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Standby security arrangements and deployment setbacks: The case of the African Standby Force

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Summary

The African Standby Force (ASF) is a key mechanism for advancing African agency in addressing the continent's peace and security threats. The African Union (AU), regional economic communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms (RMs) have previously deployed stabilisation missions and ad hoc security initiatives (ASIs). Yet these deployments don't strictly reflect the principles envisaged in the original ASF make-up and authorisation processes. In this report, the authors argue that the future of the ASF should be seen as an opportunity for the AU and RECs/RMs to standardise the quest for African agency and adopt an agile approach that aims for better partnerships between the RECs, ASIs and member states.

Recommendations

- The AU, RECs/RMs and member states should continue to use the institutional process of the ASF to create further synergy, support capacity and capabilities. It should draw on the experience of the ASF to build better institutional systems and partnerships between the AU, RECs/RMs and member states.
- Through the ASF, the AU can provide institutional capacity and support to RECs/RMs and ASI deployments and generate capacity for emerging security arrangements.
- The ASF should be used to achieve a common doctrine and strategy to guide new missions and operations conducted by RECs/RMs.
- The ASF rapid deployment capability must be clearly developed to highlight its role in an emergency response within the regular ASF structure. The ASF rotational structure must be reviewed to ensure rapid deployment and cross-regional deployability where necessary.
- The ASF must continue to develop its cost-sharing model to improve joint regional approaches.
- Finally, the AU should consider the ASF and partnerships developed with RECs/RMs to support a broader adaptive stabilisation strategy to tackle some of Africa's existing challenges.

Introduction

The origins of the African Standby Force (ASF) can be traced to Kwame Nkrumah's concept of a standing capacity dubbed the African Military High Command,¹ and Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi's proposal for a continental army.² While Nkrumah's concept was rejected by other African states emerging from colonialism, the notion of an African army continued to be adjusted during different stages of the Organization of the African Unity (OAU).³

Insecurity challenges experienced by the continent in the 1990s include extreme events as the genocide in Rwanda, and conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. These made obsolete the OAU's principle of non-interference and led to a rethink of sovereignty within the continent. African leaders subsequently agreed to reform the OAU to become the African Union (AU). This was primarily due to the nature of the continent's peace and security challenges, and the need for pragmatic responses. The move provided a basis for the concept and the formation of the ASF in 2003, eventually leading to its establishment as an instrument for preventing and responding to gross human rights violations.

The ASF has been designed as a standby capacity, with personnel drawn from member states

Rather than a standing African capacity, the ASF has been designed as a standby capacity, with personnel drawn from member states when interventions are required. The ASF is a pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) for preventing and responding to crises

on the continent. This objective is in accordance with Article 13 of the Protocol Relating to establishing the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (2003).

The ASF was designed to have uniformly trained standby forces in the five regions of Africa – north, east, central, west and south. The overall structure is set to comprise 25 000 personnel from three regional economic communities (RECs) and two regional mechanisms (RMs), which represent the five regions. The RECs/RMs are responsible for generating the personnel, who remain in the host countries until they are called on to deploy. The AU and the RECs/RMs are jointly responsible for managing and deploying the force.

Some 14 years later, in 2017, the ASF was deployed by the AU via the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to the Gambia, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to Lesotho.⁴ More recently, SADC deployed a mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in 2021, also in line with the ASF framework.⁵ Likewise, the East African Community (EAC) decided earlier in 2022 to deploy its regional force to restore stability in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.⁶ However, it could be argued that elements of the ASF had been deployed to previous AU missions prior to 2017 based on customary practice. This includes the AU missions to Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), which deployed variations of the ASF concept through aspects of the missions' capacities. Technically, while the deployment of some ASF *capacities* has taken place in the abovementioned missions, fully recognised ASF deployment was only acknowledged in 2017, following the declaration of full ASF operational capabilities in 2016.



Image: issafrica.org

Although the first ASF deployments by regional organisations started in 2017, as indicated earlier, the AU only formally acknowledged these as ASF operational deployments in 2020. The deployment of these missions dispelled concerns over the persistent non-deployment of the ASF concept since it was established in 2003. Nevertheless, while these developments have re-affirmed the role of sub-regional structures in building a collective African response, concerns remain that they do not accurately reflect the standards envisaged in the original ASF structure and authorisation processes.

At the time of writing, the ASF concept was being reviewed due to the nature, context, and trajectories of conflicts across the continent. Some of these have evolved significantly and have seen member states prioritising their own regional security arrangements. These have included ad hoc security initiatives (ASIs), such as the now-dissolved Regional Cooperation Initiative for the elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army (RCI-LRA) or AU Regional Task Force Against the Lord's Resistance Army

in Uganda (RTF-LRA); the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin (MNJTF), and the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel Force).⁷

The ASF framework provides the AU with a useful blueprint that can be adapted in response to contemporary threats

The RTF-LRA and MNJTF predate the declaration of the ASF being declared as having full operational capability (FOC) in 2016.⁸ The formation of ASIs reflects the flexibility and nature of transnational conflicts and violent extremism, which often require a response from regional or neighbouring coalitions rather than the existing ASF configurations.⁹ While the ASF framework provides the AU with a useful blueprint that can be adapted in response to contemporary security threats, the presence of ASIs call into question whether the ASF will ever live up to its envisaged concept, reach full capacity and be deployed.

Notably, capacities across the regional forces and member states are uneven.¹⁰ This, along with lessons learnt from AU Peace Support Operations (PSOs) and the rise of ASIs on the continent,¹¹ highlights the need to revise the ASF doctrine and concept. Thus, it can be argued that the original plan for the ASF does not accommodate the increasing complexity of current African-led interventions, particularly in the face of emerging conflicts, violent extremism and protracted insecurity.

