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Executive Summary of the State of Peace & Security in Africa Report 2020

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Six major conflict themes dominated the peace and security landscape in Africa in 2019, namely armed insurrections, everyday violence, human development challenges, xenophobia, environmental change and governance. Taken together, these themes produced various dynamics that make apparent the resilience of familiar challenges as well as the new ways they threaten security on the continent. Across many countries, incidences of armed insurrections challenged and intruded on the authority of the state at the same time that they exacerbated the vulnerability of individuals and groups. Yet, the signs are there that a strong will to remake the security landscape exists, as do the foundations necessary to build the solidarity required to achieve this lofty but elusive goal.

In selecting these conflict themes, the focus was not just on the most newsworthy events like major escalation in the civil war in Libya, but also on low level everyday challenges like inequality in Morocco or kidnappings in the DRC, which also have implications for long term stability. 2019 was neither a unique year for peace and security in Africa nor was it entirely the same as the previous years. The issues that animated peace and security on the continent in 2019 were products of the past and, in many cases, underlined the longevity of many of Africa's challenges and opportunities.

The coming into legal force of the AfCFTA makes 2019 a particularly epochal year. Like the formation of the OAU in 1963 and the transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2002, the AfCFTA represents an important positive moment in the advancement of the goal of integrating Africa's economies and building Pan African solidarity.

Key Takeaways

1. The 2019 SPSA Report invariably leaves two key questions. The first one, relates to whether or not the year 2019 could be held up as a viable foundation for something bigger and more ambitious for the continent in the light of AfCFTA, and one from which lasting solidarities can be built and consolidated? Second, is whether or not the year was merely another mirror which reflected the many future challenges capable of undermining the solidarities?

2. From the review of the year, both options appear to still be on the table and in equal measures. For instance, despite how the security landscape continues to be punctuated by challenges like trafficking, violent insurgencies and environmental degradation which are capable of undermining whatever progress has been made to improve the lives of millions of ordinary Africans, the transnational nature of these issues suggest that greater solidarity, cooperation and coordination are a necessity that can no longer be ignored. In that sense, within the risks lies the opportunities for remaking the peace and security landscape. Yet, many of the issues that undermine peace and stability on the continent are not dependent on the nature of relationships and exchanges between African states but rather they are dependent on the exclusionary nature of economic production and wealth distribution within African states.

3. It is not clear how the AfCTFA expansion of trade would, by itself, resolve those key inequality questions. Indeed, it is perhaps more likely to exacerbate them if governing logics remain unchanged.

4. Finally, this year's SPSA Report highlights the dense interconnectedness of Africa's security problems; recognising them as crises that are inscribed on the continent's landscape and which transcend predefined borders. It also clearly highlights that these challenges are thematically interlinked in terms of how people encounter and experience them. The coming into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) may not be the magical wand that will bring everlasting peace, stability and development, but it clearly offers an opportunity for Africa to press the reset button and set new goals.

Specificities and Highlights

I. Mapping the African Conflict Landscape in 2019

1. Africa's major hotspots like Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Cameroun, and the Democratic Republic of Congo remained unstable during the year, with state and non-state armed actors involved in each instance being no closer to finding common ground than they were the previous year. What became vividly clearly, and more troubling, was that the geography of violence continues to shift, for the most part, away from their previous epicentres. Notably, in this regard, was Mali where transnational terrorist groups took advantage of porous borders and widespread discontentment across common borders to establish and strike deeper into Burkina Faso, Niger, Ghana and Nigeria.

2. Non-state transnational armed groups were by no means the only purveyors of violent conflicts on the continent in 2019. Much the same way as in the previous years, one of the consequences of weak bureaucratic and political structures, coupled with the fossilisation of ideological posturing in the wake of the global war on terror, has been the way in which the option of violent confrontation became widely privileged by state actors, even where evidence shows such pathways to have failed repeatedly and woefully.

