

# **The African Union must adapt to changing realities**

[Comfort Ero](#)

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*To remain credible, the AU needs to generate more unity, more leadership and more of its own money instead of relying on handouts, argues the writer. (Reuters)*

Addressing his first African Union (AU) summit as Chairperson of its secretariat, Moussa Faki Mahamat spoke some home truths about the state of the continent.

After five months in office, he said he had arrived at five important conclusions:

- Africa needs a new approach to peacekeeping based on dialogue, reconciliation and consensus rather than the use of force;
- The AU “must act now” to address root causes of migration – poverty, exclusion, marginalisation and war – that lead to the “simply intolerable” numbers of African migrants dying in the Mediterranean;
- The AU member states must be willing to implement adopted decisions as the organisation “cannot remain in its current form”;
- The 55 member states need to speak with one voice. He noted that respect for the continent’s choices is only earned when AU unity is preserved;
- Rapid change in the world means the AU has no choice but to “change [its] methods and styles of work and to reform quickly”.

Faki’s reflections resonated for all who attended the AU summit from 27 June to 4 July, amid fundamental global uncertainty and new levels of geopolitical unpredictability. Traditional partners in Europe and the US are narrowing the definition of some of their interests, and upcoming actors like the Gulf states, Turkey, China and Japan are seeking greater influence.

How the AU is able to adapt will determine its relevance as well as its potential. Though challenging, current global strategic evolution does present the opportunity to develop a stronger, fit-for-purpose multilateralism on the continent. To maintain credibility and relevance, the AU must both deal head on with the five realities Faki pointed out and also seek ways to adjust to external pressures. This will not be easy, since change depends on member states. But getting both right is vital.

### **African Realities**

The continent's most debilitating constraint is conflict. The AU set 2020 as the year to achieve its "Silencing the guns" agenda, which has two strands – early warning and action and conflict management. That means peace enforcement, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction and development.

The union's early warning and action track record has been poor, despite prevention being at the heart of the AU founders' work. The AU's main challenge remains pushing its disparate members to pursue peace, consolidate democracy and abide by constitutionalism. Its early years' efforts to create continental norms, promote transparency and a respect for process were promising, but the principle task of democratisation "remains unfinished business", as a former AU Commissioner recently put it to Crisis Group – a fact that leaves the continent more vulnerable to all manner of insecurity.

Africa's five regions are developing unevenly. Some states in West Africa are pushing hard to preserve democratic gains. Africa's centre, including the Great Lakes, remains traumatised by past and current political conflict. Overall, the trend of governance on the continent is strongly negative with growing authoritarianism, attendant mismanagement and systemic corruption. Transition and successions remain political

challenges in several important countries such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe.

On conflict management, the success of African solutions has been decidedly mixed. Peace operations have evolved since the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) – the West African regional body – first intervened in Liberia (1990-1997). Subsequently the AU has tried joint operations with the UN, such as the hybrid United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which sought peace enforcement with UN logistical support. African forces have also backed up a UN peacekeeping mission, the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in eastern Congo, and most recently established coalitions of states such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to degrade the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency. These different peacekeeping formats show a welcome desire to adapt, but structural issues, especially lack of money and operational capacities, undermine them.

The AU can no longer count on the same levels of financing from the U.S. and Europe, even for operations under a UN flag. Africa – its regional power brokers, the AU as well as sub-regions – will have to do more. Some member states already realise this.

Much will depend on implementing reforms proposed by Rwanda's President Paul Kagame at the January 2017 summit. Leaders agreed in principle to a radical reform agenda that streamlines AU activities to key priorities. Central to the agenda is financial self-sufficiency. However, support for a proposed 0.2 per cent levy on imports to finance the union is lukewarm. The reforms are important indicators of member states' ambitions, but they are also a wake-up call. If they have to pay

for the AU Commission's activities, reform and scrutiny are required.

### **A Lack of a Pan-African Vision**

There are few AU leaders with a truly pan-African vision. A problem not unique to the AU is that not all members are committed to working through it or empowering a body that might take decisions that go against their interests. Power politics, often characterised as tensions between the AU and regional economic communities, threatens to reduce the AU to a bystander in places where it once held sway, such as in Burundi. The regions can invoke the AU charter's principle of subsidiarity – or deferral to economic communities, as was the case in Madagascar and Zimbabwe. Equally, strong regional heads of state that constitute the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought (IGAD) will continue to limit its leverage, as is happening in South Sudan.

