Leveraging Lessons Learned for Innovation in Threat Response Models: A Utilitarian Approach to Addressing Security Challenges in Africa

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Abstract

The design of the African Standby Force (ASF) was informed by threat scenarios in Africa following the end of the Cold War. Despite being declared operationally ready in 2015, the ASF is yet to be utilised in its originally envisaged form. Instead, African states have devised measures to address threats outside the ASF's defined scenarios. We explore how deficits in the various threat response models deployed by the African Union (AU) over the years produced lessons that shaped the context for AU member states' preference for ad hoc security initiatives to address their shared security challenges. Through this, we contribute to the growing literature on ad hoc security coalitions (AHSCs) by curating relevant lessons learned from their deployment and how the AU can develop a structured framework to guide future operations. We do so by discussing two AHSCs deployed on the continent: the Coalition of States in East Africa against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram in Nigeria. We elaborate on particular aspects of their operations that produce lessons and how the AU has leveraged some of these lessons.

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1. Introduction

One of the fundamental reasons for founding the African Union (AU) was to address the continent's complex security challenges in the early post-Cold War period. The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), including its African Standby Force (ASF) was developed to address post-Cold War threats (African Union, 2003). Despite being deemed operationally ready, the ASF has yet to be used in its originally envisaged form. This scenario notwithstanding, Africa's Regional Economic Communities (RECs)/Regional Mechanisms (RMs) and member states have demonstrated a heightened capacity to respond to contemporary security challenges confronting them (de Coning, 2023). At the core of this response is the deployment of ad hoc security coalitions (AHSCs).

AHSCs are temporary, flexible security arrangements developed by affected member states within a given geographical space to address a common threat requiring swift and coordinated responses. These arrangements fall outside existing regional security arrangements (de Coning et al., 2022; Brosig, 2024). They are conceived as short-term notice creations in response to an emerging challenge without complex negotiations associated with international organisations governed by treaties (Reykers et al., 2023; Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024). Reykers et al. (2023) submit that these arrangements are established at short notice, have task-specific mandates and are autonomous. They fall under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations (UN), which provides for self-defence. Therefore, member states collaborating in AHSCs are not obliged to seek authorisation from the UN.

Karlsrud and Reykers (2020) developed a typology of AHSCs, focusing on their institutionalisation, institutional relationship with existing institutional frameworks and duration of deployment. This typology led them to characterise military responses including AHSCs, into rapid responses that are deployed for short durations and longer periods. Following this categorisation, they identified five types of military responses, three of which entail longer-duration deployments, loose burden-sharing responses, fully-fledged coalition responses, and fully-fledged institutional responses. On the short-term rapid responses' continuum, the authors identified first-entry institutional responses and institutional rapid responses.

On the nature of their relationships, scholars argue that AHSCs do not seek to replace existing international organisations of which they are part but rather plug gaps that the latter are unwilling or unable to handle (de Coning et al., 2022; Brosig, 2024). AHSCs can exist as a network of institutions anchored in international organisations and can coexist and co-govern with them in responding collaboratively to crises (Brosig, 2024). In addition, due to their informality, these AHSCs lack the accountability, transparency and governance mechanisms typical within international organisations. The literature also highlights factors contributing to the proliferation of AHSCs. Scholars have rightly noted that AHSCs emerge when existing mechanisms like those of the UN and the AU are paralysed and unresponsive to emerging crises, encouraging affected states to seek alternative arrangements (Hofmann et al., 2023; Brosig, 2024). AHSCs offer flexibility and speed for prompt deployment of response mechanisms tailored to the needs of the affected states, circumventing cumbersome internal processes of international organisations (Hofmann et al., 2023; Brosig, 2024; Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024)

Some scholars have criticised the AHSCs' relationship with international organisations, arguing that they may, over time, corrode or deinstitutionalise the institutional structure within which many of the key norms and principles are well established (Reykers et al., 2023). Some critics also argue that AHSCs need more pluralistic and horizontal accountability mechanisms instead of hierarchical ones (Hofmann et al., 2023). As noted in the literature, AHSCs enable states to bypass the constraints and bureaucracy of formal institutions. Although outside of established international governmental organisations, they do not necessarily undermine or compete with them. Instead, they fill crucial gaps where international organisations are unwilling or unable to act, allowing them to coexist and collaborate on crisis responses (Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024; Maglia, 2025).

