

Peace and security

How the EU and AU should strengthen their cooperation

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The Current Column

of 23 November 2020

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Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



Cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) covers a wide range of issues – from trade relations and digitalisation through to investment in renewable energy. But peace and security on the African continent is still a major challenge and thus remains a key element of EU-AU relations.

The ongoing conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia makes this crystal clear. The dispute between Ethiopia's central government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which holds power in the region, has escalated into military clashes, and there is a real risk of the country drifting into civil war. The conflict is rooted in ethnic tensions between the Tigrayans and the Oromos, the country's largest ethnic group including Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who is himself Oromo. Calls from the AU for the two sides to implement an immediate ceasefire have so far fallen on deaf ears, and the AU has even been forced to sack its Tigrayan security chief following pressure from the Ethiopian government.

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These developments demonstrate that African structures and capacities for preventing crises and resolving conflicts require further strengthening, and the EU has an important role to play in this. It has long been a key supporter of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which comprises the AU and eight regional organisations. Yet the EU's engagement needs to be increased further. In particular, the EU has to guarantee robust financial support for the peacebuilding efforts of its African partners and involve them closely in decision-making processes. The EU should also step up its political dialogue with the AU, especially in the areas of civilian crisis prevention and peace mediation.

Under the African Peace Facility (APF), the EU has made nearly EUR 3 billion available since 2004 for African peacekeeping missions, capacity building for APSA structures and short-term crisis prevention and peace mediation work. Most of these funds have gone towards peace support operations, particularly the AU-led AMISOM mission in Somalia. However, the EU has also played a part in the increasing fragmentation

of Africa's institutional landscape through its strong support of regional groupings with no formal links to APSA, such as the G5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram.

EU-AU cooperation on peace and security will soon have some key decisions to make. The EU will be realigning its financial instruments for international cooperation as part of its next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, which will also impact on its partnership with Africa. For instance, there are plans to fund the APSA institutions' civilian crisis prevention and capacity development measures – currently financed by the APF – via the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument in future. Funding for African peacekeeping missions and training for African armed forces are to be provided via a new European Peace Facility (EPF), an instrument with a global reach that would not just focus on building peace and security in Africa. The proposal also envisages allowing individual African countries to access direct military assistance through the EPF without involving the AU in decision-making processes, which risks making Africa's peace and security architecture weaker instead of stronger.

The EU needs to actually treat the AU as an equal partner. During its negotiations on the EPF governance architecture, it should make sure that any bilateral EPF support for individual African states is closely coordinated with the AU. Involving the AU in EPF-related decision-making processes as well as joint conflict analyses and risk assessments are two potential ways it can help shape the fate of specific EPF measures. The EU should also step up its political dialogue with its African partners and discuss how closer cooperation and a more sharply defined division of labour between the AU and the many regional organisations and ad hoc coalitions can be brought about.

The finalisation of its new Strategy with Africa in the coming months, for which the EU unveiled some initial elements in March 2020, could also pave the way for more intensive cooperation, especially on civilian crisis prevention and peace mediation. Over the past few years, the AU has mediated numerous conflicts and has gradually increased its human resources capacity and expertise for peace mediation and mediation support. Closer dialogue about both sides' own experiences and skills in peace mediation that allows them to learn from each other would be a major step towards forging a genuine partnership of equals.