



THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF PEACE OPERATIONS II: A DIALOGUE WITH CENTRAL AFRICA

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On 24–25 September 2015 the meeting ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: A Dialogue with Central Africa’ project took place in Douala, Cameroon. The dialogue focused on five main lines of discussion: (a) the conflicts and security challenges expected in the region in the next 5–10 years; (b) the appropriate peace operations and conflict management responses to these challenges; (c) the current regional capacity to address such challenges; (d) the assistance required from external actors; and (e) democratic transitions in Central Africa.

This workshop report outlines four key themes that emerged during the regional dialogue: (a) the geopolitics of peace operations in Central Africa; (b) the need to prioritize structural prevention over reactive responses; (c) the lack of regional capacity for managing conflict; and (d) the importance of prioritizing the end-users of peace operations.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF PEACE OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Many participants regarded international and regional geopolitical dynamics as crucial factors influencing the nature and location of peace operations in Central Africa. Several participants noted that current international geopolitical dynamics are hindering the international community’s ability to respond to the perceived degradation of democracy and unwillingness of ruling elites to relinquish power in the region. One participant noted with concern the example of fragmentation in the United Nations Security Council—between China and Russia on the one side, and Western members on the other—which could paralyse the Security Council’s ability to intervene in conflicts where democracy or sovereignty are at stake. Others argued that the international footprint in Central Africa is likely to grow substantially as established and emerging powers increasingly compete for the abundant natural resources in the region. Some predicted that this multiplication of interests would also drive more robust responses. Specifically, they were concerned that as external actors pursue their interests through participating in peace operations or by providing bilateral support to conflicting parties, the lines between peace operations and war fighting would blur.

African states also engage in regional or unilateral operations to pursue their own agendas. Participants discussed the prominent role played by Nigeria and Uganda, among others, in peace operations and in military

PROJECT OVERVIEW

● The ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: African Outlooks on Conflict Management’ was launched with support from the Finnish and Dutch foreign ministries and in continued partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

The project aims to enhance understanding of how to best prepare peace operations for the diverse security environments in Africa, while promoting local and international dialogue on the future of peace and security.

In order to achieve these aims, a series of five regional dialogue meetings were organized in five African regions, followed by a global dialogue event and a variety of SIPRI publications.

This report summarizes a workshop that brought together a range of leading experts, military and government officials, and representatives of civil society and international organizations to discuss the future of peace operations and conflict management in Central Africa. It was jointly organized by SIPRI and FES.

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interventions in the region. Some were concerned that the international community has been pushing these countries and other regional actors to assume a greater share of the operational and financial burden for peace operations in their region, despite the fact that some of these countries engage in peace operations in order to pursue national interests rather than to improve regional security.

Participants also highlighted that some countries use their contributions to peace operations as a tool for deflecting international criticisms for domestic misconduct by threatening to withdraw their troops when criticized. In Burundi, for example, violence recently escalated when President Pierre Nkurunziza was elected for a third term despite the opposition's claim that a third term violates the constitution. Some suggested that the international community did not demonstrate a clear position on the issue for fear that Burundi would withdraw its troops from Somalia. In such cases, the international community is essentially confronted with a dilemma: whether to prioritize maintaining stability where a peace operation is deployed over the internal stability of the troop-contributing country.

Participants stressed that the effect of such geostrategic trade-offs should be more closely scrutinized, particularly in cases where urgent capacity comes with strings attached. One participant noted that a cost-benefit analysis of contributions guided by interests is particularly important, as the ends may not always justify the means.

STRUCTURAL PREVENTION OVER REACTIVE RESPONSES

Participants called for a shift in the approach to conflict management in the region, moving away from reactive responses towards structural prevention. Many of the current peace operations in the region were established in response to escalating violence and consequently focus on containing conflict and initiating reconstruction. Participants argued that this approach fails to produce sustainable peace and should therefore be rethought. One suggested that the examples of the persistent instability in the Central African Republic and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) demonstrate the need for a more structural and sustainable approach. Another participant gave the international and regional partnerships on counterterrorism in the region as examples of the current reactive, short-term approach. He noted that such partnerships often focus on restoring security and territorial integrity, but they neglect to encourage the state to take greater responsibility for the dynamics that perpetuate insurgent activity in the first place. Moreover, participants stressed that, ideally, future approaches to conflict management should go beyond short-term direct prevention—where action is taken to prevent a specific conflict—to long-term structural prevention that addresses underlying causes.