While the literature broadly covers the features and functions of AHSCs, gaps remain on formulating useful frameworks to guide practices in deploying such missions. Brubacher et al. (2017) draw attention to the fact that while the task forces have yielded many positive results, there are associated issues, which the AU must strategically consider. This paper therefore contributes to the literature by discussing the experiences gained from the deployment of such missions in Africa over the years with the aim of providing the AU with some parameters to serve as guidelines in their deployments.

We argue that the action of states over nearly two decades of the AU's existence reflects a transformation in the collective security assumptions underpinning its threat response models. This shift stems from the evolving nature of contemporary security challenges and the pressing need for effective and efficient responses, which encompass timeliness, appropriate mandates and capabilities (Brosig, 2024). Drawing on two representative AHSCs, we examine the insights gained from their deployments and explore how these can inform the AU's institutional frameworks. Through our analysis of the AU's engagement with member states' AHSCs, this paper contributes to how the AU can formalise structures and processes to provide better guidance and support to such missions.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, drawing on qualitative data including the authors' professional experience, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and field notes from engagements with AU, UN and REC leaders, as well as experts from Troop and Police Contributing Countries (T/PCCs). The first author contributes practitioner insights from AU Peace Support Operations, notably in ASF capability development and doctrine drafting. The second author brings field experience from the implementation of the AU's Lake Chad Basin Stabilization Strategy.

Empirical evidence draws on collaborative research, including a 2018 AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) evaluation (65 interviews), a 2021 UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) assessment (70 interviews) and 15 interviews in 2023 for the development of UN–AU Joint Planning Guidelines. Informal exchanges with senior AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) officials, documented in field journals, provided additional context (see Swain and King, 2022 and Swain and Spire, 2020 for a fuller discussion on the use of informal conversations in qualitative research).

To ensure validity, interview data were triangulated with documentary sources and secondary literature. Three limitations were identified: potential subjectivity from the authors' institutional embeddedness, addressed through bracketing and external validation; challenges of replicability from informal communications, treated as supplementary information; and limited external validation of confidential sources, mitigated through cross-checking with public records.

3. How has the AU responded to the complex security challenges confronting the continent?

To address threats of armed violence confronting the continent, the AU has adopted three main approaches: hybrid peace operations, AU-mandated peace operations and the ASF. Hybrid peace operations occur when the AU co-deploys a peace operation with the UN, thereby retaining joint command and control over the mission. AU-mandated peace operations are deployments over which the AU exercises direct command, control and management (de Coning et al., 2016). The third is the ASF, the standing security arm that supports the AU Peace and Security Council's (PSC's) conflict prevention, response and management efforts.

3.1 Hybrid peace support operations: the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur

Violent conflict erupted in Sudan's Darfur region between the Sudanese government – through a pro-government militia known as the Janjaweed – and two rebel movements, the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in February 2003. In June 2004, following the successful signing of the Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement in N'djamena, Chad, the AU deployed an observer mission – the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) to monitor the implementation of the agreement. Despite the presence of the observer mission, violence continued unabated. Efforts to widen the scope of the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) to cover Darfur were met with fierce opposition from the government (International Crisis Group, 2006; United Nations Security Council, 2006a, 2006b; Gelot, 2012). AMIS, on the other hand, was welcome. However, it was severely constrained, and its limited capacity meant that it was unable to address the challenges in Darfur effectively (Mamiya et al., 2020; United Nations Security Council, 2021a, 2021b). Determined to find a solution to the crisis in Darfur, the AU and the UN worked together to deploy a hybrid mission. In accord with the wishes of the government, the mission was composed of African troops under the authority of a jointly appointed head of mission, with UN financial and logistics support (Guéhenno, 2015). AMIS troops were capacitated and rehatted to form the nucleus of the UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), pending force generation. To this end, it was agreed that the UN would provide a two-part logistics package – a light support package to be complemented by a heavy support package (United Nations Security Council, 2007a) – to enable the transition of AMIS to UNAMID.

