A Look at the East Africa Standby Force, EASF

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*Introduction*

The world today is organized and administered in terms of geopolitical units called states which give identities to various peoples. That identity is legitimized by that state being accepted by the United Nations as an independent and sovereign member of the community of nations. Independence and sovereignty refer to the right of each of the states to make independent decisions without having to request permission from any quarter. In that context, the term "state" refers to every force and factor in that specific geopolitical entity. This means the government, the media, the citizens, NGOs, Civil Society organs, cultural and religious agencies, and security organs. Since it is "governments" within states, and mostly the executive arms of government, that are mandated to protect and advance the interests of that state, it is the quality and commitment of executive functionaries in making policy that often get attention.

Governments, however, increasingly have to respond to new realities that have eroded the ability of governments to make independent decisions. This is because other players keep "inviting" themselves into policy and decision making. Such players include the media, NGOs, civil society entities, and even influential individuals. Sometimes these supplement and compliment official policy makers and there are also times when they become obstacles. The self-inviting players become particularly troublesome when they appear to be advancing the agenda of external forces rather than the interests of their own countries. How the state handles all these players and challenges determines the level of its ability to safe guard its national interests.

The critical thing in any self-respecting state is to safeguard and advance what it perceives to be its national interests, particularly self-preservation as a geopolitical entity. The methods and strategies used for self-preservation vary but they largely depend on the capacity that each has to do so. The capacity is affected by the quality and commitment of policy makers whose ability to make the right decisions depends on command of three types of knowledge. These are thorough knowledge of the self, knowledge of the other states and forces that the state engages or is likely to engage, and the points of interest convergence and divergence of the states and forces involved. This ability entails regular analysis of the expected challenges to be surmounted and the readiness for dealing with the unknown. Those countries that have quality and committed policy makers and with requisite command of the three types of knowledge, and ability to make correct analysis tend to succeed in defending their perceived national interests and also tend to dominate their regions. They influence others and the influence can be both positive and negative. The region is vastly affected by what the dominant state does or goes through.

*The Tools for Safeguarding Interests*

Each state has or should have four inter-related tools, working together, with which to safeguard and advance its perceived national interests. First, are instruments of self-defense as a state from internal and external threats, as protection. For this reason, each state pays for such assorted forces as the military, the police, and other uniformed and specialized units. Second is the ability to practice domestic and external diplomacy in order to have state policies accepted by citizens and the other states involved. If policies are not largely accepted by the citizens, there is a danger that they might be susceptible to external manipulation against national interests. With regard to external diplomacy, the ability to convince other states that they have common interests in adopting certain positions on particular issues is itself a way of ensuring state interests. In external diplomacy, the stress is on the points of interest convergence. Third, the purpose of having constituted states as human organizing units is to cater for the economic as well as socio-political well-being of citizens in specific states. Each state tends to be unique and the purpose of armed forces and diplomacy is to protect the way of life and identity of the citizens in terms of socio-economic and even political well-being. No country aspires or should aspire to be a carbon copy of any other. Fourth, is the quality of two organs of conditioning and opinion making within a state. These are the education system and the media which, if mishandled, have ability to negate the other three.

The states that combine well catered for armed forces; effective domestic and external diplomacy; sense of identity, vibrant economies and societal values; and credible instruments of opinion shaping tend to be strong and to be led by quality and committed policy makers. These then become dominant within particular regions or in the globe. Since it is difficult for any country to have global or regional dominance in all the four tools, it often becomes necessary for various states to seek points of interest convergence and they create alliances in order to deal with specific common challenges. Among the most common of such alliances are those relating to security matters and, as a region, Africa has increasingly become prone to assorted security alliances. This is manifested in the emergence of Africa Standby Force, ASF, with its regional components among them being the East Africa Standby Force, EASF, responsible for today's gathering.

*The Africa Security Condition*

As a continent, Africa is an unfortunate contradiction. It is full of resources but its people hardly benefit from those resources. It is the cradle of humanity but it is currently the one place where humanity suffers most. It wants to be a player at the global stage but it has become a theatre for extra-continental global players competing to control the continent. It would want to have one common African identity but its peoples are fragmented into thousands of social-cultural units based on two forces; ethnic affiliations and colonial experiences.

States in Africa are largely the consequences of 19th Century and early 20th Century European imperial competition for African territories. In Eastern Africa, these were Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, and Italy. Britain ended up with Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Tanganyika, and part of Somalia. Germany had Tanganyika but lost it to Britain and Belgium after the Great War and so there are traces of German influence in mainland Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. Italy took Somalia and Eritrea but failed in effort to grab Ethiopia. France claimed Djibouti, and the islands of Comoros, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Each of those had unique colonial experiences and thus developed identities that became part of the future post-colonial states to be complicated by continuing ethnic identities that at times crossed state boundaries.

Leaders in post-colonial African states realized that they were weak individually and sought to deal with that by creating the Organisation of African Unity, OAU, and one of the dreams that was not realized was to have common security thrust. Although the desire was there in some leaders, this did not work because the continent seemed to lack capacity whether it was of the three types of knowledge or the quality and committed policy makers. It was essentially an externally dependent entity with regard to the four tools of self-preservation as a continent or as individual states. What was more, there appeared to be perpetual self-denial as to responsibility on the part of policy makers.

