence, especially in border regions.

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### African-European relations

An often-heard criticism is that African peace support is overly dependent on external donors, which generally means the European Union and its member states. To what extent does this financial dependence result in asymmetrical political relations as well? This is a controversial issue. Yiannis Neophytou, Head of Division at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), saw no sign of this happening. The basis for cooperation is the African Union’s Agenda 2063, and the thematic priorities of the negotiating packages are set by the African partners, he said.

Toni Haastrup, Senior Lecturer at the University of Kent, saw things rather differently. The substantial dependence on EU funding is the only explanation for the EU’s proposal, in June 2018, for “anchor centres” to be established on North African territory. A proposal such as this would be unthinkable among equal partners. Some members of the audience regarded the current EU negotiations on a follow-up arrangement for the African Peace Facility (APF), due to expire in 2020, as a further step towards an unequal relationship, as it will be much easier for the EU to exert influence on African regions in future without consulting the AU. The proposed European Peace Facility also allows bilateral provision of military equipment and funding of military operations not mandated by the AU. However, John Busuttill from the European External Action Service (EEAS) defended the need for the reform. The APF, established in December 2003, was intended to be a short-term instrument. Under the terms of the APF, the EU is not even permitted to provide funds bilaterally for boots for African soldiers. The proposed European Peace Facility is a response which could

address such issues, including recent criticism by the European Court of Auditors and will allow much greater flexibility.

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### The quest for peace in South Sudan

While critics of African-European relations constantly draw attention to the impacts of European migration policy on the Sahel and North Africa, the example of South Sudan highlights the limits to Europe’s influence and its willingness to intervene. Since 2013, members of the former independence movement in South Sudan have been engaged in a struggle for political power, and efforts to resolve the conflict have not stopped the violence. Far from international mediators vying for position here, there is criticism of the lack of teeth and the passivity of international and regional efforts and the excessive consideration given to powerful neighbouring states’ vested interests.

Abdul Mohammed, former Chief of Staff and Senior Political Advisor of the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) for Sudan and



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South Sudan, gave a sober assessment of the peace process in South Sudan to date. The African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), he said, had jointly deployed the full array of peace supports tools – from power- and resource-sharing agreements to national dialogues and reconciliation initiatives. The failure of these efforts should be blamed on greed: specifically, the desire for oil revenues. So it is time to think about unconventional peace measures since the conflict parties cannot be won over with the usual peace incentives.

The need for a radical rethink was also emphasised by Marina Peter, Senior Political Advisor for the Horn of Africa and East Africa at Bread for the World, Berlin, who gave an account of her work in



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the region. There had, she said, been a peacebuilding “gold rush” for NGOs but due to their lack of knowledge of the conflicts, they had been treated as “useful idiots”. As a result of the repeated failure of peace efforts, the people in South Sudan have lost all hope. The warring factions are now recruiting fighters again, and neighbouring states are enriching themselves through local allies.

What can be done in this situation? Marina Peter called for a lower level of ambition and for a greater willingness to learn on the part of humanitarian workers: “Let’s think big but act small,” she said. Patience is also needed. The older generation in South Sudan knows nothing but war, but the young generation will deal with things differently in future. There are also many examples of peaceful and cooperative relations within local civil society, and this gives cause for hope. Abdul Mohammed also had confidence in civil society, but said that in addition, more intensive pressure should be exerted on the Government of South Sudan: its international legitimacy should be dependent on progress in the peace process. A more systematic approach is needed to curb the use of oil revenues to fuel the conflict, perhaps by freezing bank accounts.

Overall, however, he felt that Africa is moving in the right direction. One third of African countries have repressive governments and neglect their citizens, but another third already comply with many inter-

national human rights and development standards and a third group is keen to join these progressive regimes. The task now is to support this latter group through regional and international partnerships and expand its membership.

## China’s security cooperation with Africa

Can China be such a partner? Does it support a shared African agenda or will it drive a wedge between African actors? These questions were discussed by Professor Zhang Chun from Yunnan University’s Center for African Studies, Kunming, Sabine Mokry from the Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin, and Professor Charles Ukeje from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State.

There are various reasons why China is constructing infrastructure such as naval bases, conducting joint exercises with African troops, providing assistance with equipment and participating in UN peace operations, according to Professor Zhang Chun. In addition to safeguarding its economic investments, China is keen to fulfil its responsibility as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Sabine Mokry drew attention to China’s self-perception as a future global power and the associated role of peacemaker and security guarantor, which China is able to play in Africa relatively unopposed. She agreed with the other panellists that China’s engagement is strategically motivated and likely to be of long duration.