The UNAMID experience provided three lessons on hybrid operations. One, it highlighted the importance of organisational flexibility in addressing contemporary security challenges enabling context-specific solutions. Two, the UNAMID experiment underlined the need to acknowledge and honour organisational differences to leverage the comparative advantages associated with the distinct organisational cultures, processes and approaches. Third, it foregrounded the need for partnership peace operations to have strategic convergence and role clarity. Strategic convergence discourages forum-shopping by conflict parties, while role clarity addresses expectations.

3.2 The African Union-mandated peace operations: the African Union Mission in Somalia

In response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Somalia and the associated complex geopolitical developments, the AU PSC mandated the deployment of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The mission was authorised by the UN Security Council for an initial six months to transition to a UN mission. AMISOM was mandated: to support the Transitional Federal Institutions of Somalia towards stabilisation, dialogue and reconciliation and longer-term post-conflict reconstruction; to facilitate humanitarian assistance; and to create long-term conditions for stabilisation (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2007). The mission functioned for 15 years, albeit with different iterations of its mandate. On 1 April 2022, the mission became the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). On 1 January 2025, it was transformed to the AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia. Although the UN supported the various iterations of the missions, they remained AU missions and never transitioned into UN missions.

The security situation in Somalia was unique in several ways. Unlike the post-Cold War armed conflicts in Africa, the crisis in Somalia in the 1990s was characterised by complete state collapse. Somalia's insurgency was distinctive because "it exhibited a diversity of insurgent actors, ranging from armed groups that turned to piracy, to local clan-based militias and to religious groups" (Reno, 2014:158). Moreover, the Somali conflict was characterised by militant Islam and violent extremism (Ramadane, 2014).

At its inception, the Chairperson's report, which served as the basis for the mission's mandate alluded to alleged connections between the Union of Islamic

Courts (UIC) and international terrorists, as well as foreign support for some actors. Nonetheless, it indicated that the mission was expected to stabilise the situation and pave the way for the UN to take over (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2007). With essentially no peace to keep, the need for offensive rather than traditional peacekeeping operations was evident. Therefore, framing AMISOM as a peace support operation, rather than a peace enforcement mission was strategically misaligned and ill-advised.

The envisaged UN transition never materialised, and AMISOM effectively became a war-fighting mission without the necessary capabilities. Several studies highlight the persistent mismatch between the mission's objectives and its operational capacity (Peace Support Operations Division, 2017; Williams et al., 2018). It was not until 2013 that the AU PSC officially acknowledged AMISOM's engagement in offensive operations and endorsed the recommendations for enhanced capabilities, including increased troop numbers, force multipliers and enablers to match the mission's tasks "to degrade the capabilities of Al Shabaab" (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2013a:para. 7). The shift in the PSC's position was critical in the initial efforts to close the capability gap that had plagued the mission since its inception.

When AMISOM transitioned to ATMIS in 2022, the PSC provided a much more realistic mandate, explicitly acknowledging the need for the mission to "become more agile, more mobile, more flexible, and better able to respond to the emerging threats by enhancing its force protection and posture as well as by creating mobile and quick reaction forces" (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2022:para. 12).

The AMISOM experience highlights three critical lessons for the AU's threat response models. First, the effectiveness of AU-mandated operations depends significantly on the engagement of states with strategic interests in the conflict because of the high human and financial costs involved. In the lead-up to the deployment of AMISOM, concerns and objections were raised over the involvement of Somalia's neighbours (Relief Web, 2005; United Nations Security Council, 2006a, 2006b). The objections stemmed mainly from the perceived support by neighbouring countries, particularly Ethiopia and Eritrea, for different factions (United Nations Security Council, 2004, 2007b). Despite these objections, non-frontline states that pledged support failed to follow through, leaving frontline states to bear the greater share of the responsibility of the deployment.

Force generation remained a perennial challenge in AMISOM, remaining well below the authorised troop strengths (United Nations Security Council, 2007b) until about 2012. On 19 January 2007, the AU had mandated 8 000 troops for Somalia but only 1 700 had been deployed by June that year (African Union Peace and Security Council 2007). Deployment rose to 6 120 by March 2010, reaching full strength in December 2010 (United Nations Security Council 2007; 2010a; 2010b). Troop generation accelerated thereafter, and by August 2012 the AU had deployed all 17 731 uniformed personnel authorised by the UN Security Council in February 2012 (United Nations Security Council 2012).