Some want to curtail what they see as the Commission's activism. Egypt – one of the five recognised continental powers – was especially irked by the AU Peace and Security Council decision to suspend Cairo in July 2013 following President Mohamed Morsi's ousting, a decision that was lifted in June 2014.

Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia, three of the AU's five main powers, face troubles at home. Abuja and Pretoria, along with Algiers, are diplomatically punching below their weight. Other strong states – Chad, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Senegal – do not have deep financial pockets to sufficiently support the AU and those that do, like Angola, remain reluctant to engage. Libya, a former power, is a collapsed state.

The arrival of a new member, Morocco, may either be useful or complicating for the Union's internal politics. Rabat's ultimate

objective to advance its claim to Western Sahara may reinstate an old discord in the AU and escalate tensions with Algeria. Its courting of West African states through political and financial investment will unsettle Algiers and Abuja. The idea that Morocco would contemplate membership of ECOWAS, which Nigeria helped found, is a sign of Abuja's decline as the region's lynchpin. However, Rabat is wooing Nigeria as a strategic partner so as to build support for its position on the Western Sahara.

Faki and his Commission cannot hope to resolve fully the AU's numerous deficiencies or deal with power politics within and between Africa's regions. He can, and must, nudge leaders to take more seriously the AU's role. The key, however, remains whether leaders are interested in supporting reforms, including self-financing. Only by doing this can Africa begin to adjust to this unpredictable period and hope to gain more from it.

### **Adjusting to Trump's America**

The exact nature of the AU's relationship with the current U.S. administration is unclear. The Trump administration is reforming the State Department and reviewing former President Obama's past policies, but it appears the U.S. counter-terror focus will continue to hold sway. President Trump's March directive delegating to U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) greater authority to attack the Somali Islamist Al-Shabaab movement is consistent with the Horn region's hard line against Islamist radicals. But this is almost certain to mean more civilian casualties and thus is likely to bring only short-term gains. In the Sahel, too, the U.S. military's focus will remain steadfast. Washington's use of drones in Niger, assistance to Nigeria and Cameroon in their fight against Boko Haram, and support to France's counter-terror role in Mali and Chad are all likely to continue.



To this day, the U.S. administration has not appointed a Senior Director for Africa at the National Security Council (NSC). Nor has the most senior post of Assistant Secretary of State for Africa been confirmed, adding to uncertainty even though one has been nominated.

The U.S. administration's preoccupation with saving money may hit the African continent hard. Trump's proposed 30 per cent cut to the foreign affairs budget anticipates a lot less for traditional development projects and for the State Department as a whole, although Congress has made clear that Trump's budget is a non-starter. The proposed cuts coincided with the UN Secretary-General's warning of hunger and famine in four conflict countries, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan. Fulfilling existing funding commitments means the impact on multilateral humanitarian activities – a large proportion directed to Africa – will not come before 2018, but the AU will need to work hard to build support for humanitarian assistance in the worst affected areas on the continent.

### **The UN and Africa**

Relations between the AU and UN have strengthened under Chairperson Faki and Secretary-General António Guterres, who signed in April 2017 the AU-UN framework on enhanced cooperation in peace and security. This is important given U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's mission-by-mission review of peacekeeping operations. There are good reasons for candid discussions to make missions more efficient and effective – a point made in the 2016 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations – and the argument for more limited UN mandates and footprints is well established.

The AU should concern itself with improving the effectiveness of the three African Security Council members in making the

continent's case. It should also continue to push for support of its various peacekeeping models which have often included hybrid, assessed contributions for AU-led operations, or transitioned from AU to UN missions. By being overly focused on securing UN assessed contributions, the AU does not always take advantage of the UN inviting it to take the lead. September's annual joint meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the AU Peace and Security Council will be an opportunity to show the AU's own progress on its financing agenda and to again look at options to secure sustainable, predictable and flexible funding for AU-led peace support operations authorised by the UNSC.

