



The African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis: Advice for African Policymakers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the operationalisation of the African Standby Force (ASF) within the AU security system, rapid reaction remains a challenging task, as the crisis in Mali has demonstrated. The African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (ACIRC) has therefore been proposed following an initiative from South Africa, in order to equip the AU with a rapid deployment instrument. The ACIRC not only fills the capability gap but also aims at providing more African ownership in crisis management and response situations. However, many challenges lie ahead. These range from outright opposition from some member states, funding gaps, troop contribution and logistical worries to mandate issues on generating, deploying and withdrawing troops, as well as the question of how to integrate the ACIRC into the AU's existing security structures. This briefing reflects both the challenges and potential of the ACIRC and makes specific policy recommendations for its operationalisation.

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INTRODUCTION

After instituting the ASF as part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2002/2003, the AU has faced many challenges in getting it fully operational. Although a rapid deployment capability (RDC) was planned as part of the ASF, it never materialised. A case in point was the conflict in Mali, to which the ECOWAS standby force did not respond adequately. Instead the French had to deploy a force to stem the incursion of rebels trying to overthrow the government. This episode exemplifies the need for a continental rapid reaction force under the administration of the AU.

The AU Assembly, on South Africa's initiative, finally agreed to such a force in 2013. The ACIRC is designed as a stopgap measure to allow the RDC to become operational later on.

ACIRC, APSA AND THE NEED FOR RAPID RESPONSE

The dynamics of conflict in Africa have changed perceptions about intervention. Crises tend to transcend regional borders, which has posed a challenge to regionally bound instruments within APSA. For example, Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army operate beyond their respective home regions. Inter-regional elements can be found in many crises, while the African security architecture is built on regional crisis reaction. The ACIRC ideally provides the AU with a continental instrument addressing such problems. Furthermore, it is aimed at reducing the existing reliance on external actors for rapid response, such as France's engagement in Mali in 2013 and the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2013.

The ACIRC is premised on volunteerism by member states and the ability and capacity of states to deploy rapidly (within 15 days). Other principles include continentalism (more AU-centred) rather than regionalism (regional economic community [REC]-centred), self-sustenance (with member states paying for deployment) and collective security. With 13 members and still growing, the ACIRC's pledged capabilities have been verified with the whole project scheduled to be operational in 2015. Although there is an objective need for a rapid response instrument within the AU peace architecture, the challenges surrounding the operationalisation of the ACIRC are significant.

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OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL MANDATE

While the ACIRC was endorsed by the AU Assembly in 2013, in practice it is far from being a pan-African project and has been criticised for creating divisions among AU members. Key countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt are not endorsing the concept, partly out of fear of South African dominance. A key determinant of the future of the ACIRC remains its political acceptance and the remaining opposition on the continent. The building of a self-reliant

continental and robust security architecture implies the allocation of important human and financial resources. This would require strong political commitment from African leaders to invest in the operationalisation of these mechanisms (ASF, ACIRC), not only by redefining their national defence policies on external military operations but also by investing in strategic and operational capacities at the continental and regional level.

A second key question is how to integrate the ACIRC into the existing structures of APSA. If it is only a stopgap instrument for the missing RDC within the ASF under continental but not regional management, political questions might become less contested. However, considering the past slow operationalisation process of the AU's peace architecture, a real concern is that it is likely to become a permanent instrument and thus will affect the political balance of the current region-based system with the ASF at the centre. The ACIRC needs to be harmonised with the operationalisation of the ASF in light of the multiple challenges that the ACIRC will encounter in launching interventions. The AU also needs to launch a capacity-building programme for troop-contributing countries (TCCs) to enhance their awareness of the need to strengthen AU oversight capacity in the management of peace support operations and the ACIRC.

