African Continental Free Trade Area and its implications for regional peace and security

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Introduction

This policy brief will assess the prospective impact of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) on creating pathways to peace and security across the African continent. The regionalism which will be ushered in by the implementation of the AfCFTA will bring with it a combination of threats and opportunities that will impact upon the governance, peace and security situation across the continent. The predominant fear is that the AfCFTA, and its effects of increasing cross-border trade, will also increase the opportunities for nefarious actors to fuel their trade in illicit weapons, narcotics, illegal immigration, natural resource extraction and human trafficking. These illicit trade processes are, however, already taking place in the absence of a fully operationalised AfCFTA. In fact, this policy brief contends that the opposite is more likely to transpire. The operationalisation of AfCFTA will increase trade and generate pathways to enhancing peace and security initiatives, as well as advance the trend towards political regional and continental integration. This is likely to enhance efforts to promote peace and security in war-affected regions of Africa.

Persistence of insecurity in Africa

A major source of insecurity in Africa is the constraining effects of the arbitrary borders historically bequeathed by colonialism. This historical reality has left the region with a legacy of state-based division, which is still a barrier to deepening peace and security based on shared values and a common vision among countries. The residual effects of colonialism have fostered a sense of discrimination between those who 'belong' and those who 'do not belong'. Africa's conflicts have demonstrated a tendency to spill across borders, affecting the security of communities in more than one country. The intra-state conflicts that have burgeoned since the 1990s more often than not have an inter-state or regional dimension in the way that they are resourced and executed. Regional conflict systems, based on historical experiences in South Sudan, Somalia, the Great Lakes region and the Mano River Union, are notoriously difficult to stabilise, and require the affected state actors to adopt a coordinated regional strategy to promote and consolidate peace and security.

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African post-colonial states tend to respond to insecurity with an overemphasis on military responses, including cross-border incursions, which inevitably fail to secure the intended outcomes of more peaceful, democratic and inclusive societies.

The Somali crisis has spilt over into Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, and has drawn Eritrea into a regional conflict system. It has also generated maritime insecurity and piracy in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the conflict in South Sudan has drawn Uganda, Sudan and Kenya into a regional conflict system. Consequently, there is a strong case for rethinking the peace and security dilemmas across Africa through alternative prisms, such as the promotion of social cohesion, peacebuilding, democratic governance, increased cross-border trade and regional integration through the implementation of transitional justice measures, as stipulated in the African Union (AU) Transitional Justice Policy of February 2019.[1]

Purpose of the AfCFTA

The AfCFTA is a logical outgrowth of the vision enshrined in Agenda 2063. Intra-continental trade in Africa is still relatively weak when compared to other regions of the world, and accounts for only 16–17% of all of Africa's exports and imports.[2] According to the AU, the AfCFTA 'is a flagship project of Agenda 2063 and refers to a continental geographic zone where goods and services move among member states of the African Union with no restrictions'.[3] The AfCFTA, which was formally launched during the 12th Extra-ordinary Summit of the AU Heads of State and Government, held in Niamey, Niger, in June 2019, 'will create a wider market of more than 1.2 billion people with a combined GDP of USD2.19 trillion'. The AU further notes that 'the establishment of the AfCFTA will allow Africa to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world, speak with one voice and act in unison on all continental and international trade issues'.[4]

The ability of the African continent to 'speak with one voice and act in unison' presupposes an existing or developing degree of social cohesion, which is currently not the case. Consequently, in line with these emerging normative developments towards increased regionalism, which are unfolding across the African continent, there is a political and economic aspiration to increase the degree of social cohesion and pan-African unity so as to be able to 'speak with one voice and act in unison'. Furthermore, AfCFTA seeks to create a wider market that will `induce investments, result in the pooling of African resources to enhance structural transformation and the development of regional value chains'.[5] Consequently, this requires a parallel continental project of fostering cross-border social cohesion in order to more effectively encourage the 'pooling of African resources' and fostering 'the development of regional value chains'.