Trends in the global and regional security landscape also affect peace and security in Africa

Trends in the global and regional security landscape also affect peace and security in Africa and pose additional questions around the relevance of standby security arrangements. These trends include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the changing global order and the decline of multilateralism, rapid technological advancements', the use and deployment of hired or private security, an over-reliance on security tools to defeat terrorism, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the challenges faced by the ASF are not unique; but seem to be shared by standby arrangements across the globe. Similar, albeit context-specific challenges, face the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Response Force (NRF), the European Union Battlegroups (EUBG), and the South-East European Brigade (SEEBRIG), among others.

In this report, the authors outline the deployment constraints and opportunities faced by three standby arrangements and explore what this means for the ASF. The report is divided into four parts. Part one assesses the

critical components that make up multinational standby arrangements, focusing on the ASF, EUBG and the NRF. It examines the rotational process and timeframes of readiness and explores additional features – such as rapid reaction units – which standby arrangement can utilise. Part two examines the deployment constraints of these standby arrangements, which have and continue to intrude on the original notion and concept for these arrangements. These include financial and troop contributions, national political interests, and the structure of standby formations. The final section considers implications for the ASF and provides concluding thoughts.

Rotational state of readiness

In most army structures, full-time soldiers and police forces are categorised as a *standing* force – as opposed to a reserve or temporary army or police staff, who are deployed during emergencies and disbanded during normalcy. In multinational settings, an example of a standing capacity is the European Corps (EUROCORPS), with about 1 100 plus troops based in Strasbourg, France. The United Nations (UN) also maintains a relatively small Standing Police Capacity (SPC) of 36 personnel located with the UN Global Service Centre at Brindisi,¹² which provides policing expertise to UN peace operations and crises areas.

On the other hand, *standby* capacities require states to earmark specific units and equipment. They also have to define logistics chains, common protocols and standard operating procedures. While standby forces are not permanent, they are implicitly 'in readiness' to intervene. The ASF, EUBG and the NRF constitute some of the major standby arrangements across the globe. Table 1 provides an overview of the key features of these arrangements.

Table 1: Critical features of multinational standby arrangements

Name	Year established & full operational capacity	Purpose	Authorised force strength	High rapid reaction unit	HQ	Rotation cycle	Location of troops in rotation	Readiness time frame	Who pays for deployment
NRF	Established (Est.) 2002; full operational capacity (FOC): 2006	Immediate collective defence response (prior to the arrival of other forces), crisis management and peace support operations, plus disaster relief and the protection of critical infrastructure.	40 000 troops	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF): 5 000 troops (est. 2014)	Rotates between the Joint Force Commands in Brunssum, the Netherlands, and Naples, Italy, each year	12 months	In-home country base	NRF: 30 days VJTF: 2–7 days	Contributing member states
EUBG	Est. 2006 FOC: 2007	Deployment in emerging crises, either under a UN mandate or pre-emptively to prevent atrocities or assist in providing humanitarian aid.	Two battle groups of 1 500 troops each in every rotation cycle	Not applicable	HQ is provided by the framework/lead nation of each EUBG formation	6 months	In-home country base	5–10 days	Contributing member states
ASF	Est. 2003 FOC: 2016	Deployments to a political mission, observer mission, preventive mission, humanitarian and disaster support, multidimensional peacekeeping missions and AU interventions in member states.	25 000 military, police, and civilian personnel (5 000 each in five sub-regions)	RDC: 2 500 in each of the five sub-regions	Five HQs: NARC in Algeria; ECOWAS in Abuja; ECCAS in Libreville; EASF in Addis Ababa; and SADC in Gaborone.	6 months	Not in a base	ASF: 30 days RDC: 14 days	The AU and contributions from member states and external sources

Source: Authors' research

A common feature of standby arrangements, albeit with differences in practice, is the rotational state of readiness. The two differing practices are the ‘resident in base’ approach and the ‘non-resident in base’ approach. The first relates to a context where forces or troops are deployed to a designated base in their home countries, where they undergo training and the necessary steps to prepare for regular or rapid deployment. The HQs and participating countries take turns as lead nations to be ready. Ready or readiness, in this example, refers to a rotational approach where forces or troops are not deployed to a designated base. Rather, they remain within their existing army structures and are only called upon when it is time to deploy to a mission. Only the HQs, or the lead nations on readiness, or on standby takes rotational responsibility to stand in readiness. The NRF and EUBG practice a ‘resident in base’ rotational framework. This involves the physical presence of a specific configuration at a designated base in their home countries.

The EUBG has a six-month rotational framework, and member states make their commitments at the six-monthly Battlegroup Coordination Conference (BGCC). In the roster, a EUBG is formed when an EU member state chooses to serve as a Framework Nation (FN) or a lead nation by providing the HQ for the Battlegroup, while other members team up to participate.¹³ After the rotation cycle, a new FN and other member states team up to form another EUBG. Once assembled, the EUBG are placed on standby at a base in their home countries.¹⁴ While on standby, participating states must rapidly deploy their pledged forces, including pre-identified and earmarked support and logistic assets, at the required readiness of five to 10 days. Once deployed, the EUBG is expected to be sustainable for 30 days and could be re-supplied and sustained for an extended period of 120 days.

The value of a ‘resident in base’ approach is that there is a readily available force within



Amani Africa II ASF Field training exercise, Lohattha, South Africa, 2015 (c) Jacqueline Cochrane / Institute for Security Studies

a specific location with a *readiness mindset* for deployment. The downside, however, is that member states in the roster bear the responsibility of covering the costs of deploying or ‘being on standby’ without necessarily deploying to an active conflict zone.

It is worth noting that the EUBG is designed to be mutually reinforcing with the NRF. The NRF has a similar rostering approach, but with a rotational period of 12 months. NATO’s two Joint Force Commands (JFCs) in Brunssum (in the Netherlands) and Naples (in Italy) take turns as the HQ for each rotation cycle. The initial rotational period was six months, but in 2021, the period was extended to 12 months to provide stability in the planning processes.¹⁵

Given that some EU members are also part of the NRF, they contribute to both the NRF and the EUBG same set of forces to either of the organisations.¹⁶ While this approach fosters complementarity, a challenge could arise if the NRF and EUBG were to simultaneously authorise two separate missions when the same forces are on standby. It could become a dilemma as to which mission would be prioritised by participating countries. However, EU members could prevent clashes through their participation in the two organisations.