3. The disintegration of Libya offers a poignant example of how quickly relatively stable countries can descend into chaos. The fragmentation of political and military authority in the country continued unabated in 2019, with the April assault on Tripoli representing a new low, even by the violent recent history of Libya. The military stalemate after that assault has come on the heels of monumental humanitarian tragedies; with about 6,000 persons killed and 140,000 displaced in 2019 alone.

    Despite the presence of, or perhaps more accurately, because of the presence of, many external actors in Libya (as in many other hotspots across the continent), the overall situation in 2019 could be characterized as 'one step forward, two steps backwards.' Over the whole year, there was one single significant act that came from the UN Security Council, namely Resolution 2486 adopted on 12th September and which extended the mandate of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Significantly, also, the African Union's engagements have mostly been consigned to either humanitarian response (e.g. the repatriation and resettlement of African refugees in their various countries) or playing second fiddle as new centres of diplomatic activities, with often mutually exclusive selfish interests, converge in Istanbul, Berlin and Moscow rather than in Addis Ababa.

4. Rising transnational Islamist groups are estimated to have caused a 500 percent rise in conflict fatalities in the Sahel region in 2019, with more than 4,000 deaths directly attributable to them compared to some 770 three years earlier. The instability associated with the many spaces of weak state control in different parts of Africa have created sanctuaries for a myriad of violent actors who have sought to replace the state by providing security, laws and education that the state failed to provide for decades.

5. Adverse climate change continues to drive and exacerbate new forms of violence in the Sahel region; the most visible being that between farmers and pastoralist herders. This crisis is also being driven in part by the impact of an extractive economy positioned around informal artisanal mining and trading and the ways resources derived from these activities are then deployed to fund transnational Islamist groups. From the gold boom in the Sahel, to charcoal trade in Somalia, and to the illicit mining and smuggling of precious minerals in the DRC, the artisanal mining sector reflects the dilemma of a potentially transformative economic opportunity growing in the context of crisis. This sector offers incentives that could provide sustainable conflict resolution, but which could also simultaneously fuel further violence.

6. For a country that was once touted as a bastion of authoritarian stability, Burkina Faso's slide into political instability in the first three quarters of 2019 resulted from multiple conflicts that were inter-communal, Islamist and political in nature. The rapidity and scale with which the situation in that country deteriorated gave the authorities- and interested regional actors- almost no time or elbow room to prepare for and respond to the crisis. With highly porous borderlands and shared social grievances, insurgency and terrorist groups were able to compound the already difficult conflict map in the country. The government has responded by promoting martial and authoritarian laws some of which undermine press freedom. Apart from exemplifying the complexity of fighting an Islamist insurgency that is able to ride on legitimate grievances about economic and political exclusion, several of the current conflicts raging on the continent also demonstrates the limits of military-led solutions and the dire implications for peacebuilding of a weak state capacity that is built around a strong authoritarian epicentre.

7. The persistence of the violent conflicts in 2019 suggests that regional powers still struggle to resolve large-scale and asymmetric armed insurgencies, but it isn't for the want of trying. Indeed, virtually all the major conflicts that raged during the year saw the mobilisation of concerted regional, continental and international responses. Unfortunately, attacks against state security and international peacekeepers have increased dramatically in 2019, further damaging an already fragile security situation.

8. Despite occasional military advances recorded against the group by Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger during the last one decade, the Boko Haram insurgency has precipitated by far the most devastating threat to human security in Africa. In 2019, the ferocious attacks by the group targeted supposed safe spaces like IDP camps and previously liberated towns. The group has also increased the sophistication as well as the intensity with which it carries out attacks, including with the use of advanced surveillance drones.

9. Understandably, these developments have put pressure on the capacity of the armed forces of most countries to engage in counterinsurgency operations aimed at securing towns and villages, maintain security along key transport corridors, and protect critical national assets and infrastructure. For instance, as the military conflict appeared to have somewhat stalemated, the Nigerian government had begun to pivot towards a deradicalization, and amnesty strategy aimed at separating "hard core" Boko Haram militants from their less hardened members and offering the latter an exit route from militancy.