Second, the AMISOM experience emphasises the need for mandates and resources that match contextual realities. Despite being a combat mission that also had to counter terrorism from the outset, AMISOM was framed as a peace support operation, limiting its ability to mobilise the needed combat resources. The UN Secretary General highlighted the operational gaps, noting that "despite significant progress, AMISOM remains overstretched, lacking critical enablers and force multipliers" (United Nations Security Council, 2013).

The third lesson from AMISOM is the need for military efforts to be anchored in a broader political strategy. Since the February 2006 violence that led to AMISOM's deployment was an outgrowth of a 1977 conflict, there were underlying political issues. Colonial legacies, postcolonial dynamics such as secession, the roles of neighbouring states, unification efforts and clan rivalries all contribute to the protracted conflict in Somalia. Addressing these requires more than kinetic responses – it demands interventions that reflect the complexity of the conflict and support state-building. Initially, the AU's mission prioritised creating conditions for peace, resulting in a strong military focus. The mission, however, remained heavily military-focused due to the lack of a political strategy by the strategic actors – the government of Somalia, the AU, the UN and other bilateral actors – to match the military commitment. There were, therefore, several missed opportunities when Somali political elites failed to take advantage of the military successes of AMISOM to further political processes for the resolution of the conflict. It was not until 11 November 2017 that the government of Somalia, the AU and the UN discussed a comprehensive approach to security that included considerations for the primacy of politics (see, UNSOM, 2017).

3.3 The African Standby Force

Africa's threat response model derives from a collective security approach rooted in a regional security complex (African Union, 2004). The Constitutive Act and the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (the Protocol) provide a comprehensive framework for early warning, conflict prevention, management, response and post-conflict reconstruction (see, in particular, the preambular sections and Articles 3(f), 4(f), (g), (h), 4(j) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000 and Articles 4, 6, 7, 9–14 of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, 2002). The ASF, which is the implementing arm for the enforcement of PSC decisions relating to the use of force is predicated on the cooperation of the continent's five regions. The political authority for the deployment of the ASF rests exclusively with the PSC meeting at the level of heads of state and government (African Union, 2003). It is noteworthy that while Article 7 (c) of the Protocol vests the PSC with the power to "authorize the mounting and deployment of peace support missions", Articles 7 (e) and (f) make it clear that the power to intervene rests with the Assembly.

Almost immediately after it was declared operationally ready, the AU PSC had to address the unfolding crisis in Burundi. Meeting at the level of ambassadors, the PSC declared an intent to deploy the standby force. The decision was, however, overturned by the heads of state and government. Several factors explain the divergence between the PSC's decision at ambassadorial level and level of heads of state and government regarding Burundi. As Assembly deliberations occurred in closed session, the exact discussion remains unclear. However, Dersso (2016) offers insight, suggesting the debate centred on whether the Burundi crisis met the Article 4(h) threshold of the AU Constitutive Act. Notably, by the January 2016 Summit, tensions following the 11 December 2015 events in Bujumbura – key to the PSC's 17 December decision – had de-escalated. As only the Assembly holds the authority to approve military intervention (African Union, 2002, Article 13(2)), the PSC's move to authorise a potentially forceful mission was arguably an overreach. Diplomatically, the absence of all but one head of state at the PSC summit-level meeting may reflect reluctance to endorse intervention (see Dersso, 2016; see also Darkwa, 2017).

Although the inability to deploy into Burundi is not the focus of this paper, the dynamics that characterised the discourse on deployment offer valuable insights.

Some members of the East African Standby Force (EASF), including Tanzania and Rwanda, made it clear that they would not deploy (The Citizen, 2015; The East African, 2015); and Uganda spoke with its silence, thereby making deployment of the EASF challenging (Wilén and Williams, 2018). This situation notwithstanding, based on the design of the ASF, the AU could also have explored the option of deployment by a REC/RM outside the East African region. The legal and policy documents of the ASF envisage cross-regional deployments (see African Union, 2005; see also Williams, 2015). Following the aborted attempt at deploying in Burundi, the issue of deploying the ASF has not come up in the PSC again. The question that must, therefore, be answered is why the ASF has never been deployed?

