Solidarity Intervention: Emerging Trends in AU’s Interventions in African Crisis

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here and to share the stage with Paul Williams and Cyril Obi. I would like to thank the Chatham House African Program Conference and BISA Africa and International Studies Working Group for organizing this workshop and extending their invitation to me.

Today, I will be talking to you about the emerging trends in the African Union’s (AU) interventions in African crises. I will do so in four stages. I start by outlining the AU. I briefly discuss the AU in part because my understanding of the organization is slightly different from the conventional way the Pan-African organization is understood, and in part because of the dearth of analytically sound conceptualization of the AU. I will follow it up by placing the topic within a broader academic and policy discussions and then specify my argument. The broader message of the talk is that solidarity matters in International Relations (IR) scholarship and in particular to the story of African IR, and we have underrated it at our own expense. I am aware that some scholarship has been done on this subject in this side of the Atlantic but the conception of solidarity that traces it back to Emile Durkheim is different from the way it is understood in an African context. I move from the discussion of Pan-African solidarity to specify four trends in AU interventions in African crises. I conclude by outlining academic and policy implications of the talk.

The African Union

In my view, the African Union is conceptually made up of three organizations. First, the AU is an intergovernmental organization, comprising 53 independent states and the disputed territory of Western Sahara. The intergovernmental bodies of the AU includes the Assembly of Heads of State and Government (the Assembly), the Executive Council (the Council), the Permanent Representative Committee (the PRC), Peace and Security Council (PSC), Pan-African Parliament (the PAP), The Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), the Court of
Justice, the Specialized Technical Committees (the STPs),\(^1\) and the Financial Institutions.\(^2\) The level of accessibility to these institutions tells us a great deal about the institutional permeability of the AU. These institutions make the final decisions on important issues. Second, the AU has supranational dimension, consisting of approximately 620 international civil servants. They operate within the organizational structure of AU Commission. They provide the link between the first AU and the third AU. The third AU is what Thakur and Weiss (2009) described in United Nations context as the outside-insider. They are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups of people who may or may not be formal members or servants of the organization but play central roles in shaping ideas, practices, directions, priorities, and policies of the AU. Some members of the third AU, such as the NGO community, relate with the other two through the Economic, Social and Cultural Councils (ECOSOC), and the African Citizens’ Directorate (CIDO).

The coming into force of the AU’s security regime, which is predicated on collective security, an early warning system (EWS), the panel of the wise (PW), the African standby-force (ASF), and the peace fund (PF), in 2003 was seen by keen observers of African security, politics, international relations, and law as a major development. A number of academics, policy makers and Non-governmental Organisations singled out for praise the move by the AU to establish a security apparatus with a right to intervene under certain circumstances. They saw the peace and security architecture as distinguishing the AU from the defunct Organization of African Unity (OAU). In the view of some policy makers, the establishment of the Pan-African peace infrastructure marks a major step towards solving the problems that African states have faced for centuries (Mbeki 2001; Maloka 2001; Parker and Rukare 2002).

The celebration which accompanied the creation of AU’s peace and security institutions suggested that policy makers, the NGO community and academics saw them as new political agents in Africa and giving my earlier work on the subject, I cannot exclude myself from this celebratory school. Despite the warm reception given to the birth of AU’s peace and security architecture and the relatively high attention it has received in the scholarly community, only a nascent body of work addresses the distinctiveness or lack thereof of AU’s interventions in African crises. An examination of emerging trends in AU’s interventions in conflicts might rectify this lacuna within the International Studies literature on Africa.

This paper seeks to outline emerging trends in AU’s interventions. It does so with a view of showing the strengths and weaknesses of African political agency in the area of intervention. I argue that the AU peace architecture is following the intervention practices established by the OAU in 1990s. I characterize these practices as solidarity intervention. I call it solidarity because

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\(^1\) These are the Committee on Rural Economy and Agricultural Matters, the Committee on Monetary and Financial Affairs, the Committee on Trade, Customs and Immigration Matters, the Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, Energy, Natural Resources and Environment, the Committee on Transport, Communications and Tourism, the Committee on Health, Labour and Social Affairs and the Committee on Education, Culture and Human Resources.

\(^2\) The African Central Bank, the African Monetary Fund and the African Investment Bank.
it is unduly shaped by the Pan-African solidarity norm which I take it to mean a widespread belief among African ruling elites that the proper and ethically acceptable behaviour of Africa’s political elites is to demonstrate a feeling of oneness and support towards other African leaders, at least in public. This feeling of “we-ness,” or public show of support, among African leaders goes “beyond the merely rhetorical level” to impose “on African rulers a sense that, at any rate, they ought to act in harmony” (Clapham 1996; Mazrui 1963, 1967). The solidarity norm not only discourages African leaders from disagreeing with each other in public, it also puts “pressure on the rulers of individual African states not to step out of line over issues where a broad continental consensus had been established” (Clapham 1996: 106-107). The norm was embedded in interstate system “at the first [Session] of OAU Council of Ministers [held in] Lagos” in 1963 (Thompson and Zartman).