10. In the Great Lakes Region, a vicious cycle of instability and conflict has meant that the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, that has been in the news for decades for all the wrong reasons would remain so. The delayed national elections in 2018 generated international concern as observers blamed it on the deliberate decision of the ex-President, Joseph Kabila, to extend his tenure beyond the constitutionally approved term-limit. Prior to the much-disputed presidential election that was eventually won by the opposition candidate, Felix Tshisekedi, the country had been gripped by violent protests which led to the killing of protesters on the streets by the state security forces.

11. The brewing political instability, unusual even for an unstable DRC, was quickly exploited by the Allied Defence Forces (ADF) which intensified its attacks on government forces as well as civilians. These attacks were especially vicious given how they systematically targeted health and aid workers involved in the urgent action to fight the devastating Ebola crisis that had lasted over one year. Insecurity in 2019 has therefore further weakened the already fragile public health infrastructure that the DRC depends on to fight outbreaks such as Ebola. The implications are dire for the broader human security situation in the country and underline the intricate relationship that political instability has with the production of social public goods such as health and education. Apart from producing a stream of refugees and IDPs within and across its borders into Uganda and Rwanda, the prevailing unstable social conditions have also created room for widespread sexual assault against women; this specific category of crime is committed by all sides of the conflict.

12. From time to time, a fresh window of opportunity opens up to allow sworn enemies to sheath their swords and embrace peace. How long the window remains open is often dependent on the sincerity of disputing parties as the situation in Central African Republic, CAR, and also in South Sudan, have shown. After much turbulence in the previous year, 2019 started relatively well for stability and peace in CAR. In February, the eight major attempts to forge a political agreement among the country's major armed groups and political factions were brokered by the AU and Russia. By March 2019, however, the hope of many citizens and external observers that CAR has finally turned a corner was again dashed when militias groups announced their withdrawal from the peace deal and from any further participation in the national government. The security situation rapidly deteriorated such that in less than 2 months, many were killed, and human rights conditions worsened. The only ray of light along the country's dark tunnel is the establishment of the Special Criminal Court (SCC) to try key actors accused of having committed a variety of crimes over the course of the conflict.

II. The Material Base of Everyday Violence in Africa

1. Whereas big ticket conflicts like those raging within the Sahel, around the Lake Chad Basin as well as in the DRC and CAR dominated the news cycle on insecurity in contemporary Africa, the lives and livelihoods of many citizens are impacted by everyday low-level violence which disrupts governance systems, subverts economic and social life, and distorts value systems. For the most part, everyday violence in different parts of the continent is linked to transnational organised crimes such as the trafficking in persons, arms, drugs and narcotics as well as daily experiences of kidnapping on land and at sea, the intractable farmer-pastoralist conflicts, rising xenophobia and other attacks on migrant workers.

2. Despite all of these, 2019 reflects the consensus that insecurity is not only produced by the outbreak of violent conflict, but also by the social and material conditions of people's lives, and the nature of opportunities or limitations that they face. It is obvious that a discussion of peace and security would be incomplete without an equally thorough examination of human security challenges; particularly those linked to poverty and inequality, and human rights.

3. Africa is widely touted to be the last frontier in the battle against poverty, with about 70 percent of the world's poor currently living on the continent. Despite relatively high rates of economic growth recorded in the preceding decade, inequality has not only persisted but in many cases taken an acute turn. This is evidenced by the unequal distribution of the benefits and pains of development across different social groups, particularly the most vulnerable ones like women and children but also between countries as well as within them. While there is a direct linkage between violent instability and poverty, this does not imply that relatively stable countries do not face difficult choices in the fight against poverty given how the latter reinforces class and socially inscribed gender inequalities.

