

The Case for Pan-African Regional Security

The recent flare up in Mozambique is only one of the many conflict hotspots on the African continent that cast a grim picture on the present and future of peace and stability in the continent.

There is a long running security conundrum in Northern Nigeria with the terror group, Boko Haram, relentlessly putting egg on the face of General Buhari's government; the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin; the turmoil across the Sahel that accelerated with the implosion of Libya after the NATO alliance literally carpet-bombed Colonel Gaddafi out of power. Add the state of 'permanent peacekeeping' in Somalia and the breakdown of what was from the start a precarious political settlement in South Sudan, and now the situation in Northern Ethiopia.

At a meeting in Washington DC a few years ago, a group of Africanist political scientists debated whether there would be more or less war and armed conflict in Africa in the coming years. The cynicism in the topic was a trifle baffling, but a group of us were compelled to argue that recent trends were pointing in the direction of a peaceful and prosperous Africa.

There was a vote at the meeting, absurd as it was, and it was quite instructive seeing leading scholars vote for the prediction for more war and conflict in the continent in the coming years. Perhaps not exactly surprising for many in academia, more problems in Africa means more career opportunities and positioning as 'Africa expert.' Paul Zeleza has drawn our attention to this dubious proclivity in the western academe.

At any rate, one has to be either naïve or insincere not to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the security crises that

cut across sub-regions and countries on the African continent. The scope and spectrum of conflicts have changed in the past couple of decades just as have other aspects of the African socioeconomic and political landscape.

The proliferation of rebel groups and the persistence of largescale civil wars in the 1980s and 1990s, many built around well-articulated goals and progressive agendas, have in recent years given way to new forms of conflicts that have taken on the tenor of jihadism and parochialism.

While the way conflicts manifest has changed, their underlying causes and sources remain constant, rooted in the internal malaise and dysfunction of African states. Obviously, there is always an external dimension but one, which would matter less if the internal conditions, and circumstances were different.

Take the cases of Mali and Nigeria. The 2012 implosion in Mali, a country long hailed as a stable and sound democracy, precipitated by a coup, itself triggered by the failure of counterinsurgency operations. At the heart of the Malian crisis was, and remains, an ineffective state incapable of meeting mundane needs of the ordinary citizen and unable to fend off insurgents especially when the latter can demonstrate they are better than the government in solving basic local socioeconomic problems.

In Northern Nigeria, successive governments going back to Obasanjo, Yar'Adua, Jonathan and especially the current under General Buhari have given succour to islamist violent entrepreneurs by failing to do the basics expected of the state and government. Without sheer neglect and the spectacular failure to serve the people, moreover in a country so endowed with both human and natural resources, it is unlikely that Boko Haram would live on let alone thrive for so long.

The externalisation of these conflicts, whose primary causes

are otherwise internal, has only compounded and complicated matters. In Niger as in other countries, the presence of AFRICOM, the US's military apparatus on the continent, is a double-edged sword, one that helps in tackling the security crisis but also fuels local anti-American sentiments.

What is more, the United States has its own security concerns and interests for which it pursues a range of policies and programmes, but there is a danger in lending cover to African governments through the blanket of fighting terrorism, which often means the pursuit of military counterterrorism operations, rather than tackling international legitimate problems. The overly securitisation of otherwise socio-political problems carries the danger of dampening the chances of securing long term and sustainable stability on the continent.

The natural and viable way for African states to manage continental security problems is through the African Union and its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the flagship institutional arrangement with a range of mechanisms, organs and structures.

Approaching African security challenges through APSA is not only borne of the Pax-Africana philosophy in the abstract, but is informed by the practical reality of contiguous and porous borders that make for shared problems that require collective solutions.

In many ways, African leaders at independence were quite prescient in the way they perceived the continent's problems and how best to tackle them. It took only three years for Kwame Nkrumah and others, working with and drawing inspiration from intellectuals and leaders in the African diaspora, to actualize the founding of the Organisation of African Unity.

The OAU became the definitive vehicle for collectively tackling multiple continental problems, including collective

security. Initial focus was on ridding the continent of the remaining vestiges of western colonial occupation.

The chilling events in the Congo, happening within months of independence in 1960, leading to the brutal assassination of Premier Patrice Lumumba, provided among the earliest signs of perilous external security interventions in the continent and the destabilisations that lay ahead.

The vulnerability of African states and their disadvantaged positioning were indeed clear-cut features of the continent's international relations very early. This reality was not lost on independence leaders who in quick order sought to pursue the Pan-African path of a unified approach and collective efforts.

Nkrumah played the leading role in articulating a vision for concerted continental collaboration, cooperation and coordination. The concrete existence of this vision got expression in the founding of the OAU as the flagship body and the platform for exercising collective African agency.

In fact, as early as 1960 before the OAU was fully established, Nkrumah had proposed the idea of an African high command as part of continental efforts at attaining peace and security. For the next several decades of independent Africa, the OAU was to serve as the vanguard for a collective African vision of starving off external intrusions and especially for realising the total independence of the entire continent.

With much of Africa independent by the end of the 1960s, the OAU had its focus on the last redoubt of imperial and racially inspired occupation in Southern Africa – in Rhodesia, South Africa and Southwest Africa under apartheid, and in the Portuguese colonies of Angola Mozambique, Cape Verde islands and Guinea further afield in West Africa.

The Cold War only but catalysed the OAU's unified struggle against white racist minority rule in Southern Africa and the

Portuguese holdout in its four colonial possessions. The United States, the leading protagonist of the Cold War, saw apartheid South Africa as a bulwark against perceived Soviet and Cuban influence in the region little wonder that President Ronald Reagan vetoed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act passed by the US Congress in 1986.

In any event, the final defeat of apartheid, coinciding with the end of the Cold War, necessitated the reimagining of a new collective continental African security architecture to deal with 21st century problems, thus the AU and its APSA. Yet, APSA has so far fallen short. More talk and good plans, less action and real commitment in the field.

The regional standby forces that are supposed to comprise a continental African Standby Force (ASF) are a practical way to tackling conflicts that are not exclusively national but regional even though rooted in local problems. More importantly, there is no shortcut to building viable and functional states that address concrete domestic problems. This is the hard work of state building.