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Politics and Security in Central Africa

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Central Africa: A Neglected Sub-Region?

Central Africa comprises eleven republics, namely Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, and Sao Tome and Principe.¹ Lying over approximately one-third of the continent, Central Africa is adjacent to all of Africa's sub-regions. Chad links it with Libya and the Maghreb, and through Cameroon and Chad, the sub-region has links with West Africa. The Great Lakes region connects Central to East Africa, namely Uganda and Tanzania (and, now, Rwanda). Angola and the DRC constitute both the sub-region's southern borders as well as its links with Southern Africa.

Central Africa is Africa's sub-region most endowed with natural resources. It holds the biggest expanse of tropical forests and in the Congo basin, the largest water reserves in the continent. In addition to the "geological scandal" dormant in the DRC, major exploited resources include precious minerals (gold, diamonds and some platinum), petroleum, bauxite and iron ore, as well as copper, cobalt, timber, hydroelectric power, uranium and natural gas. The region's economy is very dependent on extractive industry and foreign investments. The manufacturing base remains very narrow and, despite relatively good farming land, food production is still below the needs of the population.

Demographically, the sub-region counts nearly 100 million people, spread unevenly across the region and, within each country, between the areas of high density (like Rwanda or Burundi), and those of low density like Sao Tome and Principe, Equatorial Guinea or even the DRC. On the whole, the population is predominantly young, with approximately half the population in the 0-14 age

bracket. The median life expectancy hovers around 50 years and infant and maternal mortality remain very high.

Several organizations have been established in the sub-region with the aim of achieving economic cooperation. This is notably the case with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which was created in 1983 and became operational two years later.² Six out of the eleven member States of the sub-region share a common currency zone (the CFA Franc) and a monetary union known as CEMAC (*Communauté économique et monétaire d'Afrique centrale*). The others use their own, generally non-convertible, national currency.³

Despite its vast natural reserves, the Central African sub-region is generally poor. Gabon, with an adjusted real GDP of USD 3,641 per capita, is the "richest" of all ECCAS members. Rwanda, by contrast, is ranked second among the poorest countries in the world, with only USD 352 adjusted GDP per capita.⁴ On the other hand, the sub-region's large population makes it potentially a large consumer market. Yet sub-regional cooperation arrangements have yet to unleash this full economic potential and move it towards economic integration. Goods produced in Central Africa do not circulate easily in the ECCAS community. And in contrast to their counterparts in West Africa, ECCAS nationals need an entry visa to other ECCAS countries, regardless of the duration of their stay. Occasionally, police and immigration services are more ruthless towards ECCAS travelers than foreign nationals from Europe or North America.⁵

These restrictions impinge on the development of a market for consumer goods while stifling local entrepreneurship. Forced to fend for themselves, local producers have generally taken things into their own hands, even if this meant violating existing governmental regulations on regional trade. Smuggling, illicit exports and migration continue unabated between Cameroon and Gabon, Gabon and Congo, the DRC and the Central African Republic, across the Congo River, or in the Lunda area at the Congo-Angola border. Such activities testify to the fact that, were ECCAS Member States to make up their mind on the promotion of collective security and the free movement of goods and people, the sub-region could develop into a vast trade networks and consumer markets in Africa. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

The lack of a clear and sustained government commitment to promote sub-regional cooperation is not limited to economic issues. It is also evident in peace and security matters. According to the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, recurrent political crises and military hostilities have kept the sub-region "continuously in the headlines for nearly 40 years".⁶ Calling Central Africa "a hotbed of tension," the UN Standing Advisory Committee asserts that "all evidence points to Central Africa as being one of the most affected areas, especially after the large scale massacres committed between April and July 1994 in Rwanda alone."⁷ Guns are still crackling in five countries,

while political tensions and hostilities persist among at least one third of ECCAS members.

