

5th Joint Retreat of the AUPSC and EUPSC

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Tomorrow (9 June), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the European Union (EU) Political and Security Committee (EUPSC) will convene their 5th informal joint retreat, which will be followed by the 13th annual joint consultative meeting to be convened on 10 June. This year's joint retreat is expected take place physically, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Starting from 2015, the AUPSC and EUPSC have institutionalised the practice of convening informal joint retreats ahead of their joint annual consultative meetings, with aim of facilitating constructive dialogue through informal engagements. As such, the joint retreats mainly serve the two organs to discuss issues of partnership and exchange views on how to enhance cooperation on various aspects of peace and security. The last time the two convened a joint retreat was in 2018, ahead of the 11th joint consultative meeting, which constituted their 4th joint retreat. In 2020, although the 12th joint consultative meeting between the two bodies took place, the joint retreat was not convened, making this year's retreat the 5th one.

Two main agenda items are expected to feature at this year's joint retreat – first the issue of multilateralism, conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy and second, the sustainability of AU Peace Support Operations (PSOs). From the AUPSC side, there was interest in discussing the issue of humanitarian situation in the continent. However, given that the thematic issue was considered to be beyond the mandate of

the EUPSC, the topic was not taken forward in the final agenda for the retreat. On the other hand, the EU proposed to discuss the war in Ukraine as one of the agenda items of the joint retreat. Similar to the EUPSC, it was considered to be beyond the mandate of the PSC for discussing it in the joint retreat. It is however expected that individual members of the EUPSC would in their intervention raise the war in Ukraine.

The first agenda item expected to feature at the 5th joint retreat is envisaged to focus on multilateralism, conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy. In ways more than one, conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy are in crisis in Africa, as in other parts of the world. As highlighted in our report on Major Peace and Security Issues in Africa, the number and geographic spread of conflicts in Africa has grown exponentially. Further highlighting the precarious state of peace and security on the continent, Africa witnessed the largest number of coups (five) since AU came into existence in a matter of 10 months period between April 2021 and February 2022. The PSC in the communique of its 1000th session expressed 'deep concern over the persistence and resurgence of conflict and crisis situations in some parts of the Continent, including the growing threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism and armed groups.' All these are on account of the persistence or further deterioration and expansion of existing protracted conflicts such as those in Somalia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Mali and the eruption of new conflicts or crisis situations include those in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. AU Commission Chairperson in his opening address to the 35th AU Assembly warned that these trends raise 'serious questions about the future of our flagship project to silence the guns'.

There are at least three issues that the worrying peace and security trends and the challenges they pose to conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy give rise to. The first of

this concerns the adequacy and effectiveness of the approach to the management and resolution of existing protracted conflicts. In the face of lack of sustained collective continental and international support and diplomatic attention as well as failure of national actors to assume their responsibilities for achieving peace, both peace support operations and mediation efforts as currently deployed are struggling to deliver. The second issue relates to the effective operation of conflict early warning and early response systems. While information on potential risks of conflicts is ubiquitous, there are questions on the quality of early warning reports and their timely communication for decision-makers. There is also the issue of the formation of common understanding among various decision-making actors both within the AU and between the AU and various security actors including RECs/RMs and multilateral partners such as the EU. The existence of quality early warning without catalyzing such shared understanding would not trigger early action. The third issue that perhaps presents the most serious challenge to conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy is the refusal or reluctance of concerned states to cooperate for actions for conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy. This is due to the pervasive culture of denialism and the increasing use of the defense of sovereignty. As AU Commission Chairperson rightly pointed out, 'a restrictive, even dogmatic reading of the intangible principle of the sovereignty of the Member States raises an iron wall against any intervention by the continental organization, either as a preventive measure through early warning, or as a remedy when the crisis breaks out.'

In the light of the foregoing and against the background of the 6th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Member States of AU and EU which took place from 17 to 18 February 2022, it is right that the two bodies focus on addressing the challenges facing conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy as part of a commitment for multilateralism and find ways of

investing in and enhancing the effective use of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy in Africa including through enhancing regular interaction, joint analysis and exchange as well as complementary actions for prevention and preventive diplomacy, by among others focusing on channeling resources to social spending and addressing governance and development fragilities and linking the provision of support for transitions to concrete governance reforms and investment in provision and expansion of social services. Equally important is the imperative of the provision of both high-level and sustained diplomatic attention and resources support for preventive diplomacy and mediation or peacemaking processes. Success of the informal retreat on this theme would depend on the specific commitments that the two make for joint action and the mechanisms they put in place for delivering on such specific commitments along the foregoing lines.

The second agenda item to be discussed at the 5th joint retreat is the issue of ensuring sustainability of AU PSOs. An issue which may also be of central focus in the discussion on financing AU PSOs is the end of the EU funding through the Africa Peace Facility (APF) and what it could mean for collective African decision making on peace and security and AU leadership in peace efforts. The shift from APF to the European Peace Facility (EPF) which aims to explore the option of financing African peace efforts through bilateral agreements has been cause for concern among African stakeholders, not only in terms of its implications to multilateral engagement of the two continents, but also with respect to the financing gap it would entail for AU PSOs. With agreement on accessing UN assessed contributions for financing AU PSOs still pending, the funding gap created due to the shift from APF to EPF will surely have a significant impact on the capacity of AU PSOs that previously benefited from the APF scheme.

It is also to be recalled that at the 6th Summit of Heads of

State and Government of the Member States of AU and EU which took place from 17 to 18 February 2022, the two Unions adopted a joint vision for 2030 which includes commitment to support ongoing discussions on the utilisation of United Nations (UN)-assessed contributions for financing AU PSOs authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC). The importance of ensuring sustainable and predictable financing for AU-led PSOs including through UN-assessed contributions also remains a key point of discussion at AUPSC-UNSC consultative meetings while the AUPSC continues to dedicate sessions to deliberate on the issue. Despite the weight that has been given to the issue, reaching agreement on a UNSC Resolution on utilising UN assessed contributions to co-finance AU PSOs has proven to be an on-going challenge. While the adoption of a 'zero-draft African consensus paper on accessing sustainable and predictable financing for AU peace and security activities' has been a welcome progress, agreement on a final version of the consensus paper is yet to be achieved. At the forthcoming joint retreat, the AUPSC and EUPSC may reflect on the primary responsibility of the UNSC for ensuring global peace and security, including in Africa, which serves as the basis for financing of AU PSOs through UN assessed contributions. In addition, the AUPSC may particularly wish to draw attention to the human cost Africa continues to pay as the most invaluable contribution to international peace and security, whose significance has never been appreciated in discussions on Africa's contributions.