Challenges to Peace and Security in Central Africa: The Role of ECCAS

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Central Africa is one of the most volatile regions on the continent where poor governance, armed conflicts and transnational crime contribute to the persistent insecurity of states and peoples. The region's principal organisation for security cooperation, and its contribution to the African Peace and Security Architecture, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has responded to some of the security threats but remains a weak peace and security actor. This brief analyses the main challenges to peace and security in Central Africa and the role of ECCAS in countering such challenges over the past five years.

Among its ten member states, ECCAS includes three of the world's six most fragile states.[1] Protracted armed conflicts and rebellions in the *Democratic Republic of the Congo* (DRC) and the *Central African Republic* (CAR) have contributed to the instability of the region with serious effects on its neighbours, many of which have been directly involved in the conflicts. *Chad,* which struggles with political instability and frequent threats of rebellions, has been facing the spillover of insecurity from all its neighbouring countries for years. More recently the Nigerian armed group Boko Haram has emerged as a threat in Central Africa as well by destabilising northern *Cameroon*, a country already seriously affected by acts of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. *Burundi* is in a post-conflict phase facing persistent political tensions and violence, with repercussions for the stability of the neighbouring countries, including Rwanda which has expressed an interest in re-joining ECCAS. There is a risk of social unrest, political instability and falling oil prices affecting oil-producing countries like *Angola, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea* and *Gabon* in the years to come, with the two former still recovering from decades of civil war. Those states also suffer from acts of piracy, as does the island state of *São Tomé and Príncipe.*

ECCAS' peace and security structures

Established in 1983 with its General Secretariat located in Libreville, Gabon, ECCAS was reactivated in 1998, after a six-year long period of hibernation. One of the priorities was to enhance the region's capabilities for peace, security and stability, and this has remained its main area of cooperation. ECCAS' main structure for the promotion, maintenance and consolidation of peace and security is the Council for Peace and Security (COPAX), supported
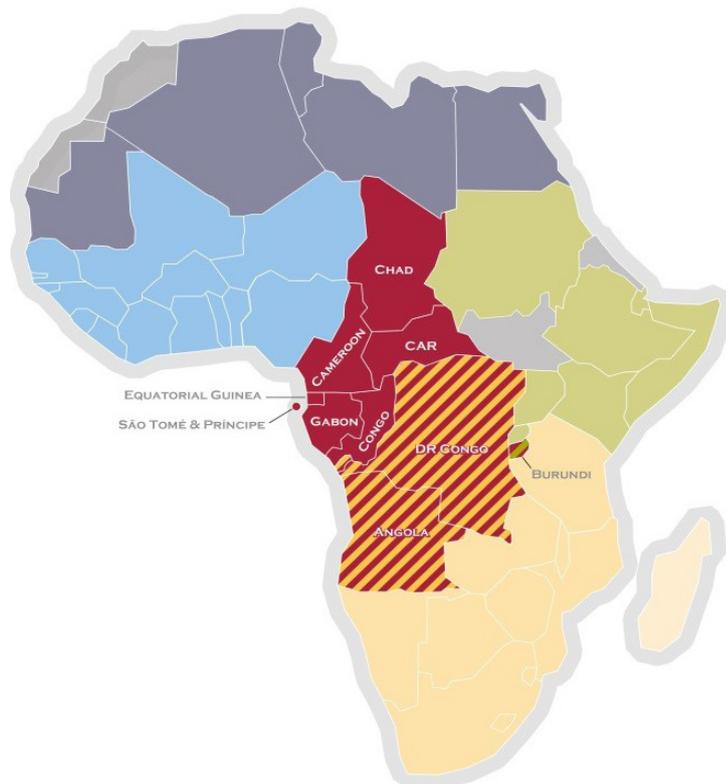
by the Commission for Defence and Security (CDS), the Central African Early Warning System (MARAC) and the Central African Multinational Force (FOMAC). Following the exercise Luango in late 2014 FOMAC was considered having full operational capability as an African Standby Force (ASF) brigade. In the General Secretariat, the Department of Human Integration, Peace, Security and Stability (DIHPSS) is responsible for the day-to-day work and implements COPAX' decisions which, however, first have to be ratified by the Conference of Heads of State, ECCAS' ultimate decision-making authority.

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1 The CAR, Chad and the DRC.

ECCAS' responses

In order to analyse the role of ECCAS in addressing challenges to peace and security, the following sections provide an overview of the organisation's responses to the main sources of insecurity in Central Africa over the past five years. Many of the security challenges in the region are the consequences of the prevalence of weak states. Due to lack of institutional capacity, many ECCAS member states are unable to secure their territorial integrity, protect their populations, and uphold law and order. Governance deficits also limit states' capacity to prevent security threats, and aggravate crises when they occur. Therefore, the importance of poor governance and weak state institutions as explanatory factors behind the region's security threats cannot be emphasised enough.

