

Towards Centralizing African Intelligence

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The African Union (AU) has long wanted to develop a continental system capable of preventing wars and resolving crises with the finality of being independent from all forms of neocolonialism and ensuring security on the African continent without having to rely on a protector such as France or the “International Community” a.k.a. the Western World of Great Britain. But the security situation in Africa is a more complicated challenge: terrorist organisations slip across borders, cybercriminality hurts African economies, and organised crime syndicates are thriving in decentralized and impoverished areas in Africa.

The African Union has established key institutions that include the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), and the African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL). These mechanisms are disjointed and have restricted responsibilities. In this world, the question to be asked is whether Africa should design a continental security and intelligence institution under the AU’s setup, such as a body that could inform more efficiently, promote data-sharing and *predict* threats before they grow into conflicts.

In reality, establishing an African Union Security and Intelligence Agency (AUSIA) would be challenged with questions of sovereignty and trust, as well as providing the structure for the necessary financial resources required for oversight. The shift described in the title of this

article, from volume to value, is not new and has been expressed and elaborated in many different ways. However, it represents a tremendous leap from rhetoric to reality.

There is an existing foundation to build from in Africa. The Peace and Security Council (PSC) has already become the AU's most important decision-making organ for preventing conflicts and combating crises. Based on it, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) gathers and analyses data on future conflicts, while AFRIPOL promotes law enforcement collaboration amongst member countries.

The Malabo Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, offers standards for protecting information and guarantees that nations will work together on cyber-related issues. Also, the AU has recently been emphasizing the integration of artificial intelligence into security governance, by recognizing the gradually increasing role that AI plays in predictive analysis and conflict prevention. These mechanisms are steps forward for the African Union.

However, they are still fragmented, the CEWS has a limited ability to predict future events AFRIPOL emphasises law enforcement instead of intelligence. The Malabo Convention is not even ratified or fully implemented in many of the member states. The result is a patchwork of tools that do not effectively address the international and quickly changing nature of security threats. One of the AU's most important components is the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), an organization that effectively integrates various instruments of war prevention and settlement. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are a key cell providing area specific know-how and functional capacity. This tool makeup has embodied the principle saying that regional cooperation is the foundation for continental peace.

This form of "Pan-Africanism" as Cheick Tidjani likes to call it is also a relevant mechanism. A consultative body composed of distinguished African figures, the *Panel of the Wise* is charged with offering advice on measures to stop conflicts from the outset and mediate when they do occur. While not a full-blown intelligence service, the Panel illustrates the way the AU makes use of trustworthy go-betweens to address ticklish political questions. It sets an example of how sensitive, high-level information might be managed responsibly at the continental level. The ASF also signals AU investment in Standby Forces under a formula called the African Standby Force (ASF). Rapid response protection especially in crises but in

practice, the lack of a coordinated intelligence has made it difficult to act on a case. A boost to intelligence capabilities will directly enhance the ASF's operational effectiveness. The AU increasingly pays attention to computerization, digital transformation and cybersecurity offers another possibility for growth.

Digital Transformation Strategy of the African Union (2020-30) envisages a continent connected over secure digital networks, whence it would be feasible to set up the technological infrastructure needed for safe intelligence sharing. Similarly, AU efforts to combat disinformation and monitoring elections show a realization that other types of non-traditional threats can weaken social orders too. Altogether, these tools demonstrate that the AU already has a patchwork of strategies, and organizations that, if better coordinated, could provide a solid base for future Security and Intelligence Agencies.

An African Union Security and Intelligence Agency could centralize threat assessment by standardizing protocols for the countries to cooperate more efficiently. Joseph Connors, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment's Africa Program. *"That will just lead to another giant, white elephant in Addis Ababa [the capital of Ethiopia and seat for the AU]. It would make much better sense for headquarters facilities and mission assets to be divided among different African countries."* A continent-wide agency could standardize protocols. Countries with different capacities will be able to cooperate effectively if they share the same set of norms and procedures.

For smaller and more fragile states, then, those potentials are there, but they are not something they could build on their own. At least three countries (Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria) have human resources and expertise in the nuclear field or know-how for developing technology for the nuclear defense industry. A continent-wide agency could bring them together. More importantly, a continental agency will strengthen the connection between intelligence and action. By pushing conclusions directly to the PSC and regional mechanisms, it could turn early warning into an early response, something the African Union has historically been slow in achieving.

Creating an African Union peace and security agency would require a development in security-related architecture. It means recognizing the international threats to the African continent such as terrorism, organized crime, cyber-insecurity, and climate-related crises. These cannot be tackled by individual states themselves.

If such an organization were to pull intelligence inputs from all sources, facilitate standardized cooperation between different actors, and combine its existing warning systems with effective action on behalf of the union, then Africa might become more proactive and resilient than it has been so far. This dream of a continental body for intelligence therefore needs to be approached with transparency and practicality.

A federal, gradualistic approach based on strong legal frameworks and oversight mechanisms represents the most realistic way forward. The AUSIA is now a goal for years to come, launching the debate is necessary. Should we try out models, set up regional hubs, and beef up existing tools like CEWS and AFRIPOL, then Africa will move further down the road to a future in which conflicts are *prevented* rather than merely *managed*. In a continent where instability is measured in the cost of lives, livelihoods, and lost opportunities, foreseeing threats before they arise and acting in cooperation will be the most important commitment the AU member states can make.