The application of the norm was so strict in the early days of the OAU that it nearly made it a taboo for African elites to disagree among themselves even on policy issues. Public disagreement was seen as un-African. A classic case occurred in July 1964 when a group of Foreign Ministers showed strong opposition to Ghana’s Africa Unity proposal which was submitted at the second session of Council of Ministers (Council) held in Cairo, Egypt. Opposition to Ghana’s proposal was described as un-African. Also, the Foreign Minister of Tunisian Ali Amer complained that the disagreement undermined the spirit and letter of Pan-African solidarity norm. Amer claimed:

“…we speak of solidarity… [when we show] a feeling of tolerance and support toward each one of us… [when we support an African state] if we find that [the country in question is] in conflict or in difficulties with a country outside of Africa.” (OAU 1964; Thompson and Zartman).

The Pan-African solidarity norm still exercises considerable influence over African political leaders at least at the interstate level. The most recent, eloquent illustration of the enduring power of the norm is the AU’s unanimous support for President Omar al-Bashir at the just ended summit in Sirte in July 2009. The organization decided to ask its member states to not execute International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant against the Sudanese president claiming that its request to the Security Council for the suspension of the arrest warrant had been ignored. This is just one of the many ways that the norm exercised considerable influence over African leaders. In practice, the norm has shaped the AU in three specific ways. First, any action taken by the AU should not undermine the harmony (at least in public) that exists among African governments, and second, that any major decision-making must be based on group thought and consensus. Third, the AU forum should not be used by any African government against another, and forth, any public criticism of an African leader by a non-African entity must not be tolerated by the AU.

**Emerging Trends in AU’s Interventions**

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3 My emphasis.
The influence of the norm has made the AU follow intervention practices similar to those of the OAU. First, like the OAU, decision to intervene is made on the basis of consensus though the Peace and Security protocol also stipulated that a decision on the part of two-thirds majority of the Assembly of the Heads of State is required for intervention purposes. In practice, most of the critical decisions on intervention are made at the level of the Permanent Representative Council (PRC). The Assembly usually rubber-stamps the decision made by the PRC. The AU followed this procedure in deploying a peacekeeping force to monitor a ceasefire in Burundi in April, 2003. Second, there is a strong preference for soft tools and positive incentives. The AU makes the necessary effort to encourage rather than threaten the offending state. They often opt for mediation and prefer it over other forms of intervention. The direct result is that mediation has become a popular conflict resolution mechanism within the AU. Even with mediation, the AU always uses the less intrusive aspect of it. It often opts for facilitation style of mediation and rarely employs manipulations or even formulation styles of mediation. For instance, in its intervention in Burundi and Comoros, the AU applied many facilitation mediation techniques including short-term missions to evaluate the situation, election observation missions, appointment of envoys, setting up of in-country missions/offices, and establishing reconciliation conferences. It used very little formulation, and manipulation mediation tools.

While the facilitation style has the greatest influence on reducing tension and creating lasting peace, it takes too long to have any meaningful impact on the process and it is heavily dependent on the availability of information regarding parties’ intentions and capabilities. Third, none of the AU members are allowed to criticize the offending state in public and the AU does not tolerate any public rebuke of offending state by non-African entity. Such criticisms usually encourage AU members to rally behind the offending state or the African state being criticized. Fourth, the success or failure of intervention depends on sub-regional powers such as Algeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa. The AU’s interventions in Comoros and Burundi were relatively successful primarily because of the leadership of Tanzania and South Africa. The AU has been unable to impose any modicum of order and peace in Darfur region because of the absence of real support from African regional powers. While the five states—Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria and South Africa—which pays seventy-five percent of the regular budget of the AU back the mission, none of them have stem up to take the leadership role in the resolution of the conflict.

**Academic and policy implications**

I highlighted these trends in AU’s intervention in part to show that the nature of social structure which condition AU’s intervention may encourage the Pan-African organizations to employ intervention styles that may be unconventional to many people outside of the African continent. The AU’s standoff with the ICC over Sudan is a good example. The social structure the AU is embedded and encourages them to take a long path to deal with a conflict. Those who are expecting the AU to resolve African conflicts speedily or those who are hoping for the AU to be more intrusive in its approach to conflict management after the establishment of the African
standby force are setting themselves up for a huge disappointment. It will normally deploy the force only after exhausting all the non-intrusive intervention tools. Thus, the kind of quick fixes donors and supporters of AU expect may not be coming very soon and it is important for them to be ready for that.

I outlined trends in AU’s intervention also to show that it is perhaps time for policy makers, especially in Advanced Industrial Societies, to reassess the value they attach to public criticisms of African leaders if such criticism is forbidden in AU, and more important, if criticisms by outsiders strengthen rather than weaken offending states. Indeed, one of the most underrated things in policy and academic circles is the idea of African solidarity. It is easy to demise it because of the meaningless way it is used at times (and I did not use to rate), but like myself, it may be useful for those who have good intentions for Africa to reconsider their position on the value of public criticisms. It may be a difficult and unpopular policy position given civil society and activist penchant for public condemnation. However, taking seriously the influence of Pan-African solidarity norm is good starting point for developing a better policy response to African states. It is also a good point of departing for building IR that speaks to African experience.

References