Despite its vast economic resources and political troubles, the Central African sub-region does not usually receive the same kind of policy attention and treatment devoted to, say, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Over the years, there has been a lot of attention given to individual countries and troubled spots. However, in comparison to ECOWAS or SADC, and excluding the case of the UN Standing Advisory Committee, the sub-region as a whole has not been considered or treated as a major actor in conflict management in Africa. On account of the cynical remarks about the inability of the sub-region to handle its numerous problems, one is often led to believe that nothing important ever happens here in the area of conflict management.

This cynicism is justified, particularly in the light of the proliferation of internal and inter-state violence in the sub-region. However, as this paper will show, political leaders in Central Africa have frequently showed their concern for political stability and security in the sub-region. Individually or collectively, they were engaged to end Chad's long civil war, the mutinies in the Central African Republic, or the 1996 rebellion against President Mobutu. During this decade alone, the Heads of State and Government of the Central African countries have committed themselves (on paper, at least) to developing and strengthening political and security cooperation in various domains.

This paper will try to fill the gap created by the generally poor knowledge about efforts being made by Central Africa's leaders towards political and security cooperation. Its aim is to describe for the community of scholars and policy makers where Central Africa stands in terms of security cooperation, and what opportunities and constraints the sub-region continues to face in the enhancement of peace, security and political stability. First, I will provide a background of the major political events and security concerns that prevail in the sub-region, and lead its leaders to search for a common peace and security mechanism. I will then review the key political decisions and security instruments that aim to preserve or restore peace, security and political stability in Central Africa. Finally, I will explore some salient political, institutional and security issues that continue to impede the development of an effective security architecture in the sub-region.

A Geo-Strategic Profile of Central African States

Nearly sixty percent of the Central African countries are currently either in a state of war or under precarious political and security conditions. Only four countries can boast of relative peace (i.e. the absence of war) and political stability. But here too, political and ethno-regional tensions persist, while material conditions have not improved much for the majority of the population.

In the Central African Republic, repeated armed mutinies and personal quarrels among the political elite appear to have subsided. French troops that were deployed in strategic parts of the country were replaced first by MISAB, the French acronym standing for the African force whose mission was to monitor the implementation of the Bangui political accord signed by Central African protagonists. Since April 1998, the United Nations has deployed a mission known as *Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine*. The main objective of MINURCA, as the mission is known in UN parlance, is twofold: to continue the implementation of peace agreements between the authorities and the former mutineers, and to maintain a climate of security and political stability through the difficult task of restructuring the security forces. Legislative elections were held in November 1998, and although the country appeared poised for the presidential elections in October 1999, uncertainty still remained as to the long-term viability of the UN-led political transition, especially in the event of the UN withdrawal from the country.

Another major security concern for the CAR remains the huge movement of refugees and fugitive government soldiers who are fleeing the war in the DRC. Reacting against the presence of nearly 10,000 Congolese government troops in the CAR, a rebel faction has recently threatened to invade the CAR if this country continues to accept Congolese soldiers on its territory.

In Cameroon, ever since the last round of general elections there still prevails a modicum of political serenity. Despite wide (and often unsubstantiated) claims of electoral fraud President Paul Biya has twice kept his office, first in 1992 then five years later in 1997. His hold on power appears steady and unshaken by a fractious and at times, refractory political opposition. Cameroon's main security concerns are threefold. (a) The tension with Nigeria over the little island of Bakassa, to which it has begun to find some kind of resolution. (b) The proliferation of small arms and weapons of war. (c) The phenomenon of "*coupeurs de routes*," i.e. armed bandits operating along major trade routes, particularly along the borders with Chad.

Gabon has just concluded its second round of general elections. At the helm of this oil-producing country of slightly over a million people for over a quarter of a century, President Omar Bongo has won another term in office through an electoral process he helped to initiate nearly a decade ago. Just as in neighbouring Cameroon, most of Gabon's political opposition appears incoherent and disunited. In both countries, the political incumbent and the opposition are still at odds over the nature of the emerging political order, the identity of its beneficiaries or the best modalities of power sharing. Meanwhile ethno-regional tensions continue to brew unattended; but they have not (yet?) led to tragedies and atrocities so characteristic of this sub-region.