What makes a security partnership with China attractive to individual African countries? This question was posed by moderator Ute Lange. One factor is the gain in autonomy, according to Professor Ukeje: “If we don’t get what we want from the West, we look to the East.” It also allows African countries to sidestep awkward questions. Professor Zhang Chun pointed out that China does indeed address local political issues but does so not in a bilateral framework but via multilateral platforms such as the African Union. The AU can authorise measures that would otherwise conflict with the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. In response, Sabine Mokry remarked that the cooperation with the AU is, in practice, very strongly dominated by China and that its multilateralism is more about appearance than substance.

What does this mean for Europe? The EU, the AU and China should certainly commence a dialogue and improve the coordination of their activities, said Sabine Mokry. Professor Zhang Chun suggested that the rivalry between China and Western countries may also offer scope for enhanced cooperation and more attractive offers of assistance.

While democracy and security are priorities for the West, China is primarily concerned with the African countries' economic and social development. China is not a stopgap: it is pursuing its own objectives – Professor Ukeje was convinced of that. A measure of rivalry and competing initiatives between Europe, the US and China are therefore unavoidable.

In the ensuing discussion with the audience, China's role proved to be a controversial issue. Chinese investments in Africa are opaque and often benefit corrupt ruling elites and their supporters, according to one member of the audience. Another warned that China's approach in Africa is based on a colonial paradigm. Africa can only stand firm and capitalise on the benefits of partnership with China if it speaks with one voice and moves beyond primarily bilateral cooperation. Another participant was far more optimistic: "Where others see problems in Africa, China sees opportunities." No other actor is in a position to close the infrastructure gap in Africa. There is undoubtedly renewed competition between the major powers for influence in Africa. However, the lessons of history have been learned and there is now an awareness of how to deal with this situation and adopt an assertive approach in negotiations.



Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2019: Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni and Sophie Desmidt (l.t.r)

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### Walk the talk

The final panel focused more generally on practical approaches to improving regional peace support. There was a note of criticism from Michelle Ndiaye, Director of the Africa Peace and Security Programme (APSP) at Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies: accurate sitreps, she said, rarely produce a rapid response from the AU. This is partly due to a lack of a clear doctrine and to the precarious funding of AU peace

operations. Professor Ulf Engel from the University of Leipzig's Institute for African Studies drew attention, in this context, to the initial successes achieved in the AU's financial reforms. Until 2014, 100% of the operational budget for peace support operations was covered by external donors, whereas today, a full 43% is funded by contributions from AU member states. However, the unbroken dominance of powerful countries in the Peace and Security Council is a less optimistic sign. Making membership of the Council conditional on timely payment of contributions would be a positive step.

True, the AU, with its mandating of subregional missions, is responding to changed security threats, as Emma Birikorang, Head of the Peace Support Operations Programme at Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Accra, explained. The rivalry between the AU and the regional organisations is still a problem, however. Here, Michelle Ndiaye and Ulf Engel placed more hope in the current AU reform process, which puts efficiency issues in the foreground for the first time. The process was inspired by New Public Management concepts, as Professor Engel explained. It is no coincidence that the representatives of the AU and the regional organisations were keen to talk about subsidiarity in July. In Michelle Ndiaye's view, however, the AU should confine itself to the role of a central advisory and decision-making body (convening power) and leave the task of implementing decisions to the regional organisations.

Professor Engel was also convinced that the new Comprehensive Governance Review Process will focus more strongly on the structural causes of conflict. In the view of some of the other participants, however, this will be undermined by the proposed merging of the African Union Commission's Political Affairs and Peace and Security Departments, which will make it easier for governments to sidestep conflict prevention issues and keep governance problems off the regional agenda. There is also a risk of militarisation of the APSA.

There were several calls for the AU to establish systematic evaluation tools. This would counter the prevailing culture of "firefighting" and help to avoid any repetition of past failures, according to Professor Engel. It would also strengthen the AU's position vis-à-vis ad hoc coalitions, such as the G5 Sahel, if the latter's activities were subject to systematic monitoring, said Emma Birikorang.

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### Learning from others' experiences

In his outlook and closing remarks, Professor Tobias Debiel from the University of Duisburg-Essen, who is a member of the sef: Executive Committee,



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considered the concept of ownership. Given the rivalry between the regional organisations, it is often unclear who, exactly, should be taking ownership. Against the backdrop of ongoing globalisation, it is also illusory to expect purely African solutions that are completely detached from the international level. Rather, African ownership could mean developing independent strategies that take other continents' experiences into account, perhaps ultimately leading to selective borrowing from both European and Chinese experiences. In that case, the cooperation with China would not necessarily signify an authoritarian turn – “China is what African states make of it.” From a liberal peace perspective, however, it is the crisis in the Sahel that is particularly worrying, given that Mali was once a model of democracy. Here, it is important to learn the right lessons in order to stand firm against competing, military-dominated models such as the anti-terror and anti-insurgency measures implemented by the G5 Sahel.

## Imprint

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sef@sef-bonn.org : [www.sef-bonn.org](https://www.sef-bonn.org)

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