Most of the conflict situations recommended for EUBG deployment have been in Africa

In some cases, the EUBG is seen as a duplication of the NRF. However, the exception is that the EUBG is often seen as a mechanism to respond to crises in the EU’s backyard, and especially across the African continent.¹⁷

Indeed, most of the conflict situations recommended for EUBG deployment have been in Africa.

The ASF practises the ‘non-resident in base’ approach. This means the five ASF regional HQs take turns to be on a high state of alert to deploy, but without deploying personnel to a base. The ASF initiated a rotational framework in 2016, whereby each of the five regional standby forces took turns to be on the highest level of alertness for six months.¹⁸ While the rostering of member states within the NRF and EUBG rotational cycles is voluntary, the five RECs/RMs of the ASF are rostered in alphabetical (in English) order continuously, but this can be changed based on consultation.

The first rotation was:

- East Africa Standby Force (EASF):
1 January – 30 June 2017
- Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) Standby Force:
1 July – 31 December 2017
- ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF):
1 January – 30 June 2018
- North Africa Regional Capacity (NARC) Standby Force (NASF):¹⁹
1 July – 31 December 2018
- SADC Standby Force:
1 January – 30 June 2019

Unlike the NRF and EUBG, member states of the ASF regional standby forces do not necessarily send their troops to a specific standby base in their home countries. Instead, the HQs of the regional standby forces are on alert to call upon the standby components for deployment when needed. This rotational approach minimises costs, but the downside is that it may take a while for forces to be called upon to respond to emergencies.

Another unique challenge in the ASF rotational structure is a lack of clarity regarding the deployment of standby troops to a crisis country outside their region in the absence of a legal agreement between RECs/RMs. For instance, if the SADC Standby Force is on high alert and conflict erupts in Guinea within the ECOWAS region, could SADC forces be deployed to support the affected region within the ECOWAS mission? Efforts to develop a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the ASF regional standby forces to allow for cross deployment remain inconclusive, but ongoing.

A crucial question is whether the envisaged cross-regional deployment will ever happen. Recent trends have seen member states joining more than one REC/RM. Already the continent's eight RECs and two RMs collectively have 106 members, which means that most countries belong to more than one REC/RM. This stretches capacity and capabilities and puts strain on limited resources, which could lead to confusion, divided loyalties, and weak functioning institutions. If one REC decides to deploy when another is already deployed, how would countries that belong to both decide on where to deploy their capabilities?²⁰ Thus, cross-regional deployment remains a challenge for the ASF concept and eventual deployment.

Nevertheless, some states tend to deploy on a bilateral basis outside their regional configuration to support a member state in another region. This is currently being observed in Mozambique, where Rwandan forces are deployed alongside the forces from SADC.

Readiness timeframes

Stipulated timeframes are among the significant determinants of readiness in standby

arrangements, as highlighted in Table 1 above. However, forces will not necessarily be able to deploy within these proposed timeframes when crises erupt. Instead, the timeframes should be regarded as guidance for the urgency required to support the streamlining of processes. This includes decision making, troop deployment and the preparation of equipment. Nevertheless, it is worth comparing the merits of shorter readiness versus the longer timeframes seen in other standby models.

Shorter timeframes – of five to 15 days – provide some form of high alert, and a heightened state of readiness for rapid action against war crimes and genocides. Such rapid deployment is possible with smaller forces, units, and battalions such as the high-reaction forces, or the EUBG composition. However, faster deployment timeframes could fall short of requirements when there is a need for retrospection and the application of a conflict-sensitive response, as explained below.

Longer readiness timeframes – of 20 to 60 days – are unsuitable when rapid response is required. Examples include cases of genocide like in Rwanda and Srebrenica, especially when interventions need to prioritise the protection of civilians.²¹ However, this timeframe allows for greater reflection and planning. For instance, the rescinding of the AU PSC decision to deploy the African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi (MAPROBU) is a case where ample time for retrospection was required. MAPROBU, which was declared on 17 December 2015, was envisaged as aligning with scenario six of ASF deployments scenarios (see Table 2). This meant it was to be undertaken with or without the consent of the government of Burundi to prevent genocide and mass atrocities.

Table 2: The six ASF deployment scenarios

Scenario 1	AU/regional military advice to a political mission.
Scenario 2	AU/regional observer mission co-deployed with UN mission.
Scenario 3	Stand alone AU/regional observer mission.
Scenario 4	AU/regional peacekeeping force (PKF) for Chapter VI and preventive deployment missions.
Scenario 5	AU PKF for complex multi-dimensional PKF mission low level spoilers (a feature of many current conflicts).
Scenario 6	AU intervention – e.g., genocide situations where international community does not act promptly.

Source: ASF Policy Framework (2003)

A fully developed rapid-deployment capability should enable the ASF to deploy in 14 days. This means that MAPROBU, which was decided on 17 December 2015, would have been required to deploy by 31 December or early in January of the following year. With the regular ASF force, the deployment should have occurred in 30 days, so, by mid-January. If the ASF had deployed immediately after the AU PSC decision in December 2015, the fate of the forces in Burundi would have been uncertain, given that the Burundi government had rejected the force. The decision had also been opposed by The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh, and some East African Standby Force member states, particularly Tanzania. Despite the rejection by The Gambia and Tanzania, the responsibility to deploy and provide the appropriate mandate rests with the decision-making organ, and not necessarily the position of member states who disagree with the decision to deploy.

