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Op-ed

Africa's security crossroads: Why the continent's future hangs in the balance *By Odile Bulten and Daryl Swanepoel*

Africa stands at a defining crossroads in that while the continent has made remarkable progress in areas such as democratic consolidation, economic growth and regional cooperation, the question of peace and stability remains precarious. Conflicts, both old and new, continue to test the resilience of African states and societies, because the challenges are vast with insurgencies, fragile governance, climate insecurity and the resurgence of geopolitical rivalries that all threaten to undermine the gains painstakingly achieved over the past decades.

An examination of Africa's contemporary peace and security dynamics reveal a sobering truth, that unless African states and their partners take bold steps, the dream of a stable, prosperous continent risks slipping further away. But there is also hope, because in every challenge lies the opportunity to rethink, reimagine and rebuild security systems that are more responsive to African realities.

The evolving face of African conflict

The nature of conflict in Africa today looks markedly different from the liberation struggles of the 20th century, for gone are the days when wars were neatly defined by national liberation movements or clear ideological divides and instead, Africa now faces a mosaic of asymmetric conflicts. Conflicts that are driven by non-state actors, cross-border insurgencies and extremist groups.

In the Sahel, for example, jihadist movements continue to expand, with them exploiting governance vacuums and porous borders. In the Horn of Africa, the combination of inter-ethnic strife, insurgency and state fragility has produced one of the world's most volatile regions. Even relatively stable nations face internal stresses, with election-related violence and social unrest linked to inequality and disputes over natural resources regularly testing the fabric of governance.

This evolving face of conflict underscores the troubling reality that Africa is being less plagued by traditional interstate wars than by wars within states and in which citizens themselves are being caught in the crossfire. The security threats of today are hybrid in that they mix criminality, terrorism, resource struggles and political exclusion.

The governance-conflict nexus

A recurring theme in Africa's security debate is governance, or rather, its deficits. Fragile political institutions, corruption and weak rule of law erode public trust and leave space for violent actors to flourish. The recent Africa Think-Tank Dialogue discussion on African security, organised by the Inclusive Society Institute, emphasised that democracy cannot thrive without well-functioning political formations, equipped and capacitated to deliver on their promises.

This is a critical point. Security is not merely about the absence of war, it is about the presence of legitimacy and when citizens feel excluded, marginalised or betrayed by their governments, they are less likely to buy into the social contract. And therefore it is fair to conclude that the rise of extremist movements in parts of Africa is not simply a product of ideology, it is often rooted in neglect, inequality and despair.

What Africa needs is not just stronger armies, but stronger democracies, wherein governance reform must sit at the heart of any credible security agenda.

External actors: Partners or meddlers?

Africa's security cannot be divorced from global geopolitics. The continent has become a chessboard for rivalries between great and emerging powers, from Russia's Wagner Group in Mali and the Central African Republic, to China's growing security footprint in Djibouti, to the West's continued military partnerships, Africa is increasingly pulled in different directions.

While international support is necessary, it raises pressing questions, such as to the extent to which these interventions reflect African priorities? And are they designed to build African capacity or to extend foreign influence? Too often, African agency is relegated to the margins, with outsiders dictating the terms of peacekeeping, counterterrorism and even governance reforms.

The solution lies in Africa asserting its own voice. In this regard, regional organisations like the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies have demonstrated capacity to mediate and intervene and yet, they remain chronically underfunded and dependent on external actors. If Africa is to secure its future, these institutions must be empowered, resourced and trusted to take the lead.

Climate, resources and insecurity

No discussion of African security today can ignore climate change. Desertification, erratic rainfall and shrinking arable land have already ignited tensions between pastoralists and farmers. Rising sea levels threaten coastal economies, while competition for water sources intensifies inter-community rivalries.

Climate insecurity is not a future challenge, it is already fuelling violence. In Nigeria, the Lake Chad basin has shrunk by more than 90 percent in the past half-century, displacing millions and creating fertile ground for insurgent recruitment. In the Sahel, resource scarcity has become inseparable from jihadist violence.

This is where Africa's security debate must expand beyond guns and armies. Security today also means food security, water security and energy security and therefore, without sustainable solutions to climate change, no amount of military expenditure will buy peace.

Youth, technology and the future of security

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with a median age of less than 20, a demographic reality that is both an opportunity and a risk. Because, whilst it is true that when a young population, if empowered with education and jobs, can be a powerful driver of stability and innovation, a generation trapped in unemployment and despair can also become a ticking time bomb.

Technology adds yet another layer to this dynamic, because whilst digital tools have democratised information and empowered movements for accountability, they have also served to enable misinformation, radicalisation and cybercrime. And African states are often unprepared for these

challenges, with many lacking robust cyber security frameworks and/or strategies to counter online extremism.

This gives rise for the urgent call on Africa to invest not only in physical security, but so too in digital security, education and youth empowerment. Because without addressing the hopes and frustrations of its young people, peace will remain elusive.

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