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Do Regional Organisations Provide a Credible Alternative to the UN in Conducting Peace Operations?

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ATLANTIC AFFAIRS

Andreas Fabian

Andreas Fabian, King's College London
e-mail: andreasf656@gmail.com

Introduction

In his speech at the United Nations (UN) Security Council meeting, the former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has recently stated that “regional organizations must find ways to expand their cooperation and dialogue to address increasingly interconnected global challenges” (United Nations News Centre, “Regional organisations must expand cooperation to tackle global challenges – Ban”). Since the end of the Cold War, regional organizations' (ROs) engagement in peace-related tasks has intensified and they have become increasingly recognized as a vital component of conflict management initiatives (Yamashita, 2012, 165). The most notable example where the number of ROs involved in peace missions has outstripped any other region in the world is African continent (Bellamy and Williams, 2010, 309). The notion of 'African Solutions to African Problems' has become widespread and greatly supported by developed states (Beswick, 2010, 740). The UN's failure to prevent atrocities in the 1990s has caused unwillingness on the side of Western states to intervene in 'insignificant' places like Somalia, Rwanda, or Sudan, and they have rather encouraged regional actors to take responsibility for conducting peace operations in their region (Cottey and Forster, 2004, 58. See also Berman and Sams, 2002, 31; Cilliers, 1999, 32). Central to the entire discipline of ROs is the degree to which such organizations are successful in producing a desired result – the long lasting peace – and whether the UN can rely on them in conducting a successful peace operation. The effectiveness of ROs in maintaining peace and sustaining security has been put into open question and investigating their capabilities is a continuing concern not only in academia, but also within the UN itself.

Drawing upon the African ROs in general and the African Union (AU) in particular, this study assesses the significance of ROs and investigates whether they can substitute the UN and provide a credible alternative in the management of conflicts and civil unrests, or not. The main aim of this essay is to examine if relying on ROs is a right way to address today's security challenges, and whether ROs have become capable enough of delivering peace effectively and in a timely manner in the region they operate. By analysing the financial resources, logistics and internal cohesion of ROs in Africa, a central argument of this essay has been formulated – ROs do not provide a credible alternative to the UN because the advantages are far outstripped by serious financial, logistical and political obstacles they face.

Argued by Williams and Boutellis, “Africa's peace and security challenges are too great for any single organization to bear” (Williams and Boutellis, 2014, 255) and as this essay shows, ROs are far from being able to carry out a robust, financially backed, and cohesively organized peace operation by themselves. First of all, this essay discusses the core benefits ROs may provide while delivering peace.

In the section that follows, three significant shortages are examined – namely the lack of financial backing, poor logistics (manpower and transportation equipment), and lack of internal cohesion – that disallow ROs to be a credible alternative to the UN in maintaining peace and security. The final part of this paper sums up and indicates possible limitations.

Regional Organisations and Their Benefits

In the history of peace operations, ROs, especially African ones, have become to be thought of as key factors in conflict resolution strategies because of their greater understanding of local issues and stakes in conflict, as well as because of their willingness to intervene in conflict deriving from the near territorial distance (Bures, 2006, 92-93. See also Bellamy and Williams, 2010, 310; Boulden, 2003, 1). In her recent book, Autesserre shows that efforts of 'Peacelanders' to provide help to the Democratic Republic of Congo by deploying UN-selected police personnel proved to have the opposite effect because of “no support among local population, no deep-rooted personal stakes in bettering security in the area, and little knowledge of specific local history” (Autesserre, 2014, 3), all of which is essential when security is to be maintained. Commenting on strengthened cooperation between the UN and ROs, the President of the UN General Assembly Sam Kahamba Kutesa has acknowledged that “regional and sub-regional organizations are distinctly positioned to understand the root causes and dynamics of issues in their regions” (General Assembly of the United Nations, “Statement of the President at the Joint Debate on Cooperation between the UN and Regional and Other Organisations”). Despite the UN's varied capabilities, there is still little comprehension of local characteristics and nature of local disputes while being involved in different regions, therefore, ROs are better suited for conducting a peace operation in that sense (Bures, 2006, 93).

Moreover, when conflict breaks out, there is a high likelihood that it will be contagious and violence will spread to neighbouring countries. In such a case, members of ROs are more probable than the UN to engage in resolution of disputes to avoid the flow of refugees and to secure their own national interests and economic ties (Weiss et al, 2006, 19). As Angelov shows on the example of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group's (ECOMOG) involvement in Liberia and the AU's mission in Sudan, “some ROs have already demonstrated an ability to act where the UN was impeded from doing so” (Angelov, 2010, 606-607). The reluctance to intervene and provide help in many conflict-affected countries in Africa has been seen throughout the history of the UN. The statistic Angelov further brings in his article indicates this trend – “the troops from Western Europe represent an impressive 62 per cent of UN forces in the strategically important Middle East, while contributing with only 2 per cent of peacekeepers deployed in Africa” (Angelov, 2010, 608). In the case Western states are unwilling to send troops, ROs are likely to fill this reluctance gap.