This self-denial declined with the transformation of the OAU into the African Union, AU, at the beginning of the 21st Century. With it was the emphasis on the slogan of African solutions to African problems in part because the visible and expected external solutions were not working very well. The slogan also covers up the fact that some of the problems were external to Africa although they were played in Africa. And the external forces were reluctant to help. Former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan noted that "most developed countries are increasingly reluctant to contribute" to deal with African crisis. This might explain some of the handicaps to finding African solutions to African problems because the problems may actually not be African. The effort, however, is commendable in that it acknowledges the need for African policy makers to take charge, despite the obstacles. One of the substantive outlook changes enshrined in the AU *Constitutive Act* was the AU right to intervene in a member country to stop genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. It was later amended to include "serious threat to legitimate order."

*The African Standby Force*

To decide when or not to intervene required a process and a structure and so the AU went about creating state based structures and processes. Critical to this was the establishment of an *African Peace and Security Architecture* APSA, which has five pillars. First is the Peace and Security Council comprising heads of state and Governments. Second, is an Early Warning System. Third is a Panel of the Wise. Fourth is a Peace Fund. Fifth and most important is the *Africa Standby Force* with regional branches called "brigades" that were collectively to raise 15,000 troops

whose number was later adjusted to 25,000. These are to be some kind of trained reserve officers who are to be on call when the need arises. Since the emphasis was on "troops", the command structure tends to be military, providing for Ministers of Defense and Security as well as Chiefs of Defense Staff meeting regularly. The police and the civilian components tend to be ignored or subsumed within discussions. The police and the civilian components appear to have been added as after-thoughts to the reality that peace keeping is more than separating possible combatants in volatile places.

One common weakness with APSA and its pillars is that the fourth pillar on fund raising is extremely weak and has generally failed to raise the needed funds. This inability is partly due to the unwillingness or lack of capacity for members to meet their financial obligations, lack of commitment to the APSA ideals, and excessive dependency of individual countries to external forces. This implies that APSA is dependent on the very extra-continental forces that it was designed to avoid. In addition, most of the *Standby* brigades or forces have failed to meet their targets whether in terms of troop availability or financial commitments. This has meant that *The African Standby Force* has not been able to intervene as it should in recent crises places and has instead watched such extra-continental powers as France do their things.

It is this failure that seemingly gave rise to peculiar stop gap recommendations before the full realization of operational capacity. First was the creation of the Rapid Deployment Capacity, RDC, which as a holding stage before the realization of the full *African Standby Brigade* and which, in theory, was to rely on anchor states such as Nigeria and South Africa to take the initiatives to intervene. It did not materialize and so a different initiative was floated. This was the South African inspired *African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises*, ACIRC, that was adopted in the May 2013 summit at Addis Ababa. *ACIRC* was to be "a transitional stop-gap measure pending full formation of the planned Standby Force" and would be "formed from voluntary contributions of troops, equipment and funds by member states currently in a position to provide these." The ones in position to provide are limited and collectively, the *African Standby Force* needs US$ 1 billion dollars to become operational. The money does not appear to be available.

Besides lack of funds and probable commitments on the part of policy makers, there seems to be areas of friction with regional *Standby* organs as to jurisdiction and priorities. Do the various *standby forces* answer to the African Union (AU) or the United Nations (UN)? The SADC and ECOWA standby brigades prefer answering to the UN rather than to the AU. This preference implies potential friction between the UN and the AU. There is also an impression that ASF is a stopgap before the UN takes over which indicates admission of incapacity to handle crises and the continued feeling of dependency. Except for one, the other four regional *Standby Forces* are mostly anchored on such regional economic bodies as ECOWA, SADC, ECCAS, and AMU or Arab Maghreb Union. AMU hardly participates and thus tends to be forgotten in discussing the fortunes and tribulations of the *African Standby Forces*. The exception is the East African Standby Force that is also exceptional in other ways.

*The East African Standby Force*

The one outstanding exception among the *Africa Standby Forces* is *The East Africa Standby Brigade* that later changed to *East Africa Standby Force.* The West African one comes close. Its exceptionalism is that in comparative terms, it seems to be doing relatively well although it still has problems. It is also exceptional in that it is not anchored on an existing regional economic body, or REC, like the rest. It is geographical, Eastern Africa, and embraces African islands in the Indian Ocean. It should have more than 10 members but it is the 10 who are active and have made the difference. With their varied contributions whose capacity is also relative. The key players are Kenya and Ethiopia who tend to be geopolitical rivals who actually share the running of the *East Africa Standby Force.* As a result, Addis Ababa is the headquarters for logistics and policy and Nairobi is the headquarters for Planning Element which entails training and public education or public relations.