Despite the non-deployment of the ASF in its originally envisaged format, its evolution offers useful lessons for Africa's threat response models. Deployments by two regions – ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) – under the rubric of the ASF offer invaluable lessons. During its intervention in The Gambia, ECOWAS maintained communication with the AU but treated the crisis as a West African matter. Two points stand out regarding the ECOWAS deployment in The Gambia. First, ECOWAS threatened the use of force to enforce its democracy norm. Notably, the AU PSC Protocol does not explicitly include the restoration of democracy under Article 13(c) of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, which outlines the conditions for ASF intervention. Second, the actual deployment occurred at the request of President Adama Barrow following his swearing-in at The Gambia's mission in Senegal. Accordingly, it fell under Article 51 of the UN Charter (self-defence) and, technically, did not require prior authorisation from the AU. In contrast, SADC's deployment to Mozambique reflected greater regional autonomy. Despite repeated AU Commission (AUC) requests for involvement, SADC excluded the AU from decision-making processes, only engaging it post-deployment to secure PSC endorsement (Interview with senior official of the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security 23 March 2023). When asked why SADC excluded the AUC, a senior mission leader of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) suggested it may have been an oversight. However, separate discussions with current and former AUC officials (including two from Southern Africa) revealed consensus that SADC's actions reflect a historical pattern of operating independently of the AU in past peacemaking efforts

(Author's communication with senior mission leader of SAMIM, 7 December 2023 and current and former senior officials of the AUC, March 2024). These cases show that, while the ASF remains a formal continental framework, it operates primarily as a political reference point. In practice, regional security complexes and collective defence arrangements offer member states more flexible and context-relevant mechanisms for addressing shared threats.

4. How have states responded to the complex security challenges confronting them?

4.1 Ad hoc security coalitions

The changing nature of security threats and the limitations of UN and AU responses, including in relation to the use of force, have created opportunities for ad hoc security initiatives to emerge as complementary response mechanisms (Maglia et al., 2025). This has been particularly evident in a post-Cold War period that is witnessing an expansion in mandates for UN peacekeeping from traditional monitoring roles to more robust peace enforcement tasks. Also, the geopolitical dynamics in the decision-making processes for the maintenance of peace and security has impacted the UN's ability to deploy peacekeeping operations into certain conflict contexts (Karlsrud, 2017; Andersen, 2018). The use of force in maintaining international peace and security remains contested. Legally, it engages jus in bello, requiring compliance with international humanitarian law. In traditional peacekeeping, force may be used in self-defence without rendering peacekeepers parties to the conflict. However, with the rise of robust mandates – particularly for civilian protection – clarity is needed. The UN Secretary General addressed this through the bulletin on the Observance by UN Forces of International Humanitarian Law. Legal complexities and potential human costs often shape political decisions regarding combat operations needed to address evolving security threats. This has created gaps for ad hoc security initiatives to fill by rapidly deploying targeted missions among states that share common security objectives, circumventing UN and AU organisational constraints.

The concept of AHSCs on the continent first surfaced in 2008, when some countries in East Africa cooperated to address the threat posed by the LRA. Six years later, in 2015, an AHSC emerged in parts of West and Central Africa under the umbrella of the Lake Chad Basin Commission to fight the Boko Haram menace. The G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Accra Initiative, two other AHSCs,

emerged in 2017 to address the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in some Sahelian countries and the littoral states in West Africa, respectively.

Lessons from two of the AHSCs, the Coalition of States in East Africa against the LRA, which was transformed into the Regional Cooperation Initiative against the Lord's Resistance Army (RCI-LRA) and the Multinational Joint Task Force for addressing Boko Haram (MNJTF) offer some perspectives.

4.1.1 Coalition of States in East Africa against the LRA

The Coalition of States in East Africa against the LRA was borne out of the realisation that the threat posed by the group was not limited to Uganda (for the history of the LRA, see Dunn, 2010; see also Allen, 2023). The LRA employed brutal tactics including the targeting of civilians, abductions, rape and amputations as deliberate strategies. Uganda adopted a combination of military and political negotiations to address the threat of the LRA, without much success. In 2002, Uganda obtained permission from Sudan to launch a military offensive – Operation Iron Fist – against LRA bases in South Sudan, from where members of the LRA launched attacks into Uganda. The destruction of the LRA's military bases resulted in a spread of the group to other areas, notably the northern and western states of South Sudan, the DRC and the Central African Republic, from where it continued to perpetrate atrocities against civilian populations (Relief Web, 2002; Dunn, 2004).