In addition to these two benefits, some supporters of regionally-led peace missions have gone that far to argue that “regional solutions offer an alternative to corrupt, wasteful, politicized, and overly bureaucratized practices of the UN” (Fleitz, in Bellamy and Williams, 2005, 159). However, this line of reasoning has dismissed other vital indicators of a successful peacekeeping operation that many ROs have lack of. As the next section shows, having local knowledge and being more willing to intervene is simply not enough. In order for a peace operation to be as effective as possible, the sufficient financial resources, logistical support and transportation equipment, and internal cohesion are essential prerequisites. As indicated in the following paragraphs, the lack of these three factors prevents ROs from being a credible alternative to the UN.

1. Financial Resources

In order to settle any dispute down, one of the most significant prior conditions is to have sufficient amount of financial backing. If an organization is facing severe financial difficulties and is not able to get required funding for a mission, its overall competences are greatly affected (Kingah and Langenhove, 2012, 212). As it will appear, being financially capable is a vital condition which has considerable impact on the way peace operations are conducted. It is a widely held view that Africa has been beset by protracted poverty which has caused that many ROs are not financially self-sufficient (Feldman, 2008, 270-271. See also Berman, 2002, 39). Based on the example of the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), this essay shows that ROs provide very low financial credibility for the UN.

When the crisis in Darfur erupted, it was expected from the AU to take the initiative and successfully resolve the crisis (Williams, 2009, 101). The initiative was taken, but the crisis was not resolved by the AU itself. After its predecessor’s failures, the crisis in Darfur was a trial of efficiency which the AU did not pass (O’Neill and Cassis, in Beshwick, 2010, 742). One of the main reasons for its inability to effectively address the crisis and to cease the conflict was financial deficiency. The budget the AU mission entered Darfur with was pitifully small - at the dawn of the mission, the AU accumulated budget of less than US\$30 million mostly sponsored by Western countries, not by its own members (Akuffo, 2010, 80). Without increased financial contributions from donors, the mission could have been sustained for only several months if the AU was to rely on its own financial assets (Sharamo, 2006, 53). As the crisis escalated, so did the quest for increased financial backing which, unfortunately, did not come in the required amount. By 2005, the AU faced enormous financial gap – from the established annual budget of US\$252 million, only approximately 31 per cent was promised to be paid, leaving enormous 69 per cent uncovered (Sharamo, 2006, 53). With such a huge shortage, the goal to halt atrocities was basically unachievable. What does the fact of the AU's lack of financial self-sufficiency add to the debate about ROs' reliability?

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that ROs are not financially credible partners for the UN when conducting a peace mission. Having sufficient financial resources, or at least enough sponsors, is very significant. Even the UN – the biggest humanitarian organization of its own – has found itself in financial hardship, therefore, it is almost impossible for the UN to financially rely on ROs (Berman and Sams, 2002, 48).

2. Logistics

Besides financial straits, ROs often come to conflict zones without proper logistics. Under the complexity of the term, this essay looks at two activities – the activity to organize military personnel for peace operations, and the activity to provide adequate transportation equipment – that are essential for successful maintenance of peace and security. By looking at the example of ECOMOG in Liberia and the AU mission in Sudan, this part of the essay argues that ROs are incapable of performing well in supplying adequate (well-equipped and well-trained) troops and transportation equipment, providing conditions the UN cannot credibly rely on when a peace mission is to be conducted by a RO.

Constraints in logistics in general and adequate military personnel in particular became increasingly recognised as a serious impediment when ECOMOG was deployed to end the Liberia's civil war in 1990 (Williams, 2010, 104). The number of military personnel ECOMOG had on its disposal was desperately low – “a maximum of about 12,500 but sometimes as low as 2,500 was too small for peace enforcement or even for effective peacekeeping” (Howe, 1996-1997, 168). Even though the number of peacekeepers was gradually increasing, Olonisakin stated in her assessment of ECOMOG and the UN in Liberia that “the total strength of ECOMOG troops was inadequate to deploy throughout Liberia, thus, it could not effectively disarm and demobilize troops of the warring factions” (Olonisakin, 1996, 42). Even the external help from the UN and the AU's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), did not make the severely weakened logistical situation of ECOMOG any better (Adebajo, 2002, 132). And the shortage in number of personnel was not the only drawback that undermined ECOMOG's operability in Liberia and its overall reliability. Deployment of ill-trained and ill-equipped personnel led to the “inappropriate battlefield strategies” (Hutchful, “The ECOMOG Experience with Peacekeeping in West Africa”) which resulted in counterproductive effects and diminished the chance for successful conflict resolution. Under such circumstances, the UN could hardly let ECOMOG to sustain the mission on its own, therefore, already in 1993 the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was set up to jointly address the situation (United Nations Mission in Liberia, “UNMIL Background”). Apparently, the evidence of ECOMOG's failure to deploy enough military forces capable of fulfilling the expectations of bringing peace in Liberia impede the full reliance of the UN on ROs' engagement in peace-related tasks. Additional observation of transportation equipment available to AMIS confirms the central argument of this paper.