Moreover, the PSC decision was taken at an ambassadorial level – as opposed to the heads of state level. Further deliberations clarified that decisions to deploy a mission without the consent of the host state rests with PSC

heads of state, not at the ambassadorial level.²² Eventually, in January 2016, the AU PSC – at the level of heads of state – overturned the decision to establish MAPROBU.²³ This means that unilateral intervention without the explicit consent of the state requires an Assembly-level decision. In other words, the ASF mandating process for scenarios one to five can be made at the ambassadorial level of the AU PSC. Only the authorisation of Article 4(h) under scenario six requires at least a two-thirds majority at the heads of state level for an outcome to be adopted.

Rapid reaction units

Another shared feature in standby practice is the need for a high rapid reaction force within the ‘regular’ standby arrangements. A standby arrangement is intended to enable swift response in crises. However, most standby arrangements have a high rapid reaction unit that provides a higher level of readiness for deployment, as evident from the NRF’s VJTF, and the ASF’s Rapid Deployment Capability (RDC) (see Table 3).

The RDC is designed to be a part of all five regional standby forces and is made up of high readiness units that could be deployed across the continent within 14 days – as opposed to the ‘regular’ ASF, which has a deployment timeframe of 30 days. The RDC is intended to be made up of 2 500 personnel from each of the five RECs/RMs. The total size of the regional forces is 12 5000 troops for each region.

However, the RDC of the ASF framework faces some significant constraints and has not been fully developed due to uneven capacities among member states within the five subregions. The need for rapid deployment led to the creation of the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) in 2013. This was in recognition of the need to strengthen Africa’s capacity for rapid response in the absence of the RDC and the regular forces making up the ASF. The model was designed to draw on the commitments of voluntary member states to work around the constraints of relying on the uniform arrangement of various regions.²⁴ However, most of the conceptualisation on ACIRC never materialised, and aspects of the concept were absorbed into the AU PSO doctrine.²⁵

Likewise, the NRF’s VJTF, established in 2014, is intended to be capable of deploying in two to seven days, while for the regular NRF, this timeframe is within 30 days of a decision. The VJTF of 5 000 troops is part of the NRF force of 40 000. The VJTF could then be augmented with forces of the NRF, in accordance with needs. An additional element of the VJTF is the need for a NATO member state, or willing member states, to serve as a framework nation (also referred to as a lead nation) to lead the Battlegroup. This is similar to how a framework nation leads the EUBG.

While the deployment timeframes of high reaction units vary, they are all intended to be capable of deploying far quicker than the regular force. In the case of the NRF-VJTF and UN Vanguard Brigade, the regular force is expected to take over an operation from the high rapid reaction forces. This enables the high reaction force to return to its high-readiness level. For the ASF RDC, it is still to be decided whether the RDC would hand over operations to a regular ASF force – or if the RDC would be incorporated as part of the regular force once deployed. If the RDC is to return to a state of readiness, this will have an implication for the size envisaged for the ASF. If the RDC remains in deployment with the regular ASF forces, there may be limitations in terms of having troops in higher levels of readiness to deploy if emergencies occur.

Deployment constraints and opportunities

Cost calculations

While standby arrangements have different approaches to covering costs, day-to-day operational and deployment expenses significantly influence whether standby arrangements are deployed or not. For instance, contributing members of the NRF²⁶ and the EUBG bear both the costs of being on readiness during rotation cycles, as well as the cost of an active deployment.²⁷ For the EUBG alone, the cost of preparing and operating two Battlegroups for a six-month rotation cycle was estimated at €450 million (\$500 million dollars) in 2014.²⁸ With such high costs, member states are not always prepared to add themselves to the roster. The European Union Military Committee report on EUBG commitments from 2019 to 2025 suggests that there are several vacant areas.²⁹

Table 3: EU Battlegroup offers and commitments, December 2019 - 2025

	Semester	Member states and third states	Battlegroup point of contact	Preferred operation headquarters
Detailed commitments	2019-2	PL, CZ, HR, HU, SK	PL	PL
		FR	FR	FR
	2020-1	EL, BG, CY, RO, RS, UA	EL	EL
		FR	FR	FR
	2020-2	DE, AT, CZ, FI, HR, IE, LV, NL, SE	DE	DE
		IT*1, EL, ES, PT*	IT*	IT*
2021-1	Vacant			
	Vacant			
2021-2	IT*, AT*, HR*, HU*, SI*	IT*	IT*	
	Vacant			
2022-1	Vacant			
	Vacant			
2022-2	ES, PT*	ES		
	Vacant			
2023-1	PL, CZ*, HU*, SK*	PL		
	EL, BG, CY, RO, Republic of North Macedonia*2, RS*, UA*	EL	EL	
	Vacant			
2023-2	Vacant			
	Vacant			
2024-1	FR, BE*	FR	FR	
	Vacant			
2024-2	IT*, AL	IT*	IT*	
	Vacant			
2025-1	DE, AT*, HR*	DE		
	PT*	PT*	TBD	
	Vacant			
2025-2	DE, AT*, HR*	DE		
	Vacant			

Source: Council of the European Union³⁰

* refers to commitments made pending political decision

Austria (AT); Belgium (BE); Bulgaria (BG); Czechia (CZ); Cyprus (CY); Finland (FI); France (FR); Germany (DE); Greece (EL); Hungary (HU); Ireland (IE); Italy (IT); Latvia (LV); Malta (HR); Netherlands (NL); Poland (PL); Portugal (PT); Romania (RO); Serbia (RS); Slovakia (SK); Slovenia (SI); Spain (SL); Sweden (SE); Ukraine (UA)

The rosters are sometimes filled following intense discussions and encouragement to member states. Cost implications can also prevent EU member states from deploying to conflict settings.³¹ To address this challenge, which also plays into considerations of national interest, there are ongoing discussions on burden-sharing during deployment within the EUBG and NRF.