The transnational threat posed by the LRA necessitated a collective approach by affected member states. On 14 December 2008, a 'coalition of LRA-affected countries' agreed to the launch of Operation Lighting Thunder, a joint military attack against the LRA in the DRC's Garamba Forest. Each member state was responsible for its troops, and participating states agreed to allow troops to operate within defined areas in one another's territories. The United States provided support through the deployment of 100 special forces as advisers and trainers. In addition, Uganda, which served as the 'Lead Nation', also provided some logistical support to some of the participating countries (Atkinson, 2009; Spiegel and Atama, 2009). These accounts were corroborated by two senior officers of the Ugandan Peoples' Defence Forces, one of whom participated in planning and executing the operation (Interview with senior military officer, Ugandan Peoples' Defence Forces, 5 September 2023; Interview with senior military officer of the Ugandan Peoples' Defence Forces who was part of the planning and execution of

the operation, 25 November 2024). The operation lasted until March 2009, when Uganda announced its withdrawal from the DRC (for a more detailed discussion on the RCI-LRA, see Brubacher et al., 2017).

In 2009, on the instruction of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the AUC engaged the affected member states to develop a coordinated regional approach to address the LRA challenge. Following two regional ministerial meetings in 2010 and 2011 and the deployment of a Technical Assessment Mission, the AU PSC authorised the deployment of the RCI-LRA in November 2011 (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2011). The RCI-LRA was deployed: to strengthen the operational capabilities of the countries affected by the atrocities of the LRA; to create an environment conducive to the stabilisation of the affected areas; to free communities of LRA atrocities; and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to affected areas. The RCI-LRA had three major components: the Joint Coordination Mechanism (JCM), the Regional Task Force (RTF) and the Headquarters of the RTF. The JCM coordinated strategy and was chaired by the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security. It consisted of the Ministers of Defence of the affected countries. The RTF was the military component of the RCI-LRA and had a ceiling of 5,000 troops. Additionally, the AU had an Envoy who coordinated issues related to the LRA. While the AU has not officially closed down the mission, it became frozen after the withdrawal of Uganda in 2017. The last time the mission was discussed at the PSC was at its 795th meeting in October 2018.

4.1.2 The Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram

Since 2009, the violent extremist group Boko Haram has been a source of insecurity for Nigeria and, more recently, the other riparian countries of the Lake Chad Basin – Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Boko Haram's use of terror, including killings, abductions, and arson, targets civilian communities and the Nigerian government, which it views as its archenemy. Details of the group's origin are varied, yet a central theme is the influence of radical Islamic ideology intertwined with socio-economic and political challenges pervasive in Northern Nigeria (for a history of Boko Haram, see Albert, 2017). Nigeria initially viewed Boko Haram as a domestic threat that could be managed nationally. Mickler et al. (2019) demonstrate how, in the early stages, Nigeria resisted external pressure for action in various international fora. However, the impact of the group's activities, including the extensive displacement of communities and the extension of attacks

to neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad Basin made a regional approach inevitable (Onuoha, 2014; McQuaid and Asfura-Heim, 2015; Falode, 2016).

In 2012, the affected countries adapted the MNJTF – an existing security cooperation mechanism, established in 1998 to combat transnational crimes in the Lake Chad Basin – to deepen cooperation in the fight against Boko Haram (Assanvo et al., 2016). Meeting in Niamey, Niger, on 20 January 2015, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Defence in the Boko Haram-affected areas and their neighbours (Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Niger and Nigeria) agreed to enhance their cooperation in the fight against Boko Haram. To this end, a meeting was requested of the Chiefs of Defence Forces/Staff of the region to develop a concept of operations to guide the efforts of operationalising the MNJTF.