4. Furthermore, given widespread arbitrary state power across the continent, human right abuses have continued to undermine human security. In 2019, the Human Rights Watch reported that crackdowns and state abuses were inflicted upon peaceful protesters, political opposition, civil society and media operators in almost two-thirds of Africa's countries, particularly in Sudan, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Mali, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya. For each cycle of clampdowns and state abuses however, the continent witnessed the corresponding amplification of the voices of social movements and prominent individuals showing awareness of the ramifications of inequalities and poverty across the continent.

III. African and External Responses: Repression, Coordination and Adaptability.

1. Three important patterns are readily discernible in the ways in which key state and institutional actors responded to violence and instability in 2019. The first is the significant improvement in cooperation and coordination between and among several key actors in recognition of the transnational nature of contemporary conflicts, or at least of their cross-border dimensions. The second pattern is adaptability; which reflected principally in a growing realisation that the default position of reliance on armed response is more often than not inadequate and can actually exacerbate existing tensions. The third pattern is the continued deployment of armed force, which remains visible across many of Africa's hotspots and has had mixed outcomes.

2. The first two options have, in significant ways, improved the efficiency of interventions and further deepened the diffusion of norms and global best practices. In the same light, key state, regional and external actors have shown a remarkable ability to innovate and adapt a wide range of preventive political, diplomatic and peacebuilding measures short of taking recourse to arms in response to cues emerging from the ground. The paradoxes of opportunity and risk or, more aptly, that of risk within opportunity, succinctly captures the state of peace and security in Africa in 2019.

IV. The Continental Free Trade Agreement, Peace and Security in Africa

1. By far the most important and positive news out of Africa in 2019 was the coming into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement. Paradoxically, however, that bold step also carries with it significant prospects as well as risk for regional peace and security. Following the mandatory 22 signatories, the AfCFTA entered into force on 30th May 2019 and has been hailed as a bold step towards the subsequent creation of the largest free trade area since the World Trade Organisation (WTO) came into force in January 1995.

   Despite a generally optimistic outlook on the AfCFTA, it is important to note that it has the potential to exacerbate tensions and conflict if there is no rupture of paradigm. AfCFTA is driven by an (afri)liberalism that promotes competition and not complementarity and transfer among African economies. It is therefore likely to deepen inequalities across African economies and potentially increase the likelihood of the emergence of inter-state conflicts.

2. The journey towards AfCFTA had started three decades earlier, in 1980, when the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa was adopted by member states of the defunct Organisation of African Unity, the precursor to the African Union. With its ambitious goals, it is realistic to expect that the AfCFTA will significantly improve intra-African trade, boost incomes and welfare, and generally reboot a sagging pan-African solidarity; but only if it is carefully nurtured to maturity. The promise of the AfCFTA will not automatically end some of the continent's long-drawn challenges, nor will it prevent it from experiencing new ones linked in part to the continental integration that a major trade pact like this will bring. The big puzzle to resolve is therefore how existing capacities at the local, national, regional and continental levels are to be harnessed, and what new capacities need to be created to respond to these challenges

3. In terms of its design, AfCFTA is unique for Africa in three ways. First, it is the first truly continental arrangement focused specifically on integrating trade mechanisms and infrastructures. Second, it is different from the traditional FTA as it moves beyond the usual focus on trade in goods and services to encompass other aspects of international trade like services, investment, intellectual property rights, and competition policy. Third, it is emerging against a growing protectionist trend in international trade which has seen the benefits of international trade and mutual benefit being vigorously contested by the same global powers that traditionally promoted trade as an important driver of growth. This nationalist bent, best captured by Brexit, the US-China trade war and multiple sanctions regimes, suggests that beyond the rosy picture of the positive multiplier effects of continental free trade lies equally substantive and urgent challenges.

4. Apart from the substantive concern that its current governance arrangement and a plethora of other domestic and regional politics may hinder the successful implementation of the AfCFTA, there is also the additional challenge of reconciling the tension between human rights promotion and trade liberalization. This is important in view of the common scepticism that trade liberalization, like structural adjustment policies, represents an ominous facet of neoliberalism that may not necessarily attend to the needs and priorities of the poor but projects the interests and priorities of more affluent members of society.

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