For the ASF, the AU advocates using UN-assessed contributions and external contributions to cover 75% of its peace deployments. In comparison, it proposes to cover 25% of peace operations costs. External actors like the EU, and bilateral donors like the US, France, China and the UK, often cover training and operational costs. The estimated annual cost of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), at its peak was about \$1.2 billion,³² and the annual cost of the G5 Sahel Force with just over 5 000 troops is about \$500 million a year.³³ While the ASF deployment size would vary depending on needs, neither the AU nor the sub-regions (RECs/RMs) has been able to fully finance ongoing multinational training and deployment costs independently beyond a month. Nevertheless, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which deployed in 2013, appears to be the last self-sustainable deployment, utilising troop-contributing countries (TCCs) who through the AU covered the missions cost for the first 30 days.

In such an unpredictable context, the ASF framework depends not only on the will of the AU and RECs/RMs and funding mechanisms, but also on the willingness of external actors to fund a potential deployment. This can breed competition between the AU and RECs/RMs in terms of command and control of the ASF – a dynamic that is sometimes driven both by a sense of responsibility and the need to directly secure and manage external funds for a mission.

As it stands, both the AU and the RECs/RMs claim responsibility for the ASF, although the standby arrangement is designed to have the AU PSC as its sole authorising power.³⁴ Likewise, Article 20 of the MoU between the AU and RECs/RMs of 2008, requires sub-

The estimated annual cost of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) with over 22 000 personnel was about \$1.2 billion

regions to deploy proactively. This presents a challenge on how RECs could be proactive, while still seeking authorisation from the AU PSC. Indeed, the RECs and some African-led missions have often deployed before seeking AU approval.³⁵ The AU authorisation tends to ensure regional compliance with AU norms. In other contexts, it's a technicality that is required for RECs to successfully request and obtain external funding.

For instance, RECs/RMs previously required AU endorsement to access the EU's African Peace Facility (APF).³⁶ The European Peace Facility (EPF) has since replaced the APF and does not require AU endorsement before RECs/RMs or even member states can access EU funds. This raises concerns about the role of the AU in steering African security interventions, and the wider challenge of external partners in influencing regional collective security efforts – especially through bilateral agreements.³⁷ Recent analysis showed that the SADC only approached the AU six months after deploying SAMIM, '...when funds started running out'.³⁸ It has also failed to update or share information about the mission to the AU. These dynamics shed light on external actors' impact on the APSA.

National interests

While readiness is often associated with the forces on standby, decision-makers are integral to readiness mechanisms. They are responsible for ensuring that interventions are aligned with their national interests, irrespective of commitments and grand alliance. TCCs to the EUBG, for instance, tend to be unwilling to deploy to conflict situations given the costs and calculations of how conflicts outside the EU area affect them.³⁹

For instance, most of the conflict situations recommended for EUBG deployment are

in Africa – including the situations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2006, Libya in 2011 and the Central African Republic in 2014. However, during those periods, the EU members on rotation failed to respond and did not send forces. This is partly due to an inability to match national interest (along with cost) with the need to deploy. While the need to deploy may be in the broader interest of the EU, member states who are unable to align such assignments with their own interests would not be willing to jeopardise their troops or commit their resources.⁴⁰

The ASF faces similar challenges with deployment. The regular ASF formations were not seriously considered or asked by the PSC to deploy to address violent extremism in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. This led to the formation of the MNJTF and the G5 Sahel Force. The affected RECs/RMs could not cooperate and deploy jointly in the two cases. Instead, member states from each region teamed up to contribute to ad hoc forces to address joint and cross-border challenges, which impact their national interest.

Regarding the Sahel, for instance, the AU initiated the Nouakchott Process on enhancing security cooperation and operationalising the APSA in the Sahelo-Saharan region in 2013 at a meeting in Mauritania. Eleven countries – Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Chad – are part of the process.

Through the Nouakchott Process, the AU PSC envisaged possibly establishing an African force to undertake offensive action against terror groups operating in Mali, and the broader Sahel, as part of its Sahel Strategy.⁴¹ However, the AU and members of the Nouakchott Process that were not directly affected by terrorism were reluctant to establish the mission. This led the

affected countries of the G5 Sahel – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – to establish the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel in February 2017. Comprising up to 5 000 personnel, the G5 Sahel was intended to address security threats.

Currently, the AU is working to establish a Special Force for Counterterrorism within the ASF framework to address the gaps that have led to the formation of *ad hoc* arrangements.⁴² Nevertheless, there is an unforeseen challenge – which is currently overlooked by the AU: if national interests hinder the deployment of the ASF, why would states be interested to deploy a special force in high-intensity engagement, if it is not in the interest of the membership of such force?

Apart from member states' own interest in deployment, another aspect of national interest involves the willingness to accept troops from other countries.

Suspicious and projections of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism in a potential host country is a challenge for the NRF and EUBG. The ASF also faces significant challenges, especially when neighbouring countries intend to intervene in crises. The NRF and EUBG were designed to protect the sovereignty of member states and not interfere in the internal affairs of member states. On the other hand, the ASF was primarily designed for deployment in crises involving a member state under the six scenarios. This complicates and politicises the ASF deployment landscape.

The multiplicity of sub-regions presents a further challenge. The ASF concept envisaged a neat division of state membership along with Africa's five geographical regions. This did not necessarily reflect the interests and commitments of African states. As noted, most African states belong to two or more sub-regional organisations that go beyond their geographical regions. For instance, the DRC – which is in central Africa and part of ECCAS and SADC – was recently granted membership to the East African Community (EAC).⁴³ Tunisia and Morocco both made requests to join ECOWAS in 2017, and Tunisia also requested to join the Common Market for Eastern and

Another aspect of national interest involves the willingness to accept troops from other countries

Southern Africa (COMESA) and ECCAS. Burundi has also applied to be a member of the SADC. This means that African states belonging to multiple RECs could play multiple roles. While that may be beneficial for a cohesive response, on the one hand, it could also undermine sustainable responses.