Of major concern to this small but "rich" country – Gabon – is the great movement of illegal immigrants as well as refugees and armed elements (fugitive

combatants and militiamen) in the southern part of the country, along the borders with the Republic of Congo. Gabon's social and economic structures are increasingly unable to absorb this surplus population, and fears are rising about the possibility that in the near future violence and political turmoil may be imported into this politically stable country.

Chad is slowly emerging from a protracted civil war and a cycle of violence that gripped the country for three decades. Since the deployment of the United Nations Aouzou Strip Observer Group in mid-1994 peace has generally been achieved, more especially with the Libyan neighbour. However, the security of goods and people remains a daunting challenge for President Idriss Déby. Small-armed bands roam certain parts of the country and maintain rebellious centres against Mr. Déby's government. In 1991 a small contingent of French troops helped the present regime to escape a near fall to a military assault allegedly mounted by Mr. Hissein Habré, Mr. Déby's predecessor now in exile in Senegal. As in the Central-African Republic, Chad's political leadership appears determined to engage the political system in the direction of political pluralism.

The economic performance of the countries that I have just profiled, including Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe, remains generally far below the expectations of the majority of the population in as far as provision for a decent life is concerned. However, these are the only countries in the sub-region to enjoy a modicum of peace, security and political stability. Much as security in those countries is threatened by the new phenomenon of "coupeurs de routes,"⁸ this, however, is nowhere close to the general insecurity and the state of war prevailing in the rest of the sub-region.

Rwanda is the epicentre of many of the violent atrocities and communal hostilities whose impact now reverberates throughout Central Africa. With the exception of a short-lived peaceful transition following President Habyalimana's *coup d'état* in 1973, the Banyarwanda have yet to see an end to their tragedy and to experience lasting peace. Ironically, in spite of its own political, economic and security ordeal at home Rwanda's already strained army has been spearheading a military insurrection aimed at overthrowing the government of one of its neighbours, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Rwanda's tragedy is well known by neighbouring Burundi. Since independence in 1962, this former monarchy has lived through four coups, a cycle of communal violence and, of course, the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic in November 1966. Unlike Rwanda, whose "contagion" it has always feared, Burundi initiated constitutional reform in 1992. Subsequently, free and fair general elections were held rather prematurely, considering the fact that society had not properly cleansed its deep wounds. Eventually, Melchior Ndadaye won and became in 1993 the first and so far, the only democratically elected Head of the Burundian State. President Ndadaye's tenure was to be short-lived. The feeling of

hope that accompanied his victory soon turned into bitterness for the various extremist groups. Only three months after his triumphant election President Ndadaye was murdered, along with most members of his cabinet. In the aftermath of his assassination violence and atrocities resumed, and once again dashed the hopes of the majority of Burundians for a stable polity. Upon his return to power, President Buyoya engaged the country towards another effort at dialogue and national reconciliation. The internal dialogue among Burundians from all walks of life seems to be going smoothly, in contrast with the ongoing talks in Arusha Tanzania, between the government and only few members of the civilian and armed opposition.

A similar situation occurred in the Republic of Congo. The 1992 elections resulted in the victory of Mr. Pascal Lissouba over the long-tenured rule of General Denis Sassou-Nguesso. However, the defeated President and his supporters did not take their defeat well. Three years later prompted by a series of political gaffes by the Lissouba government, General Sassou-Nguesso mounted a media offensive denouncing the undemocratic regime of his successor. A year later, militiamen loyal to the incumbent attacked the former president's residence in an attempt to capture him. A bloody confrontation ensued between the militias loyal to the two men, resulting in the victory of General Sassou-Nguesso.

Since General Nguesso's return to power, and in spite of his repeated calls for national dialogue and reconciliation between his government and all political and military factions, insecurity still prevails in the country. The old militias are more than ever present and actively fighting in different parts of a country where unnecessary damage and senseless destruction have occurred.

