

The 36th AU Summit beyond peace and security: Reform of the multilateral system and the AfCFTA

The 36th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly was held on 18-19 February preceded by the 42nd Ordinary Session of the Executive Council on 15-16. As part of covering this year's summit, we profile some key issues and events around the summit. We present in our 'Ideas Indaba' the issues that received particular attention: reform of the multilateral system and the AfCFTA.

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Solomon Ayele Dersso, PhD
Founding Director, Amani Africa

The members of the African Union (AU) Assembly, African Heads of State and Government, did not disappoint. They did not show up in their numbers to their own party. Well you may say, after all Addis Abeba is not Brussels, Beijing or Washington DC. One cannot help wondering if it would be a good idea for purposes of full attendance if the AU rather considers holding its summit back-to-back the summits our leaders hold with their counterparts from elsewhere in the world.

But is it really about the venue? Or is it about the value they attach to the AU, to matters pan-African? If the report of the claim by France that it is responsible for getting the President of Comoros, Azali Assoumani, to become AU Chairperson for 2023 is true, clearly there are countries like France who seem to value the AU more. As to the venue, yes, Addis Abeba is not like any of those other cities. And there

is nothing bad about that. After all, Addis is Africa's foremost diplomatic capital. A city with its own charm. Being in Addis also has an added value. It spares our dear leaders from the pain of spending our money on shopping. A huge plus in this time of crushing socio-economic distress.

Speaking of socio-economic distress on the continent, I would consider you lucky if you are not feeling the very painful pinch on your pocket. The spike in cost of living, which continues to grow every month and massively, seems to have made currencies in our continent worthless. The prospect does not look promising either. Most of our economies on the continent are facing serious debt distress during 2023 and 2024.

So, one of the questions we had was whether the leaders of our beloved continent would make this debilitating erosion of the little we have in our pockets as one of the priority agenda items during the summit. This issue also received particular attention in the summit of representatives of CSOs from across the continent held on 17-18 February in Addis Ababa for which Amani Africa had the privilege of playing a host.

It was encouraging that the dire economic issues from inflation to debt took the limelight at the summit. During the opening segment of the AU Summit, AU Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, asserted that in the face of the prevailing economic challenges, the 'activation of various mechanisms of internal resilience, intra-African solidarity, rapid implementation of African financial institutions, all supported by virtuous governance seems in my view to be the way to salvation'.

The most profound idea came from the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres. He hit the nail on the head by properly naming the leading source of the current economic woes facing countries such as those in Africa – the global financial system. In the words of Guterres, 'the global financial system

routinely denies them debt relief and concessional financing while charging extortionist interest rates’.

To end this unjust system, which is beyond the reach of ‘the mechanisms of internal resilience’ central to Faki’s speech, Guterres called for a new Bretton Woods moment, a moment that necessitates a fundamental reform of the system. This call was not limited to the opening session. It was echoed, among others, forcefully by President William Ruto of Kenya in his maiden address to the Assembly.

Yet, the AU summit has not gone far enough. For example, it did not put in place a common African proposal on the reform of the global financial system, something akin to the Bridgetown Initiative led by the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottle. The most the AU did was the announcement of a debt observatory. This, according to AU Commissioner for Trade and Industry, Albert Muchanga, ‘is going to be a debt observatory to enable us monitor the debt situations. We intend to have real-time data with respect to debt management around the countries of Africa.’

Unsurprisingly, this year’s theme of the AU: acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was also a major focus of the summit. Apart from COVID-19, which highlighted the depth of lack of preparedness of African health systems and Africa’s exclusive dependence on and the unreliability of global supply chains and the skewed nature of the global trading system as the resistance to the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver attested, the food and energy price crises that ensued following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia have further accentuated the imperative for intra-African trade and urgency of full operationalization of the AfCFTA.

During the summit, the theme of the year was launched with the AfCFTA Secretary General presenting the concept for the theme of the year. The three Protocols on Competition Policy,

Investment and Intellectual Property Rights were tabled and considered for adoption during the summit. As the AU Assembly's Champion for AfCFTA, former President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou put it, 'the implementation of the AfCFTA will enable the continent to emerge from the colonial pact that reduced it to a mere reservoir of raw materials.'