### **The AU and Europe**

Another rapidly changing relationship is with Europe. The EU's presence on the continent is extensive, ranging from massive aid assistance to joint military engagement and diplomacy, promoting governance, democracy and human rights. But it has been ten years since an agreement was reached on a Joint Africa-EU strategy, and Europe now faces a multitude of challenges. Its interests are changing and internal cohesion is under threat.

While presenting Africa with new opportunities, the UK's decision to leave the EU will also change the balance of EU policy toward the continent. The task of unscrambling Britain from numerous EU-led initiatives will absorb time and energy and its exit may also shift emphasis toward countries and areas where the main European powers in the EU have greater interest. After France and Germany, the UK is the third largest contributor – around 14 per cent – to the EU's Development Fund, which is the main vehicle for providing aid and support to peace and security on the continent.



Migration is another major preoccupation. As a senior EU official informed Crisis Group, it “will invite itself to the [fifth Africa-EU] summit, even if neither side wants migration to dominate discussions”. A hardline discourse in Europe resulted in the June 2016 EU Partnership Framework on migration with third countries, including several in Africa to thwart migration flows. Worryingly, the framework includes states where officials and institutions collude with local power brokers and smugglers and does not properly address migration’s root causes. It may undermine Europe’s moral standing on promoting human rights, good governance and rule of law.

Berlin, under pressure within Europe but also as a result of its own desire to take on more responsibility, is advancing various initiatives curiously labelled as its “Marshall Plan for Africa” to provide security and development. The question is whether Berlin can replace the UK or balance French interests. Chancellor Angela Merkel, aware of the fallout of French-British-American policy in Libya, has urged Europe to share greater responsibility in addressing migration.

Tired of being treated as a cash machine by the AU and some of its members, Europe wants to redefine its relations. It wants to shift, as a member state official put it, from being a “technical” to a “political” role, though this may prove chiefly aspirational. Discussions will continue at the fifth Africa-EU summit in Abidjan at the end of November. Europe, along with Chairperson Faki, also wants to shift from crisis management to prevention, a 25-year-old idea noted in the UN’s An Agenda for Peace that has proven politically challenging to implement. The desire to reduce its overall spending in Africa could align with the AU’s stated focus on conflict prevention. But to make that common vision work, both institutions, and the UN, whose new Secretary-General has also placed much emphasis on early

warning and early action, need to have a much clearer idea of prevention.

The EU does not want a repeat of the ten-year-old AMISOM model where it underwrites much of the mission's finances. The EU has been financing AMISOM since 2007 and it is its most expensive project in Africa. European officials felt as if they were "held hostage" after bruising negotiations with the AU in 2016 when Brussels decided, after much warning, to reduce payment to the mission by 20 per cent per month.

Complicating relations with the AU was Brussels' March 2016 decision, after the election crisis in Burundi, to stop paying AMISOM stipends to the AU that went through an account controlled by the government in Bujumbura (it kept some of the money). In December, Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza threatened to withdraw his troops and sue the AU over non-payment, which forced the EU to climb down and agree to payment of Burundian troops via a commercial bank, rather than the government.

Accusations from parts of the AU of EU bad faith for pulling its money from the mission and EU frustrations that those who pay less to support the AU, such as China, get better treatment, has left officials wanting new ways of partnering with the continent.

### **China and the Gulf**

That the EU is vexed by constant African overtures to China is a mark of Beijing's weight on the continent. Brussels has sought to encourage it and Gulf states to pay into the AU's peace and security architecture, but both have different bilateral and commercial interests. Particularly with Gulf states, African powers and the AU need to navigate relations carefully in order to avoid being unnecessarily sucked into current Middle

Eastern tensions. Crucially, Chairperson Faki understands the geopolitics of the Arab world and how Gulf states could either undermine stability or play a positive role in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. It's not yet clear how far Africa will be drawn into heightened tensions between the Saudi-United Arab Emirates (UAE) axis and the Qatari-Turkey alliance, the latter having rapidly built commercial, diplomatic and military presence on the continent. So far, the AU and most of the Horn are trying to lower the temperature by proposing mediation rather than supporting one side.