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To complement the efforts to operationalise the AfCFTA, the AU is also developing a framework for a Single Air Transport Market, as well as an AU Protocol on the Free Movement of People. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the East African Community (EAC) have formally issued their regional passport, which citizens from the individual countries are able to utilise as they undertake their cross-border activities, including trade and the promotion of regional security. The AU has also issued its own passport but this has only been granted to heads of state, ministers and ambassadors, who already have diplomatic privileges granting them access to all 55 countries. It is therefore incumbent on the continental body to issue an AU passport to all citizens across the continent.

Towards a concept of relational security: Unpacking the trade–security nexus

Trade is premised on relationships and cooperation. Insecurity is a function of the breakdown of relationships and the fragmentation of cooperation. Security is premised on promoting relationships and also ensuring cooperation among the parties affected. Consequently, it follows that an increase in trade, when effectively managed and conducted in a cooperative manner, can contribute towards establishing and strengthening relationships (see Graph 1). Conversely, when trade is ineffectively managed and conducted in an adversarial manner, it can contribute towards a breakdown of relationships, which can lead to greater insecurity. The trade war between the USA and China is an example of how trade can undermine national and global security.
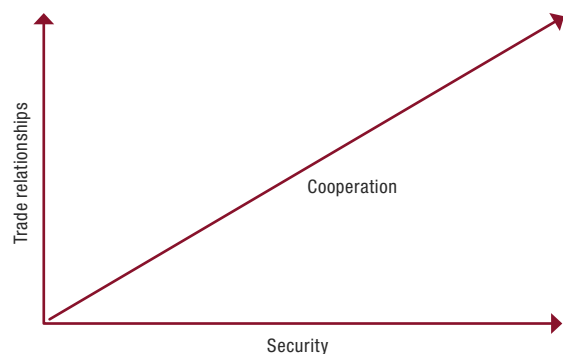
Graph 1: Relational function between trade and security

Relational security is therefore the pursuit of stability and the improvement of the well-being of people through the establishment and strengthening of relationships. Human security is a variant of relational security, because at a fundamental level it seeks to improve the well-being of people through ensuring the provision of basic necessities, which contributes towards improving communal relationships. Conversely, state security is predicated on and privileges the security of the nation state above all else and does not prioritise improving human relationships. The notion of relational security becomes useful when we seek to understand how continental trade can contribute towards promoting regional security. Specifically, regional peace and security would require implementing processes of peacebuilding and redress across borders, as preliminary processes towards consolidating stability in the medium to long term.

AfCFTA and its effect on regional security

The predominant fear is that the AfCFTA, and its effects of increasing cross-border trade, will paradoxically increase the opportunities for nefarious actors to exploit the regionalism to fuel their trade in illicit weapons, narcotics, illegal immigration, natural resource extraction and human trafficking. However, this is an erroneous assumption, because these illicit trade processes are already taking place in the absence of a fully operationalised AfCFTA. The notion of relational security suggests that a more likely outcome is that the implementation of the AfCFTA will contribute towards establishing and strengthening relationships between people who remain caged, confined and restricted from freedom of movement in artificially constructed nation states. Furthermore, the natural progression of increased interaction and exchange through trade – particularly when it is effectively managed across borders, which enhances societal interaction – will contribute towards improving the well-being of communities.

Specifically, the AfCFTA will contribute towards increasing regional security by enabling the multitude of ethnic communities that cut across state boundaries, pastoralist populations whose mode of existence necessitates crossing international boundaries, large migrant and refugee populations to utilise the opportunities provided by the CFTA to ensure their socio-economic livelihood.

An Afrobarometer research study suggests 'it is possible in the coming decade that the African Continental Free Trade Agreement may facilitate enhanced intra-continental mobility'.[6] People-to-people regionalism already exists beyond the borders of states and is driven by the grassroots interactions of citizens between countries. Consequently, the full operationalisation of AfCFTA will enable African citizens to leverage it to also increase social interaction and job creation amongst cross-border traders in the region, which could contribute towards promoting peacebuilding and enhance regional security in crisis-affected parts of the continent.[7]