While it did not take center stage during this year's summit, peace and security issues, attracted some attention. AU's highest standing decision-making body on matters of peace and security, the Peace and Security Council (PSC), held a summit level session on 17 February on the pressing conflict in Eastern DRC. Among others, the summit called for 'the cantonment and disarmament of M23 under the control of the DRC authorities, and the supervision of EAC Regional Force.'

The Assembly also debated the African Consensus position on funding of AU peace operations, including through accessing UN assessed contributions. As stated in the consensus position paper, the AU 'will endeavor to pay up to 25% of PSO budgetary component of AU PSOs' from member states contributions. This, according to the paper, 'progressively covers in large part the preparation stage of AU-Led PSOs especially effective assessment, planning, and readiness for efficient mandate implementation. In addition, this will cover costs related to strategic planning, mission-specific pre-deployment training, mission-specific technical assessments and fact-finding missions, recruitment and selection process of mission personnel, pre-deployment verification of personnel and equipment, negotiations and signing processes for the MoU between the AU and Police/Troop Contributing Countries (PTCC), negotiations and signing processes for AU-Host Country Status of Forces/Mission Agreements, negotiations and signing processes for Letters of Assists between the AU and Countries Contributing capabilities for AU-Led PSOs.'

In terms of financing of Peace Support Operations (PSOs), one of the major outcomes of the AU PSC summit on the DRC was the

decision for contributing to the funding for the East African Force from the AU Peace Fund. While various figures were floated by member states during the consideration of the report of the PSC to the Assembly, the only portion of the Peace Fund, which was approved following the financial rules and available for use during 2023, is the USD 5 million from the Conflict Reserve Fund (CRF) of the Peace Fund.

One of the items that also attracted some interest was the agenda on the request for reform of the PSC with a focus on increasing representation of the Northern region, which in the current PSC set up only has the least number of seats with one three years and one two years term seats. The debate on this item was cut short with the new AU Chairperson, Assoumani, announcing that as no consensus was emerging he would take it up with his peers. As no decision was adopted by the Assembly, it remains unclear if and how this agenda would be followed up.

On the global geo-political situation, President Kagame of Rwanda pointed out in his intervention that 'Africa must not become a casualty of geopolitical tensions. What Africa wants and needs first is peace'. At the same time, as the debate on the report of the Ministerial Committee of Ten on the Reform of the UN Security Council revealed, there is a recognition that this could be an opportune moment for advancing Africa's longstanding quest for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Of course, the debate also made it apparent that AU member states should guard against the pressure facing them from various quarters in the jockeying of different groupings on the reform of the UN Security Council. As the Chair of the Committee at Assembly level, Sierra Leone's President put it, 'Africa should stay the course, continue to speak with one voice.'

This proved to be a summit that is not dominated by peace and security issues. However, in terms of whether it makes any difference depends a great deal on the quality of decisions

and the adoption by states of the measures necessary for implementation of those decisions. Thus, as a year for acceleration of implementation of the AfCFTA, the catalyst role of the AfCFTA, as the acting chief of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) put it, in bringing supply chains closer to home and facilitating the production and trading of food and fertilisers in Africa, depends a lot on whether the requirements for harnessing its potentials would be prioritized in the ongoing push towards the operationalization of the world's largest free trade area.

These requirements include legislation by states parties on tariffs, customs and certification of origin. Also not any less important are speeding up industrialization (and expanding manufacturing capacities including the manufacturing of medicines – we were told that our governments have left us to be dependent on importation for 98% of medicines people on the continent need), free movement of people without which goods and services could not fully move (by ensuring ratification and implementation of the protocol on free movement of persons), cross border cooperation (by ensuring ratification and implementation of the Niamey Convention) and investing in agricultural development (by among others, implementing commitments under AU's flagship program Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CADAP) and the outcome of the Dakar Summit on food security – so that a continent with 60 % arable land reduces its dependence on importation of staple food resources from elsewhere in the world).

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