

Missing in Inaction: Where is the African Peace and Security Architecture?

Written by David Chuter

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DAVID CHUTER, MAR 19 2014

It was not supposed to be like this.

In all the commentary on the mayhem in North Africa, from the collapse of the Libyan regime through the fighting in Mali to the current crisis in the Central African Republic, one element has been politely and indulgently overlooked. The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), under construction since 2002, was intended to foresee and prevent such crises, or at least deal with them promptly if they occurred. The APSA model has an impressive array of councils, committees, offices and organisations, and extremely ambitious objectives. Its operational arm, the African Standby Force (ASF), was to consist of five regional multinational brigades able to intervene promptly in a crisis. The ASF was hoped to be operational in 2008, and the first serious deadline was 2010. This was extended to 2010, then 2013, but the Force is still not operational. The current aspiration is for 2015, but it is not clear that this date will be met either.

It is true that the APSA structures themselves have been quite busy. In 2013, the Peace and Security Council held 61 meetings and issued 70 statements and communiqués.[1] Refinements of procedure and structure have been introduced, and some political decisions (such as sanctions against the Central African Republic) have been taken. But it remains true that the régime in Libya was overthrown by western airpower, and that interventions in both Mali and the CAR have been led by France, the former colonial power. Although some African troops have been deployed in both the latter two crises, the APSA and the ASF have not been involved at anything beyond the verbal level.

Commentators suggest two main reasons for this absence. The first, and more optimistic, holds that extra time, effort, money and coordination are required, before the APSA can function as originally envisaged. The second is that the APSA structures are simply too ambitious and complex for a continent poor in capability and rich in political differences, and that no realistic transfer of financial and other resources from donors can cure these problems.

Both explanations contain some truth. Better coordination and more resources are never a bad idea. Likewise, it is true that the APSA (like the AU as a whole) is extremely ambitious: trying to do more than the European Union with far fewer resources and twice the number of member states in a much more unstable environment. But I argue that there is another, deeper problem: the APSA is incapable of resolving crises such as those currently happening in the Sahel, because it is based on a series of assumptions which are not only false in Africa, but false everywhere.

We can list the essential features of the APSA approach as follows:

- an attempt to create a strong organization out of weak states, patterned predominantly after the smaller, more homogeneous and much wealthier European Union, which largely funds it.
- a belief that security problems in Africa are such that they can be solved, or at least stabilized, by the use of small, conventional, multi-national European-style forces, but much less well trained and equipped.
- support for donor efforts to re-build post-conflict African states along liberal social, political and economic lines.

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The first two assumptions are widely agreed to be dubious anyway, so they will be treated relatively briefly. The African Union was always an exceptionally ambitious enterprise, and the APSA even more so, relative to any conceivable level of wealth, military capability and political coherence that Africa might acquire in the next generation. It was adopted for two main reasons. First, African elites were tired of being patronized and manipulated by external organizations: politically, it was time that Africa organized itself, with a level of formal sophistication equal to that of the EU or the UN, even if resources to underpin it were absent. But secondly, after a century of overwhelming western intellectual domination, African elites were bound to produce a scheme that was fundamentally western in conception, even if they were not consciously aware of doing so.[2] In effect, the AU and the APSA are what a team of western consultants might have recommended, based on western models with some regional input. And it is significant, perhaps, that much of the work on the ASF, especially in the ECOWAS area, has been entrusted to western consultants.

Moreover, this western intellectual domination has itself historically been hopelessly divided between the tendencies of Doing Good (historically missionaries, today NGOs and human rights organizations) and Doing Things (historically colonial administrators, today development experts and consultants). One aimed at moral and spiritual transformation, the other at building railways, training security forces and setting up justice systems. Both traditions are faithfully reflected in the documents and practices of the AU, and each remains slightly at odds with the other.

Unsurprisingly, then, the ASF was designed along the model of light, mobile, western-style intervention forces. Such forces were becoming the norm in western armies anyway, and it was therefore inevitable that the ASF would follow suit, not just because large, heavy forces would have been unaffordable and impracticable for African states, but also because it was the only model available. Whether it is appropriate to Africa, on the other hand, is another question. The rapid French success in the first days of the intervention in Mali demonstrated that light intervention forces (albeit national, not multinational) could be effective against an enemy fighting conventionally, in organized groups. But it was the speed and sophistication of the French operation, with good intelligence and the use of airpower, which made the difference. In the CAR, by contrast, where violence is inter-communal and the line between militias and the local population is poorly defined, the French effort has been much less successful. The CAR is obviously more typical of African security crises generally, and suggests that the ASF has largely been designed according to the wrong model.

But there is another question also. When we note the poor performance and the effective disintegration of the armies of the two countries in the face of relatively modest challenges, and subsequently the decision of the EU to send training teams to Mali, we inevitably wonder what purpose has actually been served by all the training given to African armies since 1960. It is as though we have now discovered the weaknesses of these states and their security apparatuses for the first time. Yet in fact ceaseless efforts were made to reform them, in colonial times, at independence, during the Cold War, in the multiple alphabet soup of the 1990s, (RECOMP, ACOTA, BMATT) and more recently in the guise of the War on Terror. Yet none of this effort has produced states, or regional and international organizations, with viable forces capable of providing security. Why?