Across the Congo River, the former Zaire was re-christened the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in May 1997. President Mobutu had just been driven out of office (and the country) by an incongruous alliance of obscure domestic forces, with the backing of a clandestine coalition of foreign countries and financial interests. The story of the odyssey that led to the demise of President Mobutu and the rise of the current autocrat began with the massacres in Rwanda in 1994.

The subsequent flight of Rwandan Hutu refugees and their settlement in eastern Zaire posed a serious security threat to the Tutsi dominated regime of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Around the same time, obscure leaders of four unknown Congolese political parties met to form what came to be known as *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo (AFDL)*. Thanks to the involvement of the Rwandan army, the tacit approval of the Zairean people and the implication, for various reasons, of a score of African and foreign interests, AFDL successfully routed Mobutu's army and toppled his regime in May 1997.

Two years after its advent, the AFDL has virtually ceased to exist. There is no more mention of it in public speeches. Some of its prominent founders have been

either jailed or exiled. Accusing its former ally of harbouring dictatorial and genocidal impulses, a faction which became known as the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD)*, took up arms and, with the backing of Rwanda and Uganda, sought to topple the government of President Kabila. Ironically a year or so after its founding, the DRC has also broken into two factions, each ostensibly backed by a neighbouring country. Meanwhile, the forces loyal to President Kabila appear incapable of fending off three new rebellions at once without the help of their African friends.

The second Congo crisis has caused the Central African sub-region to be almost at war against itself. Neighbouring countries, including Rwanda, Uganda and, initially, Burundi ostensibly support three rebel armies intent on toppling an internationally-recognized government, itself backed by two other countries of the sub-region (i.e. Angola and Chad). A peace accord was recently signed in Lusaka Zambia, among the countries engaged in this phony war. After protracted negotiations, the rebels have also decided to sign the peace accord. Meanwhile, foreign troops are supposed to leave the country and be replaced by a multinational force under the aegis of the OAU and the UN.

In Angola, lasting peace appears as elusive as elsewhere in this troubled sub-region. Between 1989 and 1997, Angola received continuous assistance from the United Nations. Under the guise of the United Nations Verification Mission in Angola (UNAVEM I, UNAVEM II and UNAVEM III), the United Nations established a presence in Angola to monitor the implementation of peace accords signed between the government and the main armed opposition. The first round of general elections took place in 1992, and resulted in the (contested) victory of the ruling party. Hostilities resumed in 1992, but the fighting parties agreed to another peace accord in 1994. In June 1997, the United Nations terminated UNAVEM III and replaced it with United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA). The war broke out again in early 1999 and, in a controversial move, the government of Angola requested the United Nations to withdraw all MONUA staff. The civil war is still raging with claims and counter-claims against one another.

Sub-Regional Initiatives at Conflict Management

The security situation in Central Africa is at present bleak. To their credit, ECCAS political leaders have, individually or collectively, sought regularly to prevent, manage or resolve armed conflicts and prevent political differences from escalating into open hostilities. Some of these political and diplomatic initiatives have yielded relative success. The mediation conducted by several African countries, including Chad and Gabon, to end the mutinies and violence that crippled the Central African Republic in 1996 is a good example. Mediation by African countries led to the 1997 Bangui Agreement and the establishment of an inter-African peace force (*"Mission Inter-Africaine de Vérification des Accords de*

Bangui," or *MISAB*). ECCAS members played a prominent role in this African initiative to end an African conflict.

Most significant, however, is the decision by the Heads of State and Government to establish a legal and institutional framework to promote and strengthen peace and security in the sub-region. This historic decision was made at the Yaoundé Summit on 25 February 1999.⁹ The *Conseil Supérieur de Paix et de Sécurité de l'Afrique Centrale* (Article 1), or COPAX, as the security mechanism is called, has a dual mission. First, it aims to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in Central Africa. Secondly, it will undertake all and any necessary action that can deal effectively with political conflicts and lead to the promotion, preservation and consolidation of peace and security in the sub-region (Article 2).