Furthermore, there is a need for an effective consultation mechanism co-ordinated by the AU to engage TCCs in political and operational decisions relating to future peace operations. The AU should also utilise African think tanks to engage in an annual critical review of ASF/ACIRC operations. A move to depoliticise the ACIRC and ease potential friction with existing mechanisms would be the official recognition that the ASF is already operational, as the intervention in Mali showed, and state categorically that the Full Operational Capability to which the ACIRC makes an important contribution, will remain a work in progress for the foreseeable future.

Recent data on Africa shows that armed conflict is on the rise again. Yet considering the slow deployment of the UN (6–12 months) there is an objective capacity gap, which the ACIRC seeks to address. However, in light of the large numbers of deployed peacekeepers, it is not clear if the operationalisation of an additional rapid response tool will have negative resource implications for existing security structures within the AU, in particular the ASF.

The strategic direction of the ACIRC in the context of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) as a potential lead military will be a major factor in determining operational success or failure. Key issues are centred primarily on the operational and tactical theatres of possible ACIRC deployments, highlighting command and control issues, training problems and, most importantly, the dearth of strategic and tactical airlift capacity among African nations.

Nevertheless, the ACIRC should be designed in a way that embraces structural responses rather than being reactive and only a stopgap instrument based on a

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short-term coalition of a few states. A structural or organisation-wide response is important because most regional and global crises are complex in their emergence and solution, which requires concerted and comprehensive action, as opposed to isolated and short-term responses. This can only be achieved if the AU responds to an immanent crisis comprehensively.

Lastly, the authorisation of deployments within the AU needs to correspond to the practical needs of rapid deployment. This would naturally strengthen the role of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) vis-à-vis the AU Assembly. While the ACIRC's role is to respond to threats including those relating to the prevention of mass atrocities, formally speaking the latter situation (defined as Scenario 6 under the ASF) requires an endorsement of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government. This could, however prevent early deployment in a crisis situation. Hence, in order to facilitate rapid deployment, consideration should be given to the possibility of deferring such authority (for the deployment of ACIRC under scenario 6) to the PSC.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF MILITARY INTERVENTION

Insights on the political aspects of military intervention in Africa can be drawn from the deployment of the UN Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Although seen as a necessary development due to the challenges of stabilising the DRC, the FIB has nevertheless faced criticism. This has ranged from its UN-initiated origins (raising questions of impartiality) to the controversial role of SADC countries, due to lingering perceptions about vested self-interests in this resource-rich country. Problems have also included a disregard for the existing command and control structure and the lack of an exit strategy.

It has been noted that an exit strategy for the FIB will ultimately require an emerging framework of peace operations, peacekeeping and ultimately peacebuilding and reconciliation. In terms of enhancing peacebuilding initiatives, genuine acceptance of the DRC government's engagement can only be achieved by a root-and-branch commitment to security sector reform, in a manner that transforms the military and police services into platforms for ethnic inclusion and accommodation. This highlights the importance of a follow-up instrument subsequent to the deployment of the ACIRC or its integration into existing peacekeeping operations. It is unlikely that the ACIRC can survive institutionally as a stand-alone instrument.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

Apart from lessons learnt from the FIB, the ACIRC can potentially draw lessons from the EU's 'Battlegroup' concept. Like the ACIRC, the EU battlegroups were designed for rapid response. In addition, the EU battlegroups have

faced challenges quite similar to those that the ACIRC is experiencing or is most likely to experience, and there is a need to address them quickly. The battlegroups have until today never been deployed; not because of operational shortcomings but because of insufficient political agreement. On a technical level, issues such as limited strategic air lift capacity and a lack of uniformity due to varying requirements and standards for training and equipment remain even in the better resourced European context.

As much of the success of the ACIRC depends on its integration into existing AU peace structures, it also affects the AU–UN partnership. Current trends in peacekeeping clearly point to more complex and robust missions. With the ACIRC, the AU would receive a robust but highly specialised instrument. The division of labour between the AU and UN would develop further; while the AU engages in peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations, the UN takes over at a later point, fulfilling more comprehensive tasks reaching into the peacebuilding area. In this regard the ACIRC is sharpening the AU's profile as providing for a specialised but non-comprehensive solution in conflict management. Playing the role of a conflict stabiliser, three deployment scenarios are most likely.