Emphasized by May and Cleaver, “given the inadequate nature of Africa's road and rail communications and taking into account the geographical factors of distance and difficulty of access, the burden falls upon air,” (May and Cleaver, 1997, 9) making air transport capabilities an indispensable part of a successful operation in Africa. However, AMIS lacked sufficient air transportation equipment and its great dependence on external donors significantly complicated the situation on the ground (Kreps, 2007, 68-69). For instance, “of the entire helicopter fleet of 28, Canada has provided 25 and the Netherlands the remaining three” (Appiah-Mensah, “The African Mission”, 2005, 5). Apart from this critical dependence on foreign air transport capabilities, the AU faced a similar situation with ground vehicles – the gap was filled by Canada which provided “105 armoured personnel carriers” (Appiah-Mensah, “The African Mission”, 2005, 5) and by the Great Britain which donated AMIS with a significant number of cars that helped the mission to continue the operation (Appiah-Mensah, “AU’s Critical Assignment”, 2005, 16). Without such foreign contributions, the AU would have not been able to carry out even basic tasks, such as moving from one place to another. Altogether, the abovementioned examples indicate that there is little credibility offered by ROs in terms of logistics.

3. Internal Cohesion

Even though ROs might seem politically better positioned for conflict resolution in their region, the following part refutes this discourse. Many African countries are generally closer to each other from historical and cultural point of view, but as Kasaija demonstrates, “they have not often spoken with one voice on issues concerning the continent” (Kasaija, 2013, 133). Based on the evaluation of the AU, this last section argues that the lack of internal cohesion and like-mindedness among member states provide little trustworthiness for the UN in maintaining of peace and security by regional actors.

First and foremost, it has become generally accepted that members of the AU have not been able to come to a common agreement over significant issues and standards they respect (Williams, 2010, 99). In his analysis of how member states of the AU perceive the notion of human security, Tiekou found that “a number of AU member states oppose the human security agenda because promotion of Western values renders their regimes vulnerable” (Tiekou, 2007, 33). If some African states accept the notion but other do not, there is a great likelihood of incompatibilities in members' responses to crises result of which might be ineffective and slow political answers to security challenges. One of the possible explanations for this lack of common perception could be seen in Nathan's observation which, deriving from the history of a hostile and mistrustful environment among the AU members, describes the AU as a “community of insecurity” (Nathan, 2010, 112). Having affirmed that, how can the AU effectively establish order in a conflict-affected country if its member states still have unresolved security issues and unstable relationships? Could the UN rely on such an incoherent, politically disparate and tense environment prevailing at the AU?

The example of the AU's response to the crisis in Libya confirms a negative answer to this question. In the in-depth assessment of the Libyan civil war, Kasaija asserts that it was the absence of common position towards the 'head' of Libya within the AU that prevented it from addressing the crisis properly (Kasaija, 2013, 118. See also Williams and Boutellis, 2014, 256). More specifically, De Waal has recently indicated that whilst some countries agreed on Gaddafi's overthrow, "Chad and Nigeria leaned towards Gaddafi, and Algeria took strict non-interventionist position" (De Waal, 2013, 373). Consequently, as De Waal puts it, "these decisions enabled P3 diplomats to ignore the AU" (De Waal, 2013, 373). This clearly shows that due to the lack of internal cohesion, ROs are not in a good position to provide a solution to conflict in a way that would be trusted by the UN. Even if there is an attempt to leave the full responsibility to ROs in bringing end to hostilities, it eventually often ends up in the hands of the UN.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether ROs can provide a credible alternative to the UN in carrying out a robust peacekeeping operation. By assessing the financial and logistical resources of particular ROs in Africa, as well as their internal cohesion, this essay has come to a negative conclusion arguing that ROs do not possess the quality of being credible actors in conflict prevention and conflict resolution initiatives yet, hence, do not provide a reliable alternative to the UN. Highlighted by Angelov, "a variety of resources have to be available to a RO in order to empower it for a greater role in peace operations" (Angelov, 2010, 611). This essay has shown that there is a significant dearth of such resources at regional actors' disposal which are necessary for a peace mission to be effectively managed and successful in producing intended results. Despite the benefits ROs provide, these benefits are far outstripped by inappropriate financial and logistical resources, and the lack of internal cohesion, which prevents them from holding a position of effective peacekeepers and performing the function that corresponds with standards of the UN.

Finally, a number of significant limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the current study has only focused on African ROs, particularly on the AU and to lesser extent on ECOMOG's involvement in Liberia under the patronage of ECOWAS. If we look at other ROs such as NATO or the EU, the generalisation of this essay's argument might not be appropriate because both NATO and the EU have arguably been standing out in terms of their capabilities, whether financial, logistical or military (Williams, 2006, 171, and Kingah and Langenhove, 2012, 216). Secondly, the current research was not designed to evaluate all aspects of ROs, such as their legitimacy, authority, or intelligence. The argument was developed on examination of financial and logistical capabilities, and internal coherence only, therefore, study findings need to be interpreted cautiously.

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