Policy recommendations

African governments and inter-governmental actors

- All African governments should ratify the AfCFTA agreement, strengthen regional mechanisms and increase the frequency of cross-border trade.
- All African governments should sign and ratify the AU Protocol on the Free Movement of People and issue AU passports to ordinary citizens across the continent.
- Governments should adopt a regional reconciliation framework to complement the AfCFTA which will develop a coordinated cross-border strategy to promote and consolidate peace and security based on interactions through leader-to-leader, government-to-government and people-to-people engagements.
- Government interventions need to be targeted in a manner that will address the inequities in the region, such as improving equal access to quality education and skills development, and developing infrastructure such as decent housing, healthcare and transport, in order to enhance the lived day-to-day experiences of people across the region.
- Governments should leverage cross-border ethnic affinities that can be utilised to forge transnational trade links, reinforced by cultural and educational exchanges that can function to enhance regional security.
- Governments should embrace the issue of cross-border migration as an opportunity to function as a catalyst and a driver of regional trade and security.

Civil society

- Training centres and institutions can play a role in building the national and regional capacity of civic actors to promote and leverage regional trade and security.
- Civic actors can develop entrepreneurship training programmes to empower people with access to economic opportunities, thus ensuring that knowledge and skills transfer increases the promotion of regional trade and security.

International partners

- They should assess how they can leverage the opportunities provided by AfCFTA to enhance inter-continental trade and improve economic development in African countries as a pathway towards promoting international peace and security.
- They can support the platforms created by AfCFTA to promote dialogue and peacebuilding so as to enhance regional security.

Conclusion

The increased contact that cross-border traders engage in expands the frequency of socio-economic interaction and creates opportunities for improving the understanding among citizens across the region. A key challenge is to ensure that citizens across the region engage with the establishment of AfCFTA and also find ways to leverage it to improve their socio-economic livelihoods, in order to consolidate peace and security. In this regard, civic actors engaging in transnational trade can contribute towards fostering a sense of belonging, shared values, peace and security through cross-border interaction, in collaboration with governments and inter-governmental organisations. The operationalisation of AfCFTA and the increased interaction through trade will promote a form of relational security that will also complement the increasing trend towards regional and continental political and socio-economic integration.

Endnotes

1   African Union, *AU Transitional Justice Policy*. Addis Ababa: African Union, 2019.

2   Mukhisa Kituyi, How Can African Continental Free Trade Area Deliver a Made in Africa Reality?', *East African*, 12 September 2019, https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/comment/How-can-afcfta-deliver-made-in-africa-reality/434750-5270090-jy4swkz/index.html

3   African Union, The Continental Free Trade Area: A Game Changer for Africa, *East African*, 27 June 2018, https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/Sponsored/Continental-Free-Trade-Area-game-changer-Africa/4358802-4633714-pvve9xz/index.html

4   Ibid., p.2.

5   Ibid.

6   Afrobarometer and Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Updating the Narrative About African Migration, Afrobarometer and MIF Joint Research Paper, November 2018.

7   Ibid.

Acronyms

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area	UN	United Nations
AU	African Union	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
EAC	East African Community		

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The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), established in 2000, is a pan-African organisation that works collaboratively with governments, inter-governmental and civil society actors to contribute towards building fair, democratic and inclusive societies across the continent, through transitional justice and peacebuilding interventions. The IJR's work is informed by the insights gained from working with governmental stakeholders and grassroot communities in countries such as Burundi, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Sudan, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Historically, the IJR has worked on interventions in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda. Internationally, the IJR has provided strategic and technical advice to stakeholders in Colombia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UK and USA.

The IJR is a trusted advisor to key decision makers and inter-governmental actors on transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives, and engages with the AU, Southern African Development Community, EAC, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, European Union and the United Nations (UN) system. The IJR has partnered with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) on a number of in-country interventions in Africa. On this basis, in 2021, the IJR was tasked by the UNDP to develop its Guidelines on Mental Health, Psychosocial Support and Peacebuilding. The IJR has positioned itself as a provider of choice of reliable qualitative data on public perception in the areas of peace and security. The pioneering South African Reconciliation Barometer enables the IJR to be the leading African think tank in terms of providing public opinion data in these areas. We welcome collaboration with like-minded partners and invite you to find out more about our work on our website: www.ijr.org.za.

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