- The ACIRC fulfils the role of a bridging tool, deploying rapidly and handing over to the UN (the CAR, Mali).
- The ACIRC bolsters surge capacities for existing UN or AU missions (the DRC, South Sudan).
- The ACIRC provides longer-term support for stand-alone (combat) operations (Somalia) in situations in which the UN does not want to engage.

The last option may be the least attractive, as it lacks a clear exit strategy. In any case the operationalisation of the ACIRC requires more meaningful and permanent strategic dialogue and co-ordination between the decision-making bodies of the AU and UN, in this respect the Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council.

REFINING THE MANDATE OF THE ACIRC

Conceptually the ACIRC mandate needs further refinement. It is clear that the short-term deployment scenario is likely to be insufficient to stabilise an armed conflict, as security threats are often persistent and recurring. A focus on only short-term deployment is largely unrealistic if it is not credibly linked with a longer-term peacekeeping operation provided by the AU, an REC or the UN.

Furthermore, not all rapid responses need to lead to a peacekeeping operation handover. In some instances a rapid response needs to be integrated into an existing mission, such as in the DRC, or to run in parallel with it. Deployment strategies should be developed for these situations. In addition, rapid

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deployment tools have to be fully integrated into wider peacemaking efforts and should not be seen as isolated intervention tools.

The key question is whether the exit strategy of the ACIRC is the entry point for peacekeeping by the AU, the UN or RECs. Efforts should be undertaken to harmonise deployment doctrines, especially in conjunction with the UN.

IMPROVING THE AU'S CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO PEACE AND SECURITY CRISES IN THE REGION

Beyond the imminent political question of support for and opposition to the ACIRC, which will vary from case to case, a number of additional issues emerge:

- the development of viable and sustainable funding mechanisms on the basis of objective needs (the AU is largely donor-dependent): independent or alternative sources of funding are needed because making independent decisions regarding the mandate, scope, size and duration of peace operations will largely depend on the AU's ability to self-finance operations;
- the establishment of integrated mission support services, systems and procedures that can be activated rapidly to support deployment and sustainability in the field;
- the establishment of command and control mechanisms that provide the right degree of flexibility to contributing countries and the right degree of political control and oversight; and
- a guarantee of the highest level of interoperability possible between contributing countries.

CONCLUSION

The ACIRC faces many challenges to and concerns over its sustainability. One of the teething problems it faces is the refusal of major states, especially in West Africa, to come on board, as they view it as a project set to undermine the ASF. Problems have also been noted in the funding gap, especially as the ACIRC is based on the principle of voluntary participation. Connected to this principle is the concern that troop-contributing countries may not be willing to hand over command and control of their troops to the AU in the field. Additionally, with the lack of logistical supplies such as strategic airlift and the current proponents of the ACIRC being overstretched, there is a worry that the project may not get off the ground.

Other challenges are related to the mandates governing troop generation, deployment and withdrawal. There seems to be no clear plan on how troops will be handed over to another force. Since the ACIRC has no civil–military capabilities, there are fears that it will run into difficulties in the field in operations lasting more than 120 days.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the debacle in Mali where ASF capabilities were found wanting (and the embarrassment of the French intervention) highlights the AU's needs for a continental force to respond to crises or intensifying the operationalisation of ASF. With no certainty as to whether the ACIRC will be a permanent fixture or not, RECs remain anxious about the true motives behind this project. For RECs to come on board they will need to be reassured that the ACIRC poses no threat to the ASF – that it is there to complement the latter and will be phased out when that goal is attained. A danger also exists, however, that should the ACIRC be successful it could create an elite club within the AU, strengthening a military interventionist approach to peace at the expense of civilian peacemaking capacities.

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