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Policy Brief 3

Critical appraisal of the agenda of silencing the guns in Africa

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critical review of the AU's theme of the year and probes how and what needs to change to achieve progress in the implementation of this agenda.

Introduction

Silencing the Guns is one of the flagship projects of Africa's development blue print of Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU). It provides the overarching objective guiding the efforts of the organization towards achieving a peaceful and secure Africa which is the foundation for the implementation the development and regional integration plans of the continent. In a move to mobilize focused concerted effort towards the containment and resolution of conflicts, the AU designated as the theme of the year 2020 'Silencing the Guns in Africa - Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development'.

It is to be recalled that AU member states made a solemn commitment in 2013 as part of the Solemn Declaration of the 50th Anniversary of the O/AU, 'to achieve the goal of a conflict-free Africa, to make peace a reality for all our people and to rid the continent of wars, civil conflicts, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters and violent conflicts and to prevent genocide.' They further pledged, rather too ambitiously, 'not to bequeath the burden of conflicts to the next generation of Africans and undertake to end all wars by 2020.'

Considering the extraordinary summit of the AU taking place on 6 December 2020, this policy brief presents a

Guns getting louder in a year of silencing the guns

Among the various flagship projects of Agenda 2063, silencing the guns has acquired particular saliency in popular usage. Unfortunately, questions abound as to whether its wide appeal is matched by measurable progress. This is due to the enormous gulf between the ambition of silencing the guns and the realities of the peace and security landscape of the continent.

In 2020, the security situation on the continent has become bleaker than it was during the preceding years. The signs are that despite all efforts and progress made in some areas such as the peace agreement in Central African Republic or the transition in Sudan, deterioration of existing protracted conflicts and emergence of new violence means that, like the rest of the world as a major conflict database highlighted early in the year, the continent is in a more violent situation than a decade ago. As the end of 2020 approaches, new conflicts erupted in Ethiopia and in the Western Sahara.

In a speech outlining South Africa's priority when it assumed the role of Chairing the AU in 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa observed 'Violent conflict continues to hamper our efforts to achieve continental peace development.' As Africa Confidential pointed out in its analysis at the beginning of 2020, the conflicts currently

raging in various parts of the continent 'are dragging down indices for social progress, economic growth and stability'.

From North Africa to West Africa and Sahel to Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes regions, the guns, instead of being silenced, are getting louder. This situation seems to make a mockery of the theme of the year.

While the new impetus in the peace process gives a glimmer of hope for extricating the country from years of internationalized civil war, the sound of guns has been a dominant feature of the Libya's landscape for much of 2020. This has pushed the country into deeper divisions. It has also led to the perpetration of atrocities as civilians, migrants and refugees are trapped in the violence which continue to target civilian areas and infrastructure including hospitals. During 2019 and 2020, the country witnessed highest levels of displacement since 2014-15.

The situation in Libya is a concern not only for Libya but also for the entire region. President Maky Sall of Senegal put it well early in the year when he said the 'whole African continent is worried about the consequences of what is happening in Libya,' adding that 'Africa's worry is that there's a risk that all these weapons (from Libya) will transit through the Sahel'.

Perhaps more than any other part of the continent where the guns are heard the loudest in 2020 has been in West Africa and the Sahel. The number of violent incidents in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has increased sharply. According

to the UN, it has increased fivefold since 2016 and doubled in 2019 compared to 2018. In geographic scope as well, the violence in the Sahel has during 2019 spread across the region. As the UN Chief Representative for West Africa said in a briefing to the UN Security Council on 8 January 2020, this geographic expansion of terrorist attacks 'is increasingly threatening West African coastal States'.

Despite some gains made in eroding the capacity of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the operations of the terrorist group expanded into parts of countries neighboring Nigeria including Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Terrorism has also gained new ground in Southern Africa via the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.

Election disputes and unconstitutional changes of government and other forms of political and security instability that continue to be witnessed on the continent from Guinea Bissau to Cote d'Ivoire to Mali also represent other manifestations of conflict in which guns have come to play a part.

Inter-communal conflicts pitting in particular herders and farmers have also witnessed spike with very deadly consequences. These trends have reached very worrisome levels in West Africa and the Sahel including notably in countries such as Nigeria and Mali. Apart from the ready availability of guns, it is the lack of timely policy intervention to address tensions over the depletion of resources and the impact of environmental degradation as well as population pressure. These issues are not that can be resolved through a law and order or a security response.

The resolution of these issues lies in the development and deployment of tailor-made social, economic and natural resources governance policies based on a clear and committed political leadership.