- *Democracy and governance deficits*

Democratic institutions are important mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution and therefore important if states are to be able to handle societal challenges. Eight of ECCAS' member states are categorised as "not free" in the Freedom in the World Index, and the remaining two – the CAR and Equatorial Guinea – are in the category comprising the ten states in the world with the lowest score on political rights and civil liberties. The combination of limited possibilities to voice grievances, poor governance, uneven resource distribution and weak security sectors means that ECCAS' member states risk facing increased social unrest and instability due to popular discontent. A particular issue relates to the lack of free and fair elections, and within the ECCAS General Secretariat there is concern about violence in relation to the general elections that will be held in a majority of the ECCAS member states in 2015–2017.

The institutional weakness of ECCAS member states also translates into limited capacity within ECCAS institutions. Furthermore, as an intergovernmental organisation, ECCAS has not been given the mandate to engage in domestic conflicts in member states. Its silence in relation to social unrest this year in Gabon and Burundi illustrates this. In order to support the consolidation of democracy and governance in the member states, ECCAS established an electoral training centre in Libreville in 2011. The organisation's election observer missions to member states are nevertheless constrained by the sensitivity of the subject, and the fact that ECCAS does not have its own voice but is strictly controlled by its member states.

- *Armed conflicts*

A major threat to peace and security in the region is the armed conflicts raging in, or spilling over into, some of ECCAS' member states. The organisation's responses have varied. The recurrent crises in the **Central African Republic** have been a major concern for the states in the region for more than a decade. The region has been engaged in the CAR within the ECCAS framework and through CEMAC,[2] comprising six of ECCAS' ten member states. With a military presence in the CAR since 2008, ECCAS took the lead in mediating in the conflict when the CAR plunged into a new cycle of violence in 2013. Despite an increase in strength from 700 to 2,000 troops and a reinforced mandate, ECCAS' regional peacekeeping force MICOPAX did not manage to fulfil its tasks which included protection of civilians.

The political engagement of the organisation and its member states has been crucial in the CAR crisis, but is complicated by the direct involvement of some of its constituent members in the causes of the insecurity, notably Chad, currently chairing ECCAS. The ECCAS-appointed international mediator, President Sassou-Nguesso from the Republic of the Congo, has been engaged in resolving the crisis from the outset. He often, however, acts in his personal capacity, outside the ECCAS framework, which demonstrates how ECCAS as an institution still lacks mechanisms for mediation and does not have the capacity to undertake preventive diplomatic measures. While ECCAS considered itself better positioned to resolve the CAR crisis, the African Union (AU) feared the regional organisation lacked capability to handle it and decided to authorise the deployment of the AU mission, MISCA,[3] something that created tensions and resulted in strained relations between the two organisations. Most ECCAS member states have remained engaged in the CAR with significant troop contributions to MISCA and the subsequent UN mission MINUSCA.[4]

While ECCAS has been engaged in the CAR for a long time, the armed conflicts in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** have not been high on the organisation's agenda.

2 Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale, which comprises Cameroon, the CAR, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo.
3 The African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic.
4 United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

The centre of gravity of the crises leans towards eastern DRC where a myriad of rebel and foreign armed groups have been operating for more than two decades. The conflicts constitute a major source of instability in Central Africa and international actors such as the UN, and other regional organisations such as ICGLR[5] and SADC,[6] have taken a significant position in supporting the Congolese National Army in fighting the armed elements and promoting peace. Although the protracted armed conflicts in the DRC have notable regional dimensions, most ECCAS member states have not had the same vested interests as other countries heavily affected by and directly involved in the armed conflicts, such as Uganda and Rwanda, so that the lack of engagement from ECCAS is understandable. Angola and Burundi, directly affected by the instability in the DRC, can forward their interests through their membership in other organisations. ICGLR, led by Uganda, mediated in the conflict between the Congolese government and one of the rebel groups. With the DRC also being a member of SADC, three countries from that organisation provided troops to the UN Force Intervention Brigade which has been operating in the east since 2013 with a mandate to neutralise all armed groups. When other regional actors have an interest in engaging in what they consider their sphere of interest, there limited space for a much weaker organisation such as ECCAS to play a role as a peace and security actor.

Boko Haram, on the other hand, has recently been a priority for discussion within ECCAS. Over the past two years the armed conflict in north-eastern Nigeria, where the armed group Boko Haram has been waging a war against the Nigerian state since 2009, has spilled over into the neighbouring countries. Chad and Cameroon, the two ECCAS member states affected by the armed conflict, are contributing troops to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) created by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), now operating under an AU mandate. ECCAS Heads of State have declared their support for the MNJTF and ECCAS cooperates with its West African counterpart ECOWAS.[7] However, member states' military engagement takes place outside the ECCAS framework and the role of the organisation will be limited as long as the affected member states choose other forums for cooperation.

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5 International Conference of the Great Lakes Region.
6 Southern African Development Community.
7 Economic Community of West African States.

- *Maritime insecurity*

Seven member states in ECCAS have coasts on the Gulf of Guinea, an area where piracy has steadily risen over the last decade. The attacks against and looting of shipping, oil stealing, illegal fishing and smuggling threaten both security and economic development in the states concerned, and have therefore created a genuine political will to increase the surveillance of the resources at sea. The most visible results so far have been attained in the maritime zone controlled by Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, with a decrease in attacks since 2009.