The meeting tasked the Chairperson of the AUC to report to the PSC on efforts made by the affected states to counter Boko Haram, in preparation for authorising the deployment of the MNJTF. It also requested the AUC to convene a meeting between the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), relevant regional bodies, international partners and experts to finalise key instruments for the operationalisation of the mission. Additionally, the Chairperson was asked to transmit the concept of operations and subsequent PSC Resolution to the UN Security Council (UNSC) for authorisation and the establishment of a trust fund to support the MNJTF (Government of Niger, 2015). On 30 January 2015, the PSC authorised the deployment of the MNJTF, requested the UNSC endorsement and called for international support and funding (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2015).

5. What lessons can the AU learn to enhance its ability to address contemporary security threats on the continent?

The cases analysed demonstrate that when the AU, UN, RECs/RMs and member states have found it necessary to work together, they have identified innovative arrangements to enable collective action despite political and operational constraints. A key lesson from the cases discussed is the need for timely consultation and coordination at the highest political decision-making levels to foster strategic convergence and guidance for timely, coherent threat responses.

Responses by African member states to insecurity on the continent reveals a dissonance between the AU's normative frameworks for addressing peace and security and state practice. The practice of member states shows an inclination

towards the pragmatism of collective defence over collective security mechanisms. The collective security norm in the AU is provided for in several provisions of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000). Articles 3(b) and (f) of the Act promote collective action for peace and security. Article 4 (f) of the Act affirms the principle of non-use of force, while Articles 4(h) and (j) set out the parameters for intervention and collective action. Similarly, Article 2(1) of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (2002) assigns responsibility for determining breaches of these principles. Article 7 of the Protocol empowers the PSC to determine an appropriate response to violations. However, the AU does not provide specific provisions for collective defence. State practice suggests an application of the Charter principles of self-defence. This emerging trend calls into question the continued relevance of the collective security assumptions that underpinned the development of the ASF. While collective security is premised on a shared commitment to peace and centralised decision-making (Miller, 1999) through organs like the UNSC globally, the AU PSC and the decision-making organs of the RECs/RMs, collective defence is decentralised and rooted in the inherent right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter. It permits affected states to unilaterally determine violations and coordinate responses – individually or with regional allies – without requiring prior authorisation from a central body, though notification is expected (Kelsen, 1948). This distinction is critical because it has implications for political decision-making and command and control of operations.

Despite the persistent resource constraints associated with the deployment of peace operations, affected member states have devised innovative responses through AHSCs to address threats confronting them (de Coning, 2023). Using national resources, states involved in AHSCs deploy their own troops with available capabilities, within national borders, with the right of hot pursuit into the territories of participating states. Operations are undertaken under national command within a cooperative framework that facilitates intelligence sharing, coordination and joint operations. Although there is burden-sharing, AHSCs rely on a lead nation with the political will to assume the largest share of financial and logistical responsibilities.

AU endorsement is often sought after the political decision to act by affected member states has been made. Endorsement by the AU PSC offers additional legitimacy and provides a convening platform for coordination particularly with

stakeholders that may not be directly affected, to promote strategic coherence. The level of AU involvement may vary from minimal to fairly significant. Clearer AU guidance on the legal and procedural distinctions between self-defence and collective security, and on the steps required for AU endorsement of the former, is essential. This includes defining expectations for when and how regional or ad hoc responses should be aligned with continental frameworks. Developing institutionalised mechanisms for strategic coordination between the AU, regional organisations, and where applicable, coalitions of the willing is therefore critical.

6. How has the AU leveraged the lessons to enhance its threat response models?

The AU has progressively incorporated lessons from threat response models on the continent to enhance its normative and operational threat response options. For instance, lessons from UNAMID were instrumental in shaping the arrangement between the AU and the UN responses to the conflict in Somalia. The provision of a logistical support package by the UN to AMISOM was to enhance the capacity of the AU to address a conflict that the UN could not engage with. The idea was similar to the light and heavy support packages provided by the UN to the start-up mission in Darfur as AMIS was transformed into UNAMID.