Addressing drivers of conflict: Militarization of societies

One of the major drivers of armed conflict and violence in Africa is the trend of the militarization of communities resulting from the trafficking, circulation and possession of small arms and light weapons. Indeed, this phenomenon accounts for the increase in the deadliness of inter-communal conflicts.

Recognizing the gravity of the role of arms and weapons in creating the conditions for the eruption of violent conflicts, the AU identified the issue as a major area of intervention for silencing the guns. It has declared the month of September as the Africa amnesty month for the collection and destruction of weapons and small arms. According to a joint study of the AU and Small Arms survey, nearly 80 percent of small arms and light weapons are in the hands of private citizens.

While this is an area that requires high-level mobilization, there is a need for measurable targeted intervention at the national, regional and continental levels. There is in particular a need for identifying and deploying tailor made policy and institutional interventions in countries with the most concentration and circulation of small arms and light weapons. It also requires enhancement of national legislative and regulatory frameworks on the trade,

circulation, possession and use of small arms and light weapons and on the effective functioning of law and order and security institutions. Not any less important is the effective management and protection of arms depots.

The trade, circulation and trafficking of weapons is another issue which has to be addressed at regional and continental levels. Often weapons are smuggled into and circulated into affected countries through porous borders. The mapping, tracking and regulation of movement of arms and weapons is a cross border phenomenon requiring regional collective commitment and coordination.

At the continental level, a major contribution can be made through the identification of the sources, routes, destination and use of small arms and light weapons and the mobilization of support for initiating and implementing targeted measures at national and regional levels.

Africa being a destination rather than being a major center for the manufacturing of arms and weapons, there is a need for the adoption of a continental collective framework for the regulation of the importation or trafficking of arms and weapons into the continent. This is perhaps one of the major areas of intervention in respect of which no significant attention has been paid. While the adoption of the arms trade treaty is a major breakthrough for the international regulation of arms and Africa, as one of the parts of the world most affected by and serves as destination of arms and weapons, stands to benefit from the effective implementation of this treaty, success will be very limited without a continental legal and institutional regime for the regulation of the importation or trafficking of arms and weapons into the continent. In this respect, it would be

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imperative to have a treaty on the regulation of the importation into Africa and the curbing of the illicit circulation of arms and weapons on the African continent.

The politics and governance dimensions of Silencing the guns

The trade or trafficking of weapons is a major industry. Even by measures of the official spending of countries, the defense sector in Africa consumes on an annual basis tens of billions of dollars. This figure is sure to be much higher if there is a way of accounting the illicit trade or trafficking of arms and weapons. Because of the huge sum of money involved, the weapons industry and trade is also a major source of corruption.

Without a commitment of states for delivering security through enhanced governance and law enforcement infrastructure and reducing and shifting defense related spending towards financing development projects, there is little prospect of success in the quest for silencing the guns. Indeed, this is one of the areas for translating the lofty rhetoric of silencing the guns into concrete action. There is thus a need for shifting from defense spending in investing in inclusive systems of governance at national and local levels.

Addressing the governance and other structural deficits that create the conditions for the demand for guns among members of society is another dimension in the equation to silencing the guns. Conditions for resolving disputes through peaceful, legal and democratic means should be created. This means that it should be much easier for various social and political forces, including rival actors, to resolve or manage their disagreements through such non-violent means than through a resort to violence. Alternatively, it must be much more costly to resort to the use of guns than to use non-violent means including mediation, dialogue, alternative dispute resolution, judicial means, political negotiations. Increasingly, not only the cheap availability of weapons but also importantly the weakening or absence of such non-violent mechanisms of resolving or managing disputes that has created the vacuum for making the use of guns a common means of pursuing social or political objectives.

States and non-state actors should invest more in strengthening & expanding the non-violent mechanisms of dispute resolutions. The avenues for enabling various social and political forces to meet their basic needs or secure their basic interests should also be expanded if despair is not to push them into resorting to seeking the use of force and the language of guns. Critical to these are enhancing and ensuring respect for constitutionalism, rule of law and human rights as well as political and social practices that emphasize and promote accommodation and compromise and that guarantee the protection of the interests and rights of all sectors of society.

Guns do not shoot on their own. They depend on human agency for firing. Silencing the guns thus depends primarily on working on the human agency whose

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activation leads guns to fire. Peace and civic education and political discourse and debate that emphasizes inclusion and protection of the interest of all rather than that which incites hate speech and ethnic or religious acrimony or instrumentalization or weaponization of identity should be encouraged.

While the effective regulation of the circulation, possession and use of weapons is important, it cannot be the primary and most effective way of silencing the guns. It is rather through the elaboration and application of a well thought out political strategy that silencing the guns can be achieved. Silencing the guns is thus primarily a political matter. This underscores the primacy of political solutions.

Bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality: Bringing Silencing the Guns to the ground

Perhaps the most important intervention for silencing the guns has to happen at the level where the guns are already in use or where there are risks of guns being used. Accordingly, it matters a great deal whether silencing the guns mean much more than the business as usual approach to responding to or dealing with ongoing conflicts. Indeed, if silencing the guns is meant to entail a more effective mobilization for ending of violent conflicts, then targeted intervention must be deployed for resolving ongoing violent conflicts in a very decisive, forceful, concerted form with the urgency required for achieving resolution. This necessitates reassessing the adequacy of the political and security tools that are used by the AU and regional

organizations as well as their partners or the approach of how these political and security instruments are deployed.

So, one must ask and find policy answers to the question what does silencing the guns mean in the various ongoing conflict situations on the agenda of the PSC and those not on its agenda? One must ask and find policy answers about what has been done and what needs to change and be done for achieving the goal of silencing the guns in each of these situations.

Clearly, it is not possible to have a one size approach or policy to the agenda of silencing the guns in all instances of ongoing conflicts. This means that there is a need for designing and deploying the kind of conflict management and resolution instrument tailored to the specificities of each conflict at a level and time that guarantees higher degree of success for resolution under conditions that present either incentives for opting for ending conflicts or higher costs for continuing with the use of guns.

In the light of the apparent deterioration of the peace and security conditions on the continent, it is clear that silencing the guns has changed nothing from the business as usual approach to peace and security. Unless the way Africa deals with existing and newly erupted conflicts and its approach to conflict management & resolution changes, no tangible results will be achieved in respect of the agenda of silencing the guns in respect of these existing or emerging conflicts.

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Similarly, there is a need for a much forceful and proactive approach to conflict prevention if new conflicts are to be presented from erupting. This entails that the AU and RECs/RMs as well as international organizations such as the UN and partners are able to effectively map situations that face risks of violent conflicts and hence use of guns and initiate timely policy intervention to prevent it from materializing.

It is only where silencing the guns mean something in the way AU deals with both existing conflicts and the threat of the eruption of new conflicts that it can mean something meaningful and more than sloganeering and a policy rhetoric with no practical application.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that 2020 marks the year for silencing the guns in Africa, the progress made in this respect is very limited. The persistence of existing conflicts and the eruption of new conflicts means that the continent has experienced major regression in its quest for silencing the guns. As the foregoing brief analysis highlighted, this reality necessitates fundamental rethinking in terms of both identifying strategic areas of intervention and in the AU's approach to existing and emerging conflicts or threats to peace and security on the continent.

As the AU convenes an extraordinary summit on Silencing the Guns on 6 December 2020 with a view to extend the timeline for silencing the guns, progress in the next phase of this agenda will depend among others on the following:

- Adoption of a comprehensive continental legal and institutional regime (treaty) on the regulation of the importation into Africa and the curbing of the illicit circulation of arms and weapons on the African continent;

- Identifying and deploying tailor made policy and institutional interventions in countries with the most concentration and circulation of small arms and light weapons;

- Foregrounding political solutions as the primary means of silencing the guns and thus addressing the governance and institutional fragilities and weaknesses that create the conditions both for the expansion of the terrorist threat on the continent and the eruption of violent conflicts;

- Designing and deploying the kind of conflict management and resolution instrument tailored to the specificities of each conflict at a level and time that guarantees higher degree of success for resolution under conditions that present either incentives for opting for ending conflicts or higher costs for continuing with the use of guns;

- Proactive conflict prevention measures based on mapping situations that exhibit risks of violent conflicts and the use of guns and initiate timely policy intervention to prevent such risks from materializing;

- The implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the AU human rights and governance institutions including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the

African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Peer Review Mechanisms as a basis for institutionalization in all states of inclusive systems of governance that guarantees protection of the interests and rights of all sections of society;

- Promotion of peace and civic education and political discourse and debate that emphasizes inclusion and protection of the interest of all rather than that which weaponizes identity and propagate division and hate which necessitates the expansion of the civic space for the full and free functioning of civil society organizations;

- The mainstreaming of human rights and the inclusion of women and youth in all peace processes across the conflict continuum from prevention to post-conflict reconstruction and development and transitional justice; and

- Prioritize investment in addressing the weakness or absence of and expanding mechanisms for non-violent means of resolving disputes including mediation, dialogue, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, judicial means, political negotiations.

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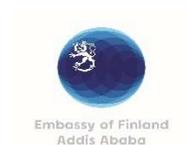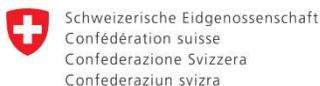
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