Initially, there was hope that EASF could be anchored in the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Desertification, IGADD, which transformed itself into Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, IGAD. Created in 1986, IGADD changed ten years later to IGAD in 1996 to handle general security and peace related matters. The attraction to IGAD was in part because it was very active in promoting *peace*, meaning effective management of conflicts, within the region. And it already had one of the pillars, early warning in place. The challenge was that its potential members had conflicting loyalty to such RECs as the East African Community, COMESA, and even SADC. Other potential members were not party to IGAD, felt left out, and wanted a more accommodating base by reducing the IGAD coordinating role. Some members like Tanzania, Madagascar and Mauritius preferred the Southern Africa one. With the reduction of IGAD's visibility, there appears to be enthusiasm among those that remained and even went to the extent of expanding activities and who is to be involved. These involve the inclusion of the police and civilians components in the regular training of *the Standby Force* and the capacity building to the expected levels of at least 5,000 that are operational ready. The Force claims that it is already ready before the December target date.

That readiness is in terms of training and data possession as to who is where and the type of skills but not in terms of logistics and funding. It has held training sessions in Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya that essentially boost the morale of the training. It is also premised on two assumptions. First is that the need for EASF deployment would be for one place operation but not for simultaneous demands of its help. Second it is premised on sufficiency of funds and logistical support from Friends of EASF. The delivery and sustainability, therefore, depends on the goodwill of donors. While each state would provide some funds and personnel for a 14 day deployment, stated Rwanda Defense Ministaer General James Kabarebe, maintaining the operation would rely on donors. "Once we have the funding," General Joseph Zambamwita of Rwanda asserted, "then we can be sure of sustainability…. We can only hope that we get all the support and all the finances as soon as possible."

*Challenges for the East Africa Standby Force*

Although the East Africa Standby Force is the most efficient and advanced of the *African Standby Forces*, and although it claims to be ready for operation, it faces several changes that are both internal and external to itself to which the concerned policy makers should pay attention. So far, the time for deployment has not arisen but in case it arises, the following should be considered:

First, is the issue of command being in proportion to the contribution that each member makes to the whole. It is likely that those who make the most contribution in terms of troops, logistics, and finances would feel cheated if the command structure does not recognize the levels of contribution. It is a search for equitable balance that makes everyone feel appreciated in whatever the mission is.

Second, is for policy makes to determine and be clear about what the objective of deploying a Standby Force to a particular place should be. Is it to separate warring factions or is it to restore lost sense of faith and confidence to distraught people and places? And is it realistic in assessing its capacity to do either or both?

Third, are the political dynamics and frictions within each member state and between member states as to the right actions. Suppose there are serious internal challenges within a key state as to whether or not to deploy due to coordination failures. Other ministries involved in such an undertaking would be those of Interior and probably Justice and Foreign Affairs and yet they are nowhere in the official structure that stresses ministries of Defense and Security. Should this be the case? Similarly a strong state opposed to a specific deployment might derail the whole undertaking by simply withdrawing its contribution.

Fourth, is the challenge of dependency. Given that not all members fully meet their financial commitments to EASF, this failure can hinder operation-ability. The dependency on extra-continental forces called "donors" or friends of EASF whose resources may not be available when they are needed is likely to be an obstacle to effectiveness. The donors may find good reasons or impose new conditions before they deliver on their promises. For instance, the expected United Nations assistance for AMISON in Somalia has not been forthcoming and AU is stuck.

Fifth, is the issue of regional loyalty and the choice of belonging, which is bothersome. Tanzania is symbolic of this challenge in that it is a founder member of the East African Community and is geographically in eastern Africa but it chooses to identify with southern Africa rather than eastern Africa where it counts. This is an anomaly that policy makers may wish to look at.

Sixth, given the procedures that are needed before deployment of a military nature in case of breach of security, it probably would be easy to have special provisions for rapid deployment in

case natural disasters. It is in responding to natural disasters, immediately rather than in 14 days, that EASF is likely to make the biggest impact and win the support of various stakeholders.

Seventh, is the question of assigning guilt in the breach of peace as prelude to determining the level and type of intervention. It assumes that there will be agreements on what is to be done and where the probable guilt lies. Decision makers should avoid making assumptions that are politically driven to exonerate particular factions and shift blame to another. If so, policy makers would be doing a lousy job and it is a danger to be concerned about.

Eighth, there is an assumption of an existing unified concept of security among the members of EASF. Does that uniformity exist? The supposed unified concept may be in conflict with the individual state perception of its security when relating to its neighbours. Eritrea and Ethiopia, for instance, do not see eye to eye on security matters.

Ninth, in case of deployment in an area of contention between two or three members of the EASF, where is the loyalty of the individual trained officer, to his country or to EASF? The assumption that individual trained officers are on Standby for calls is thus valid only to the extent that a state does not object. Would the particular state release such people to serve in missions they may not approve? And even if it approves and the officer is needed somewhere else within the state at that particular time, what would happen in the case of multiple needs.

Tenth, is the level of public engagement to help make EASF a positive household name and in the forefront of public discussions. In this, the media and educational institutions are critical to its success and ability to deliver. Today's session in Nairobi is a good beginning. I wonder whether this kind of forum is taking place in such other capitals as Kampala. Addis Ababa, Kigali, Bujumbura, or the Comoros and if not, why not?

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