With regards to AHSCs, the Peace Support Operations Division of the AUC on 10 August 2017 organised a roundtable meeting to discuss the 'Implications of ad-hoc regional coalitions of States for the African Standby Force and African Peace and Security Architecture' (African Union, 2017). The meeting was the first formal attempt by the AU to systematically engage with the political and operational implications of AHSCs to the continental peace and security architecture. The recommendations of the meeting, which contributed significantly to the AU's efforts at developing relevant policy and legal documents for its threat response models, included better conceptual, political and legal clarity on AHSCs. Several recommendations from the meeting significantly shaped the AU's threat response frameworks. Notably, the call for a comprehensive Capstone document led to the development of the AU Peace Support Operations Doctrine, replacing the initially proposed ASF doctrine. This new doctrine offers conceptual clarity on ASFs and ASIs, delineated roles, and provides decision-making guidance to strengthen political coherence across peace operations (African Union 2024).

In 2018, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government pronounced itself on the place of AHSCs in the AU's threat response models when it inter alia, requested enhanced cooperation with existing AHSCs and continued use of AHSCs . At the Commission level, a structured framework for coordinating with AHSCs has emerged, centred on strategic support cells that link the AUC, coalition headquarters, RECs/RMs, and partners. These cells facilitate decision implementation, resource mobilisation and support operational planning. Having learned the need for dedicated expertise for functional coordination between the Commission and AHSCs, the Commission provided a much more robustly staffed strategic support cell for the MNJTF (interview with senior officials, AU DPAPS, 17 May 2023). Moreover, the AU has embedded a senior civilian officer in the MNJTF who assists with practical coordination between the MNJTF in the field and the strategic support cell at the AU headquarters.

This utilitarian engagement with new response models reflects their role in strengthening security complexes that complement the AU's efforts to address continental peace and security challenges. The 2024 AU Doctrine on Peace Support Operations codifies long-standing practices and provides guidance for engaging response mechanisms outside APSA. It defines "coalitions of member states" and outlines AU engagement modalities, clarifying responsibilities and roles for all stakeholders. Two practices have emerged: first, the AU legitimises operations through PSC "authorisation", "endorsement" or "recognition"; second, the AUC, via the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, provides technical and logistical support. Additionally, in advocating for predictable and sustainable financing, the Commission cites AHSCs to highlight gaps in the international peace and security architecture and supports calls for UN-backed funding of initiatives like the MNJTF and G5 Sahel (African Union, 2023).

7. Conclusion

AU member states are increasingly adopting their own security response models, especially in confronting violent extremism and terrorism, due to the AU's limited capacity to address evolving threats. These responses often take the form of cross-border coalitions rooted in collective defence, diverging from the collective security principles underpinning the AU's peace and security architecture. In practice, the AU has adopted a utilitarian approach – authorising, endorsing or recognising such coalitions through the PSC, and providing technical and logistical support.

This trend reflects both the AU's operational constraints and its adaptive learning. Inadequate and unpredictable funding, capability shortfalls and limited coordination between the PSC, RECs/RMs, and affected member states have hindered the AU's ability to lead strategically. Nonetheless, lessons learned have contributed to a more flexible AU posture, resulting in a mutually beneficial arrangement: member states and RECs/RMs draw on the AU's legitimacy and political cover, while the AU remains relevant in peace and security efforts.

However, there is a risk that the PSC becomes a rubber-stamp mechanism – used primarily for legitimising actions already taken by member states – thus weakening its strategic role. Increasingly, affected states make autonomous decisions that the AU is later expected to endorse, raising concerns about the erosion of the AU's agency.

While guidance exists on AU-REC/RM relations, there is a lack of clear protocols governing the AU's engagement with AHSCs involving member states and RECs. To avoid instrumentalisation of the PSC and ensure coherent decision-making, greater clarity is needed on consultation, coordination and role delineation. This would enable the AU to provide more meaningful strategic input and reduce fragmentation and inter-institutional tension.

The evolving pattern of AU engagement suggests the consolidation of a new norm: support for member state-led coalitions in managing security threats. Yet, the absence of standardised criteria for AU endorsement undermines consistency and transparency. Without uniform procedures on accountability and reporting, the AU's role risks becoming reactive rather than directive.

To uphold its credibility and ensure continued relevance, the AU must invest in a structured framework to guide its engagement with AHSCs. This should build on the past 15 years of institutional experience, distilling key lessons into clear, actionable guidance. Doing so will strengthen the AU's strategic leadership, ensure consistency across interventions, and help the AU maintain its legitimacy as the primary guarantor of peace and security on the continent.

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