A shift towards prevention was also seen as a priority in light of the upcoming elections in several countries in the region, such as Chad, the DRC, the Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. Many participants agreed that the coming election season is likely to lead to conflict and criticized the international community's inaction, particularly given that the region is already highly unstable and the many evident warning signs. To prevent electoral violence in the short term, participants suggested deploying 'observer



missions' ahead of the election period. Such missions should aim to create dialogue between the key political figures on a mutually acceptable election protocol, monitor election proceedings and educate the population on the election process. Should these measures fail to prevent conflict, a regular stabilization mission could be considered. However, the long-term prevention of electoral violence demands structural measures. It is important not only to educate the population on electoral processes but also to improve education in general and strengthen services to marginalized communities with high levels of illiteracy and little access to information.

Some participants questioned whether the current governments in the region would welcome either such short-term direct or more long-term structural approaches. Many regimes in the region are highly sensitive about perceived interference in domestic affairs and might, therefore, view such efforts as a threat to national sovereignty. Others argued that while short-term direct prevention (such as the suggested observer missions) would probably be controversial, long-term structural prevention (such as improving access to basic education) would be far less political and, therefore, pose no threat to governments.

LACK OF REGIONAL CAPACITY FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

Many participants were concerned about the current lack of regional capacity for managing conflict. An official from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) noted that despite the ambition of its members, the organization faces considerable financial and capacity challenges. Participants identified four primary capacity gaps: (a) most member states lack basic resources such as the troops and equipment necessary to deploy peace operations, while countries with larger armed forces, such as the DRC, face internal conflicts and are therefore reluctant to commit their military capacities externally; (b) most of the armed forces in the region lack operational experience and do not meet international standards; (c) regional cooperation has been limited due to fragmentation and animosity between certain states and, according to one participant, ECCAS member states only cooperate under external pressure from the African Union or UN; and (d) not all the countries in the region are members of, or committed to, ECCAS. Rwanda and Uganda, for example, are members of the East African Community and not of ECCAS, while Angola and the DRC are members of both ECCAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). For some participants, this regional fragmentation tends to reduce the ability of the region to pool resources and develop a common vision to deal with security threats.

Despite these challenges, most participants stressed that improving cooperation and the capacity for conflict management in the region are crucial to addressing the complex security challenges that Central Africa will continue to face. Many called for increased international assistance in the short term—in terms of deploying external peace operations in the region and providing support for regional capacity building. However, a minority of participants argued that states should build up their own capacities internally in order to achieve greater ownership of the regional security agenda. One participant noted that regardless of whether capacity is built internally

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or through external assistance, the armed forces in the region currently provide security mainly to the ruling elites rather than being concerned with the well-being of the state or the public at large. External assistance would, therefore, only be sustainable if the countries in the region were to undergo a bottom-up reconciliation and development process that changed the role of the military.

PRIORITIZING THE END-USERS OF PEACE OPERATIONS

Several participants, primarily those from civil society organizations, suggested that existing peace operations are not sufficiently responsive to the needs of the communities affected by conflict. They stressed that peace operations should prioritize the empowerment and engagement of local communities and vulnerable populations. In particular, the experiences and points of view of women, children and youth should be better represented in decision-making processes. One participant noted, for example, that despite the fact that UN Security Council Resolution 1325 requires women to be involved in peace processes, this is rarely implemented in the region. The participant cited the high degree of impunity for cases of rape and violence against women and children in the region as evidence for this lack of implementation.

Participants noted that neither external international actors nor the whims of ruling elites should determine the goals and timing of a peace operation. Instead, the circumstances on the ground and the needs of the affected populations should dictate when an operation is deployed and when it is ready to be withdrawn. They warned that, despite the call by many international actors for deploying short-term operations with limited mandates, only long-term efforts can help countries in the region to build the capacity and institutions that guarantee a sustainable peace.

In order to ensure that the needs of affected populations are better aligned with the goals of the operation, several participants argued that development cooperation and humanitarian aid should be better coordinated, or even mainstreamed into operations. Some participants also noted that peace operations often inequitably allocate resources (e.g. building wells and providing basic services and protection) to internally displaced persons and refugees when the local communities are impoverished, lack the same basic amenities and are equally ravaged by the conflict. International and regional responses should, therefore, consider whether the distribution of aid and assistance is equitable between refugees and local communities.

Last but not least, in order to better focus on the needs of local communities, channels of communication with populations must be improved. One participant noted that populations and even the government are often not fully aware of the goals of a mission or its scope and are, therefore, not sufficiently enabled to guide peace operations in the direction of their needs.