

Consideration of the report the MSC on the harmonization of ACIRC in the ASF

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Tomorrow (9 January) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is scheduled to have a session for consideration of the report of its Military Staff Committee (MSC) on the harmonization of the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (ACIRC) within the African Standby Force (ASF).

It is to be recalled that the PSC held a session for consideration of the summary of records of the MSC on 19 November. Following the meeting the PSC requested the MSC to submit to it a report building on the proposals outlined in the summary of records of the meeting of the MSC with inputs from member states.

ACIRC was put in place in 2013 as a gap filling measure for availing the AU a rapid response capability pending the full operationalization of the ASF. ACIRC became a reality in the following years, although it has not been used. Over the years divisions emerged over the role of ACIRC and its relationship with and implications on the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in general and the ASF in particular. While countries participating in ACIRC viewed it as availing the AU pragmatic capability for rapid response based on the concept of coalition of the willing organized around a lead nation, others came to view ACIRC as diverting attention from the operationalization of the ASF and carrying the risk of fragmenting or undermining the APSA framework. Some RECs/RMs, such as ECOWAS, ECCAS and EASFCOM, have in particular been critical of ACIRC both for lack of their participation in its establishment and for their exclusion in its

operationalization and potential utilization.

The Specialized Technical Committee on Defense, Safety and Security (STCDSS), during its seventh meeting held on 14 January 2014 in Addis Ababa, recommended that both the ACIRC and the ASF RDC concepts should be harmonized to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure that the ACIRC assists in expediting the operationalization process of the RDC. In 2015, the Report of the Independent Panel of Experts' Assessment of the African Standby Force recommended that the AU Commission 'takes steps to harmonise and integrate the ACIRC into the ASF model, as an additional tool for further enhancing the AU's capacity to respond rapidly to Scenario Six-type mass atrocity crimes, and that it be synchronised with the ASF's national or stand-alone RDC (Rapid Deployment Capacity) model.'

Subsequently, the AU Assembly adopted decision 679 which called on all stakeholders to support the realization of the full operationalization of the ASF, and harmonization of the activities of ACIRC with the Framework of the ASF and enhance cooperation with all ad-hoc coalitions namely, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram terrorist group, Group of Five Sahel Joint Force and the Regional Cooperation Initiative against the Lord's Resistance Army (RCI-LRA), and requested the Commission to submit a plan on the harmonization of ACIRC into ASF, including steps to be taken by the AU and the Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention (RECs/RMs) to coordinate ad-hoc coalitions, within the context of Articles 13 and 16 of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union.'

Despite the policy decisions, the actual implementation of the harmonization of ACIRC within the ASF has faced challenging questions of political, legal and resource preconditions. Various institutional, technical, human and financial inputs have been put in place for putting ACIRC in place. An ACIRC Planning Element (PLANELM) within the Peace Support Operations

Division (PSOD) of the AU Commission in Addis Ababa has been established. Politically, it remains unclear that all ACIRC participating countries are convinced that ACIRC should merge into the ASF RDC. The legal issue pertains to the memorandum of understanding that the AU may need to sign with ACIRC members on the integration and use of their pledged capabilities within the ASF. It is also imperative that the harmonization addresses the question of what happens to the various technical, logistical and institutional resources, including the personnel making up the ACIRC PLANELM, currently servicing the ACIRC.

These were the issues that the 5 October meeting MSC considered with the Defense Attaché of the Congo chairing by virtue of the fact that Congo was the PSC chair of the month. The meeting of the MSC proposed the steps to be taken and the accompanying timeline for implementing the harmonization. The steps to be taken consist broadly of a) letter of appreciation by the AUC to ACIRC countries (for their contributions), and communication to AU member states (urging them to comply with Assembly decisions 679 and 695) and partners (notifying them of the merger of ACIRC and ASF), b) the legal process to be followed (in terms of review of existing legal frameworks between AU and ACIRC countries and reporting to the PSC in May 2019), and c) the approach to the re-deployment of the assets and resources of ACIRC into the ASF, and the measures to be taken at the level of the PSOD, RECs/RMs and finally the AU Assembly.

It has been noted during the 19 November session that the various steps are envisaged to run from November 2018 to February 2020 when the AU Assembly is expected to make final pronouncement. This has now been adjusted to reflect the time that has lapsed since November 2018. The integration of ACIRC into the ASF seems to fit the ongoing AU reform process that seeks to avoid duplication and ensure mainstreaming of efforts.

Yet, some of these issues such as the proposal on integrating the human resources of the ACIRC PLANLEM into PSOD are likely to trigger discussion from the perspective of the human resource regulations of the AU. It is however clear from the report of the MSC that the MSC 'reached the consensus that the term 'harmonization', in the context of Assembly Decisions 679 and 695, means that ACIRC should be integrated within the ASF Framework.'

One of the issues that arose within the PSC has been the proposal from some member states for the ACIRC volunteering countries to put their capabilities at the disposal of the AU for use within the framework of the ASF. The emerging view that seems to be carrying weight in the PSC is that these are capabilities availed voluntarily and could not be made binding without the consent of the volunteering states.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC may endorse the proposed steps in the report with a request for the AUC to report periodically on progress.