China says it is a defender of Africa's multilateralism and wants strategic partnership, but also prioritises quick bilateral gains. Economics has shaped Beijing's Africa policy, but protecting business interests required it to enter the peacekeeping and conflict-resolution arena, including in Mali and South Sudan. It has concluded that it cannot influence South Sudan's politics without engaging at least , IGAD, and sees it as the peace and security vehicle for engaging in the Horn. China views the Horn as an area where it could potentially enhance cooperation with the EU and U.S. to advance peace and security, but also an important military outpost for its activities – hence its recent decision to base troops in Djibouti, which already serves as a military base for France, Japan and the U.S.

### **Adapting to the New Security Environment**

Africa is adapting to new external pressures and realities in its regions. In West Africa, the MNJTF and the G5 Sahel states' force are novel ways to dealing with collective defence and tackling insecurity involving states in the immediate neighbourhood.

For the EU, the manner of funding is less burdensome, allowing it to avoid paying stipends to troops. Crucially for Brussels, the

regional MNJTF military cooperation is a genuine regional approach driven and primarily financed by Lake Chad basin countries affected by Boko Haram (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria), with bilateral support from key Western governments. Although it faces problems and is overly militarised and thus imperfectly suited to a still-agile insurgency, the MNJTF nevertheless has pushed back Boko Haram.

In Mali, the Algerian-brokered 2015 Bamako peace agreement lacks impetus and despite French Operation Barkhane and the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), jihadist and other violent non-state armed groups remain agile and able to adapt to military pressure. Earlier in 2017, they showed remarkable confidence and resilience in coming together – at least politically – much more quickly than states and international bodies that were slowed down by diverging interests and a burdensome multilateral infrastructure. The G5 force, intended to be highly responsive in dealing with border insecurity, especially the spillover of Mali’s crisis into the region, is an attempt to match the jihadists’ capacity to adapt.

Its supporters, including the EU, are trying to replicate the MNJTF’s relative success against Boko Haram in the much vaster Sahel, though dissatisfaction with AU procurement means it will not manage funds for the G5. However, this effort faces different challenges.

First, there is no financial heavyweight like Nigeria able to absorb costs.

Second, unlike the G5, the Lake Chad basin countries clearly agree that Boko Haram is the main threat and thus the fight against it is far more localised.

Third, the G5 forces have disparate interests and uneven capabilities. Mali’s army is yet to recover from years of war;

the Burkinabé army has remained vulnerable since the 2015 coup (and is under pressure to protect its border); Mauritania's interests are unclear; Niger's forces are fragile, dangerously overstretched on its border with Libya and Mali, and are fighting Boko Haram; and Chad President Deby, whose troops are the most reliable and experienced, also fighting Boko Haram and deployed in MINUSMA, recently declared that his regime is too financially exhausted to commit more troops.

Fourth, the absence of Algeria, a vital regional actor, may raise questions about the force's legitimacy and effectiveness. Algeria sees the G5 as a French-backed process and prefers its own regional initiatives, such as the Nouakchott Process on enhancing security cooperation in the Sahelo-Saharan region, advancing a rhetoric that the region's countries should be in charge.

But Paris, overstretched, wants to substantially reduce the cost of Barkhane and is nonetheless accelerating setting up the G5. It was top of France President Macron's agenda when visiting Bamako on 19 May soon after his election and when he returned on 2 July to launch the force. France wants to work with countries (and militaries) it knows and in which it has relative trust, hence its willingness to set up something without Algeria (or Nigeria). The EU has pledged €50 million. France did not, however, secure financial backing from the UNSC in resolution 2359 welcoming the force.

Within the new funding environment, the MNJTF and G5 should be understood as an expression of EU officials and member states' desire for more ad hoc sub-continental arrangements that carry less financial burden and are likely more effective. While these arrangements may present some real opportunities, as demonstrated, they face complex challenges concerning authorisation, legitimacy and financing.

Still, if AU member states learn to fund its initiatives, bruising financial negotiations such as funding AMISOM and compromises around the G5 force can be managed. To remain credible, the AU needs to generate more unity, more leadership and more of its own money instead of relying on handouts. In some ways, the crisis, both political and financial, of Western countries is both a threat and an opportunity for the continent. But until it takes up many of the challenges Faki pointed to at the summit, much of the AU's peace and security efforts will be based on partner concerns and not what the continent needs or wants.

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