ECCAS was the first concerned organisation to adopt a strategy for maritime security in 2009, a commitment that was reinforced at the Yaoundé summit in 2013 when ECCAS decided to develop a joint strategy to combat piracy. In this field, the interests of the ECCAS community correspond to the interests of actively engaged external partners such as the US, the UK, France and Germany and this appears to have been key to the development of collective responses. One example is the development of maritime coordination centres on four levels: an inter-regional coordination centre in Cameroon to link ECCAS and ECOWAS, the regional coordination centre CRESMAC[8] in the Republic of the Congo, one multinational coordination centre per maritime zone established in Cameroon and Angola respectively, and national maritime centres. The ability of these coordination centres is however hampered by the lack of institutional and financial capacity, trained staff and technical equipment – both nationally and within ECCAS – as well as by the complexity of cross-border collaboration in practice. Hence, even though the structure is clear, offices exist and personnel have been appointed, none of the centres is yet fully operational.

- *Transnational crime*

Due to the weak institutional capacities of many ECCAS states, vast areas in the region are characterised by a general lawlessness. This gives room for illegal armed groups to exploit the region's immense and extremely valuable natural resources, thus creating incentives to prolong instability and conflict, and to form alliances between armed groups and corrupt state representatives in order to secure profit. Central Africa is ravaged by, for example, the trafficking of minerals, narcotics, timber and wildlife as well as trafficking of children into armed conflict. A huge amount of small arms and light weapons are circulated in the region, used

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8 Regional Centre for Maritime Security in Central Africa.

not only for rebellions but also for armed robberies, illegal road blocks and poaching. In for example eastern DRC and the CAR, all these phenomena blend, making it difficult to determine whether groups' motivations are foremost ideological, territorial or economic.

The transnational flows of contraband undermine state building and perpetuate insecurity in Central Africa. So far ECCAS' focus has been predominantly military but the organisation has identified the need to develop tools for intelligence gathering and sharing, and to facilitate both strategic and technical collaboration between bordering states. One obstacle is the lack of properly demarked borders, which is addressed in the ECCAS border programme established in 2008 to limit criminal activities. ECCAS has five training centres of which one is focused on police training. However, it can be questioned whether the political will exists to regulate the movements of people and goods efficiently. Furthermore, the ECCAS member states have signed the Kinshasa Convention, regulating small arms and light weapons and countering their illicit trade, but many states lack the capacity or will to enforce the convention. Established in 2010, the convention has not yet entered into force because only five states have ratified it.

ECCAS as a peace and security actor

Although peace and security are highly prioritised within ECCAS, a combination of regional rivalries and distrust, hyper-centralised decision-making, and a member state-run General Secretariat with no right of initiative have hampered the development of ECCAS to become a relevant peace and security actor. This has been exacerbated by insufficient financial and human resources and a militarised view on security matters.

While ECCAS remains an important forum for discussions between member states on security matters, many of the people interviewed for this study expressed the view that the organisation is little more than a conference organiser when Heads of State decide to convene. This normally happens on an ad hoc basis as a reaction to ongoing crises and rarely, if ever, in order to take decisions on preventive measures. The region faces a number of security challenges which call for preventive measures to tackle such things as the risk of electoral violence and social unrest. So far the region has not been severely hit by terrorism, but people interviewed in the ECCAS General Secretariat mention Boko Haram's increasing cross-border incursions into the ECCAS region as a warning example

both of how grievances, if they are ignored, can lead to radicalisation and of the limitations of a military response.

According to the ECCAS General Secretariat the regional early warning mechanism MARAC is operational with correspondents in all member states, feeding into the analysis made at the headquarters in Libreville. It is however not clear how the information provided may lead to any action by ECCAS before a crisis is already a reality.

Facing a crisis, it is more likely that coalitions of states will act militarily rather than FOMAC being activated. Not only does a deployment of FOMAC require a decision by all ECCAS Heads of State, who do not always share the same threat perception, but its operational capability is restrained by financial shortfalls and the fact that most of the components from the force catalogue are deployed elsewhere. This seriously calls into question the concept of an ASF with five regional brigades being ready to deploy, suggesting that the idea of an African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC), comprising willing states, may be more adapted to realities, as demonstrated by the responses to Boko Haram. Nevertheless, the regional standby force is a means by which to increase military capabilities and interoperability in the region, and to enhance cooperation between member states.

The member states have been unable to agree upon the contents of an institutional reform, with the aim of merging ECCAS with CEMAC and transforming the General Secretariat into a more powerful Commission, and this weakens ECCAS an actor: it is mainly used by member states at their convenience. This highlights how member states are often reluctant to create strong regional organisations at the possible expense of national sovereignty, unless there is an evident added value in doing so. As long as ECCAS member states see little added value in a stronger ECCAS, the organisation will remain a weak peace and security actor.