It is obviously not because Africans are inherently incapable of being good soldiers or policemen, or running states effectively. On the other hand, it is true, and has often been noted, that western models of state formation and military organization do not transpose well to Africa, where the realities are quite different. But there is more to it than this, and it has to do with the very concept of the state itself, and of the role of the public service within it. As these ideas have changed in the West, so western models of state building abroad have changed also.

It is accepted that models of conflict recovery and reform pursued in African states since the end of the Cold War correspond broadly to those of the Liberal State. Simplifying somewhat, we can define a Liberal State society as one where its citizens are free to pursue their personal economic interests, and maximize their personal autonomy, with minimal interference from the state itself. The individual, in the perfect form of such a state has, indeed, no relations other than economic ones, no activities except the maximization of their personal and financial freedom, and no sense of membership in a community of any kind. Violent conflict is economically irrational and to be avoided at all costs.[3]

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The revolutionary implications of such an ideology, which threatened to dissolve all traditional bonds of family, group and religion, were recognized from the very beginning. In the West, whilst such ideas have made immense progress in the last generation, their final triumph is obstructed by the persistence of social structures built around families, trades unions, churches, civil society organizations and so forth. Africa, on the other hand, has been a free-fire zone for imported ideas for the last century, and its elites have generally accepted and implemented foreign ideologies without question. Yet this attempted liberal reconstruction of African states is not necessarily as popular with ordinary people, for whom in many cases clan and family bonds remain important, and land ownership, for example, is a matter of custom and tradition, as well as the physical presence of ancestors, not a matter of competitive bidding and contract law.

The attempted reconstruction of Africa, at national, regional and continental level, is thus as a series of empty shells, completely lacking any ethical or normative content. There is a normative *discourse* of course, largely consisting of empty phrases about “governance” “human dignity” or the “rule of law” which mean something different to everybody and nothing much to anybody, and are seldom observably rooted in African values. But the experience of many of those who have worked on such issues (including the author) is that there is no real connection between this discourse and the mundane and technocratic reality of the computerization of court records or financial management courses for defence decision-makers. Once more, then, the Missionaries and the Colonial Administrators are at cross-purposes.

It was not always like that. Missionaries and Administrators of the colonial powers, for all their differences, shared a high moral seriousness, as well as recent experience of building effective states in their own countries. They knew that such states require agreed ethical standards, a sense of collective purpose, and a spirit of public service. These criteria are rigorously excluded from the Liberal State model, which has, curiously, always depended for its very survival on the dedication of those who do not share its radical individualist values, since otherwise they would be doing something else more lucrative instead.

The Liberal State model has no arguments to persuade Africans to work honestly and competently in the public sector, or even to join it in the first place, when rational maximization of personal and financial autonomy would suggest otherwise. It has no arguments against corruption except the fear of being caught; the more so since individual corruption is a highly rational benefit-maximising activity, and in certain African countries the fundamental means of survival.

As the social critic Ian Welsh has recently noted, societies have to cling to irrational, but deeply felt beliefs if they are to survive, since “rational decision making leads to betrayal.”[4] When we refer to Islamic groups in the Sahel as “irrational” or even “fanatical”, we reveal more about ourselves than we do about them. In the end, nobody is going to fight, let alone die, for the collective right to quietly maximize economic freedom and personal autonomy: much more rational to let somebody else die for you. Such groups attract the interest they do precisely *because* they are irrational, and incarnate common values, identity and a collective ethic that goes beyond soulless competition to extract the most money and the greatest number of (largely theoretical) “rights” from the system. And it is hardly surprising that their condemnation of those, mainly from the West, who promote such an empty ideology, should be well received in certain quarters. It is not clear that attempts to set up cumbersome, foreign inspired and foreign funded bureaucratic systems, all form and no content, can ever, in principle, have anything like the same attraction for the people of Africa.

1 See Solomon A. Dersso, *Annual Review of the African Union Peace and Security Council 2013/2014*, Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2013/14 pp. 84-5. Available at <http://www.issafrica.org/topics/african-union/annual-review-of-the-african-union-peace-and-security-council-2013-2014> Accessed 16 March 2014.

[2] On historical lack of African self-confidence, see Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, Oxford, James Currey, 1992. For the sado-masochistic relationship between the AU and the EU, see David Chuter, *A Strategy in Search of Two Continents: The EU and Crisis Management in Africa*, ISIS Europe,

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2011, available at <http://isis-europe.eu/sites/default/files/page-attachments/Chuter%20-%20EU%20Africa%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf> Accessed 16 March 2014.

[3] On the dangers and misunderstandings caused by the Liberal concept of war and peace, especially in Africa, see Christopher Cramer, *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*, London, Hurst, 2011.

4 Ian Welsh "How to Create a Viable Ideology", online at <http://www.ianwelsh.net/how-to-create-a-viable-ideology/> accessed 28 February 2014.

About the author:

David Chuter worked for more than thirty years for the British government in the security area, with spells in international organizations and think tanks, and a three-and-a-half year spell on loan to the French Defence Ministry in Paris. He took early retirement in 2008, and is now an independent lecturer, author, translator and consultant based in Paris. He is Senior Research Fellow at Cranfield University's Department of Management and Security, and a lecturer at Sciences Po in Paris. He has been involved in issues of African security for over twenty years, beginning with the defence and security transition in South Africa before 1994. Dr Chuter is the author of four books, and numerous essays on African security, conflict and development and similar subjects.