Standby formations and structures

Lastly, the formalised and rigid formations of standby arrangements are sometimes unfavourable for deployment. Since their establishment, the NRF and the EUBG have never been deployed to actual conflict situations. The ASF framework has ostensibly been drawn on and deployed in The Gambia, Lesotho and Mozambique. However, some of these did not follow the strict structures of the ASF, raising debate about whether these deployments constituted ‘coalitions of the willing’.⁴⁴ In The Gambia, for instance, the mission was composed of troops from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Togo. The mission did not, however, include the other 10 countries that make up the ECOWAS Standby Force – calling into question whether the mission could be considered truly regional. However, a significant lesson derived from recent ASF deployment is its flexibility, including the potential of having smaller coalitions of regional forces deployed within the ASF framework.

A clear challenge for the ASF is that it will be difficult to deploy the standby forces uniformly.⁴⁵ Lessons from African peace efforts show that each conflict has a unique set of interested parties and capacities that may not come solely from the regional arrangement. While reviewing the ASF arrangement, De Coning proposes a ‘just-in-time arrangement’, where trained troops are generated from willing, capable and ready member states to deploy across the continent.⁴⁶

This is because each conflict situation requires a unique solution and a different configuration of coalitions to respond, like in the cases of the G5 Sahel Force and MNJTF.

In this regard, Africa’s capacity to deploy rapidly resides at the national level, not at the regional level. De Coning further posits that while there is a need for a pre-identified, trained and verified regional standby force, rapid deployment should be based on the capacity, willingness, and readiness of individual states to deploy to a given conflict across the continent. Flexibility in deployments is why ad hoc arrangements have become one of the preferred forms of deployment – without strictly defined structures. A flexible approach could enable lead nations to form coalitions to deploy within and outside the ASF. In other cases, a coalition of ready elements across the RECs/RMs could team up to deploy.

Each conflict has a unique set of interested parties and capacities

For example, the MNJTF was repurposed as a civilian secretariat for a sub-regional security operations and civilian stabilisation efforts. The combined response and arrangements are coordinated and managed by a command structure or a joint secretariat with member states contributing troops. The MNJTF and the G5 Sahel are aligned with the AU’s Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP).⁴⁷ This means that both the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Force have been established within a political framework. For example, the outcome of the five ministerial meetings provided the basis for forming the MNJTF, while the Nouakchott Process provided the political context that culminated in the establishment of the G5

Sahel. Each ASI has legal arrangements in place for each coalition. This underpins cross-border operations and enables participating countries to position contingents within another state's territory to pursue non-state armed actors. This allows each force to cross over national borders without fear of reprisal. Since ASIs are not part of the ASF, they do not conform to the ASF's original six scenarios for military deployment.⁴⁸ In addition, the challenges of resources experienced in standby forces are avoided with ASIs, as each participating country contributes resources and is responsible for covering some or all operational costs, including troop salaries. The individual and collective abilities of states participating in ASIs allow for a specific division of work based on actual relationships and the comparative advantages of the different actors on the ground.

States that make up ASIs can coordinate and respond to crises before a situation escalates. In contrast, the ability to convene, coordinate and respond between RECs/RM at heads of state level, or within the ASF system, is limited and has a slower response time. Restrictions here can include discussions on peace and security matters, which are often limited to the AU Commission or Chairperson and the PSC at an ambassadorial level. Moreover, PSC summits are infrequently held at heads of state level where decisions for intervention and deployment are key but unlikely to be made. These often occur once a year on the margins of an AU Assembly, which means decision-makers meet infrequently. Discussions on pressing issues are often time restricted. Thus, states impacted by insecurity may not be given the appropriate attention, which requires quick-thinking, strategic decisions and decisive leadership. In contrast, at the sub-regional level, heads of state – with support from the relevant technical committees – often lead emerging peace and security interventions and convey pressing matters rapidly. Finally, the emergence of ASIs brings into question whether the ASF may or may not be feasible for responding to specific emerging crises - witnessed over the last decade - that require a rapid trans-boundary response to threats.

The challenges of resources experienced in standby forces are avoided with ASIs

Conclusion

This report has examined the nature of multinational standby security arrangements such as the EUBG, NRF and the ASF to draw out common features, divergencies, challenges and recommendations. While most standby arrangements are context-specific, they face similar constraints. Notably, day-to-day operational and deployment costs significantly influence whether a standby arrangement is deployed or not. Standby arrangements with cost-sharing models have a higher chance of deployment than those requiring contributing member states to pay for costs. The study further highlights that those deployments are contingent on states' willingness to deploy within a standby arrangement or accept troops within their own territories. As such, standby arrangements constantly face challenges in matching deployment needs with national interests.

Furthermore, rigid and overly formalised processes of standby arrangements may fail to match context specificities and the fluid interests of member states. The ASF standby arrangement, for instance, provides a continued opportunity for the AU to generate capacities instead of having a fixed structure with specific, pre-planned forces.

Formalised processes of standby arrangements may fail to match the fluid interests of member states

In most cases, the ASF has contributed to increasing the overall capabilities of individual countries, as well as the ability of regional arrangements to work together to plan and

manage missions. These capacities were then deployed in a just-in-time manner to meet the needs of the moment. In this way, the ASF has helped to standardise the effectiveness of force through training, and increased awareness of the laws of armed conflict, protection of civilians, international humanitarian law and many other international treaties. To a large extent, the ASF has not deployed as conceptually put together in its blueprint. The ASF has, however, been used as a platform to bring member states in line with AU policy; and created an opportunity to strengthen the AU Military Logistics Depot (AMLDD), a logistics structure and re-supply system based on the UN logistics base concept. Other benefits include generating long-term support for the Silencing the Guns initiative; achieving a common doctrine and strategy to guide new missions or operations conducted by states; and better AU and regional planning elements and coordination.

While some are calling to further institutionalise and deploy the ASF, the force risks not being able to respond and adapt to current peace, conflict, and security challenges. Therefore, the AU will need to avoid over-institutionalising the ASF.

