

PSC marks 20th anniversary as the continent faces dangerous deterioration of peace and security

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Today 25 May is Africa day – the day of anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity 61 years ago. Today's Africa day is special as it also marks the 20th anniversary of the official launch of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) – the standing peace and security decision-making body. The PSC is observing its 20th anniversary with various reflective activities, including the High-Level colloquium being held today in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

During the official launch in May 2004, the operationalisation of the PSC marks, in the ambitious if not unrealistic assessment of that African states, 'an historic watershed in Africa's progress towards resolving its conflicts and the building of a durable peace and security order.' This is another way of saying that the PSC represents the institutional expression of what Ali Mazrui called *pax Africana* – a peace protected and maintained through the leadership and exertion of Africa. Or as the PSC Protocol's preamble put it, the PSC is established 'to ensure that

Africa, through the African Union, plays a central role in bringing about peace, security and stability on the Continent.'

As PSC's experience through its various efforts illustrated, *Pax Africana* is not beyond the realm of the possible. It mobilized various credible, even some landmark, responses to conflicts and crises on the continent, using preventive diplomacy, mediation, peace support operations and suspension in cases of unconstitutional changes of government.

Yet, as the security situation on the continent goes 'from the frying pan to the fire' including in Sudan where the PSC invested much of its diplomatic time and efforts, questions abound on whether the continental body is on a losing streak in recent years in its fight for peace and security.

The Council's first major test came with the crisis in Darfur, Sudan, which featured on the agenda of the PSC when the PSC became operational in March 2004. It was here that the PSC experimented and sharpened its various precedent-setting conflict management and resolution tools.

In 2004, mediation talks, led by the AU, culminated in the signing of the Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement in N'djamena, Chad, on 8 April. As a follow-up, It was in Darfur that the PSC deployed its first peace support operation, the AU Mission to Sudan (AMIS). AMIS provided the first international presence in Darfur. The mission started in 2004 with 60 military observers and 300 troops. AMIS later evolved into a full-fledged peace support operation with its size reaching 7,000 troops by 2006.

Despite being confronted with a limited mandate, insufficient troops, a lack of political will and inadequate funding and equipment, the mission was successful in reducing violence. Through strategic negotiations, it also managed to prevent certain attacks from occurring.

AMIS also laid the groundwork for the first and historic UN and AU joint mission known as United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).

It is also here in Darfur that the PSC for the first time established a high-level panel, the AU High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD) which later became AU High-level Panel on Sudan (AUHIP), setting an example for the high-level panel as a model of AU's diplomatic action for mediation and peacemaking.

Fast forward to today, Sudan once again finds itself in turmoil, following the war that broke out on 15 April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Force (SAF) and, the paramilitary, Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Almost 14,000 fatalities have been recorded since April 2023, with about 10 million Sudanese displaced and over 24 million people in need of humanitarian aid. Recent data shows that a large number of people face imminent famine.

Despite its early engagement, in subsequent months it lost momentum and dented its credibility as it failed to mobilise an effective response to the situation in Sudan. Unable to bridge the widening gulf between peoples' expectations of it and its actual delivery, AU run into a serious legitimacy crisis. Despite the plight of Sudanese civilians caught up in this destructive war and AU's claim for leadership, the PSC and the AU in general did not go beyond expression of concern and condemnation of breaches of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

It took eight months for the PSC to stand its ground and adopt a decision on the establishment of a high-level ad hoc panel meant to work on a full-time basis on the situation on Sudan. While this is a welcome development, it will be an uphill battle for the panel to make up for the lost time and regain AU's credibility on the Sudan file.

In Addition to the dangerous process of state collapse

underway and the mass atrocities unfolding in Darfur with El Fasher under the grip of murderous fighting, with conflicts involving terrorist groups proliferating, eight successful military coups since 2021 and six of AU member states under suspension, the PSC is facing legitimate charges of failing to muster effective leadership and falling back to the old politics of indifference to mass atrocities that was characteristic of the now defunct AU's predecessor the Organization of African Unity.

As the PSC takes stock of its past triumphs and setbacks, the lessons learned from Darfur and other efforts, particularly during the first decade must guide its endeavours for restoring its effectiveness and credibility. The PSC owes this to its founding commitment and its future relevance as a catalyst and embodiment of *pax Africana*. This might not come early enough for those caught up in the crossfire of deadly wars, such as those in Sudan and the DRC enduring enormous suffering on account of, among others, the failing & inadequate peace efforts of the AU.

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