The ASF was established to address internal crises between internationally recognised belligerents and deploy to situations marked by inter-state conflict, based on a legitimate mandating process. The ASF has continually been hindered from being fully deployed, if one accepts that ASF capacities only have been deployed, to meet the specific needs of the moment. Against this backdrop, the global and regional security landscape continues to change. This includes challenges such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the decline of multilateralism, rapid technological advancements and the use and

deployment of hired security, or over-reliance on security tools to defeat terrorism. These trends demonstrate changes in opportunities for deploying the ASF, and also raise further criticism over the relevance of standby security arrangements in rapidly responding to a collective security threat.

At the same time, attempts to deploy the ASF in cases of violent extremism and terrorism could be seen as a process of adaptation rather than a weakness of the ASF, but the nature of security threats continues to amplify calls for deploying ASIs. Still, the governance around these ASIs - compliance, human rights, standards, and structures - need to be further enhanced, standardised, or strengthened.

Thus, the status of the ASF provides the AU and RECs/RMs with an opportunity to adapt to current trends and adopt an agile approach which looks toward better partnership between

AU-RECs, ASIs and member states.⁴⁹ Adaption through partnership would allow the AU and RECs/RMs to draw further on their exclusive bilateral, multilateral abilities and acquired experiences to enhance future deployments. This will mark a move towards a model that utilises the AU's institutional capacity; draws on RECs/RMs, ASIs and member states that have the force capacity and capabilities; and exploits the experience of the ASF to build better institutional systems and partnerships between the two entities. In many ways, this could naturally serve to end the call to deploy the ASF - but still retain the institutional capacity that allowed the AU to develop the ASF as a model. On the other hand, adapting through partnership could present the AU and RECs/RMs with an opportunity to develop a broader adaptive stabilisation strategy that links existing policies with forward-thinking strategies, which can help to support the African continent to tackle current and future challenges.

Notes

- 1 New York Times (1962). “Nkrumah Steps Up Nkrumahism; To achieve his ‘pan-African goals, Ghana’s President is building an ever-stricter regime and moving ever closer to the Eastern bloc. Nkrumah Steps Up Nkrumahism,” [Accessed on 15 April 2021]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/01/14/archives/nkrumah-steps-up-nkrumahism-to-achieve-his-panafrican-goals-ghanas.html>.
- 2 During an Extraordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union in March 2005, which laid the basis for the redefinition of sovereignty as a responsibility between the African Union (AU) and the reform of the United Nations (UN), calling for a more representative and democratic Security Council, in which Africa, like all other world regions, is represented.
- 3 The plan was revived again in 1970s when Portugal attempted to invade Guinea. See T.A. Imobighc (1980). “African High Command: The Search for a Feasible Strategy of Continental Defence” *African Affairs*, no.315. 79, pp.241-254.
- 4 African Union Peace and Security Council (2020) Report 2020. Report of the Peace and Security Council on its Activities and the State of Peace and Security in Africa, from February 2019 to February 2020. Thirty-Third Ordinary Session, Assembly/AU/5(XXXIII), 9-10 February 2020, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 5 African Union Peace and Security Council (2022). Communiqué of the 1062nd meeting of the PSC held on 31 January 2022 on the Deployment of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). Available at: <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1062nd-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-31-january-2022-on-the-deployment-of-the-southern-african-development-community-mission-in-mozambique-samim>
- 6 HumAngle (2022). “East Africa military chiefs to meet in Nairobi over regional operations in DR Congo.” Available at: <https://humanglemedia.com/east-africa-military-chiefs-to-meet-in-nairobi-over-regional-operations-in-dr-congo/>
- 7 De Coning, C. Tchie, A.E.Y Grand, A. (2021). “Understanding Ad hoc Security Initiatives in Africa” TFP Policy Brief. Available at: https://trainingforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/TFP_ASI_Policy-Brief_v7-for-web.pdf
- 8 The ASF attained FOC in 2015, following Amani Africa II field training exercise in Lohatla, South Africa. This was prior to the establishment of the MNJTF as well as the RTF-LRA. The first plan for ASF FOC in 2010 was missed and extended to 2015, then 2016.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 See Gambari Report (2015). “Report of the Independent Panel of Experts’ Assessment of the African Standby Force and Plan of Action for Achieving Full Operational Capability by 2015”. The report main findings suggests that West, East, and Southern Africa have reached some degree of operational readiness while Central and North Africa are still behind. Available at: <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/report-independent-panel-of-experts-assessment-of-the-asf-latest.pdf>
- 11 Second Extraordinary Meeting with the Specialized Technical Committee on Defence, Safety and Security, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 15 January 2016.
- 12 The UN also has a Justice and Corrections Standing Capacity (JCSC), of six staff members, that was established in 2010.
- 13 In the second half of 2020, for instance, Italy chose to be a framework nation by leading a battlegroup which was participated in by Greece and Spain. Some other members participate as members of the Battlegroup. In some cases, countries like France, Germany, the UK, etc., singlehandedly form the EUBG by providing both HQ and troops.
- 14 Finabel Finabel. “European Union Battle Group Manual”. Guidance for operational preparation and tactical use. Promulgation of report FINABEL Nr A.25.R-T.37.R. European Land Forces Interoperability Centre
- 15 The NRF is also open to partner countries once approved by the North Atlantic Council.

- 16 Mölling, C. (2007). "NATO and EU Rapid Response: Contradictory or Complementary?" Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich Vol. 2 No. 22.
- 17 Xavier, A. I. (2013). "The EU's Battlegroup in perspective: addressing present challenges for future deployments". Austria Institut für Europaund Sicherheitspolitik.
- 18 African Union Specialised Technical Committees (2016). "9th Ordinary Meeting of the Specialized Technical Committee on Defence, Safety and Security" Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 04 June 2016.
- 19 Composed of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Western Sahara, NARC was established to fill the void of an active sub-regional organisation in the north due to the dormancy of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) since its establishment in 1989.
- 20 Darkwa, L. (2017) "The African Standby Force: The African Union's tool for the maintenance of peace and security", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38:3, 471-482, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2017.1342478
- 21 Seybolt, T. B. (1997). Coordination in Rwanda: The Humanitarian Response to Genocide and Civil War. Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, Working Paper, Available at: <http://www-jha.sps.cam.ac.uk/a/a027.htm>
- 22 Darkwa, L., 2020: Online interview on division of labour between the AU and RECs. 03 September 2020.
- 23 African Union Peace and Security Council (2016). "Communiqué 571st Meeting of the PSC Heads of State." Addis Ababa.. Available at: <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/571-psc-com-burundi-29-1-2016.pdf>
- 24 ACIRC was to provide an interim arrangement for a coalition of capable member states to deploy rapidly across the continent when authorised by the PSC. ACIRC was established in the context of the inability of African forces to respond rapidly to the situation in Mali, leading to France's rapid intervention in the region. Although it has not been deployed until its dissolution in 2020, ACIRC is expected to draw from the commitments of its 14 voluntary member states following AU approval.
- 25 PSC Communiqué 2019. The 821st meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on the harmonization of the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) within the African Standby Force (ASF) Framework. <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-821st-meeting-of-the-au-peace-and-security-council-on-the-harmonization-of-the-african-capacity-for-immediate-response-to-crises-acirc-within-the-african-standby-force-asf-framework>
- 26 While the NRF has not been deployed in conflict settings, elements of the force have been used in disaster relief, for example, to protect the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens and to support the Afghan presidential elections 2004. The NRF, specifically the VJTF, was for the first time activated in February 2022 and deployed to Eastern Europe as a defensive measure in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the force has not been deployed in an active combat operation.
- 27 Reykers, Yf and Karlsrud, J. (2017). "Multinational rapid response mechanisms: Past promises and future prospects", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38:3, 420-426, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2017.1348567
- 28 McCray, W. M. (2014). "Rapid Reaction Capability of the European Union", Marshall Centre Occasional Paper, no. 27, Available at: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/rapid-reaction-capability-european-union-0>.
- 29 Council of the European Union (2019). "EUMC Report to PSC on the Outcome of BGCC 2/19 – Enclosures: EU Battlegroup Offers and Commitments: Training and Certification Programmes". Brussels, Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14985-2019-ADD-1/en/pdf>
- 30 Council of the European Union 2019.
- 31 Reykers, Yf. (2017) EU Battlegroups: High costs, no benefits, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38:3, 457-470, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2017.1348568
- 32 The estimated cost of all AU PSOs in 2016 is \$772 million. (AU Peace Fund 2016. Securing Predictable and Sustainable Financing for Peace in Africa. African Union, August 2016.)

- 33 Azad, E. (2017). "G5 Sahel counterterrorism force explained." Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/3/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained>
- 34 AU PSC Protocol 2002. Protocol relating to the establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. Addis Ababa: African Union. Available from http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/Protocol_peace_and_security.pdf
- 35 AU 2005. The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: "The Ezulwini Consensus". Available at : https://www.apaunr.org/AU_Ezulwini%20Consensus.pdf
- 36 EU Commission (2017). "Evaluation of the implementation of the African Peace Facility as an instrument supporting African efforts to manage conflicts on the continent" – (2017/383799), Final Report Volume 2: Annexes.
- 37 A 2010 assessment of APSA also shows that 'some RECs/RMs are of the view that the AU Commission should not view itself as an implementing agency; it should rather play more of a coordination role' (AU PSD, 2010) but especially in norm-setting while RECs do the actual interventions.
- 38 Louw-Vaudran, L., (2022). "SADC and Rwanda should not go it alone in Mozambique". Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sadc-and-rwanda-shouldnt-go-it-alone-in-mozambique>
- 39 While national interest is key, countries with strong parliament may generally tend to be more critical of forces, especially in high risks environments.
- 40 De coning, C, Tchie, A, E, Y, Grand, A, (2021). "Understanding Ad hoc Security Initiatives in Africa" TfP Policy Brief. Available at: https://trainingforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/TfP_ASI_Policy-Brief_v7-for-web.pdf
- 41 African Union Peace and Security Council (2015). Communiqué of the Peace and Security Council of the AU (AU), at its 544th meeting on the situation in Mali and the Sahel region in general, 18 September 2015, Available at: <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-peace-and-security-council-of-the-african-union-au-at-its-544th-meeting-on-the-situation-in-mali-and-the-sahel-region-in-general>
- 42 Ani, NC., (2021). "Politics of Intervention within the African Peace and Security Architecture: The Fluid Roles between the African Union and Sub-Regional Organizations". *Africa Amani Journal*, Vol 8, Issue 1, 2021.
- 43 AU PSC Report 2020. Report of the Peace and Security Council on its Activities and the State of Peace and Security in Africa, from February 2019 to February 2020. Thirty-Third Ordinary Session, Assembly/AU/5(XXXIII), 9-10 February 2020, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 In the case of AU deployments in Burundi, Sudan and Somalia, the AU relied on troops from capable and willing member states rather than a solely regional arrangement. In Somalia, the involvement of regional actors is sometimes seen as a hurdle to the peace process. In Mali, the missions had solid regional components, but it took a long for the mission to be deployed due to the uneven capabilities of the troop-contributing states.
- 46 De Coning, C., (2016). "Adapting the African Standby Force to a just-in-time readiness model: improved alignment with the emerging African model of peace operations", in De Coning, Cedric; Karlsrud, John and Gelot, Linnéa (eds) (2016). *The Future of African Peace Operations: From the Janjaweed to Boko Haram*. Zed Books. Available from: <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:913028/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- 47 United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations, Article 51*; John S Gibson, *Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, 1957*
- 48 Aleksandra, D., (2010). "*The African Standby Force Put to the Test*" Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich. Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/124466/CSS_Analysis_84.pdf
- 49 Tchie, A, E, Y., (2022). Forthcoming "Waging Peace, Towards an Africa Union Stabilisation Strategy for Somalia" *Journal of International Peacekeeping, Brill*.



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