The decision to establish COPAX was the culmination of intense deliberations that occurred in three stages, organized under the auspices of the UN Standing Advisory Committee for Security Questions in Central Africa. The first was by the Committee of Ambassadors to the United Nations of the Central African sub-region. The second was a meeting by experts and government representatives of the sub-region. And finally, there was a meeting by the Council of Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs. At the 1999 Yaoundé Summit, the Council of Ministers was also instructed by the Heads of State to prepare as quickly as possible a draft of the statute, protocols and administrative structure of COPAX. However, at the time of writing, COPAX is still not operational, owing to disagreements among government experts on technicalities.

COPAX: Its Roots

COPAX was established under the auspices of the UN Standing Advisory Committee for Security Questions in Central Africa. Grouping all the eleven member States of ECCAS, the Committee was instituted by the UN Secretary-General on 28 May 1992, pursuant to the resolution of the General Assembly (described below). Its mission is "to develop confidence-building measures and to encourage arms limitation and development". The Committee held its first meeting in Yaoundé in 1992, and has since met twice a year at the level of government experts, the Council of Ministers of Defence, Interior and Foreign Affairs, and Heads of State and Government. In addition to COPAX, the Committee assisted Central African states in the signing of a Pact of Non-Aggression in 1996 and the establishment, in the same year, of the Libreville-based early warning mechanism (*mécanisme d'alerte rapide*). It also commissioned a joint study by the former Zaire and the Republic of Congo on the feasibility of a Pact of Mutual Assistance, which should then be included in the COPAX.

The need for inter-state security cooperation in Central Africa arose for the first time at the Yaoundé Summit of 8 October 1996, when the Heads of State and Government of the sub-region decided to create and establish an Early Warning

Mechanism (EWM) for Central Africa in Libreville Gabon. At a meeting in Libreville on 8 May 1997 over the political crisis in Zaire, the political leaders agreed on the necessity of creating an inter-state security mechanism and cooperation for the prevention and management of conflicts in the sub-region. ECCAS Ministers of Defence and Interior deliberated on this idea during their meeting in Libreville, from 28 to 30 April 1998. Consensus emerged on the possibility of cooperating on defence and security matters at the sub-regional level. The Ministers unanimously agreed to form a supreme council whose task was to promote peace and to prevent, manage and resolve armed conflicts in Central Africa. They subsequently recommended the establishment of such a mechanism to the Heads of State and Government.

A similar decision was reached at the conference on democratic institutions and peace in Central Africa, that was held in Bata, Equatorial Guinea from 18 to 20 May 1998. Expressing concern over the persistence of political crises in the sub-region, the participants adopted a document entitled "Bata Declaration for the Promotion of Democracy, Peace and Sustainable Development in Central Africa". The document concurred with the recommendations of the ECCAS Ministers of Defence and Internal Affairs on the need to create a political mechanism whose sole aim would be to build confidence and to strengthen cooperation among the countries of the sub-region on peace, security and political stability.

Finally, at a meeting in Yaoundé from 29 to 30 October 1998, ECCAS Ministers of Foreign Affairs also discussed the possibility of inter-state cooperation on security matters. The Ministers noted "with satisfaction" the progress made by the sub-region, notably towards the reduction of political tensions. Alarmed by increased insecurity and the illicit traffic of drugs and small arms across the region, they urged greater cooperation and dialogue among sub-regional security forces over these issues and the adoption of a common strategy to stave off such illegal and criminal activities. Above all, recognizing the institutional void on inter-state security cooperation, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs concurred with their colleagues in charge of Defence and Interior on the need for a legal framework aimed at preventing, managing and resolving armed conflicts in the sub-region. They, too, agreed to propose to the Heads of State and Government the establishment of a *Conseil Supérieur pour la promotion de la paix, la prévention, la gestion et le règlement des crises politiques et des conflits armés en Afrique centrale*.

The UN General Assembly and Secretary-General have provided significant assistance and expertise to ECCAS member States in their search for effective inter-state cooperation in security matters. Prominent among UN initiatives for Central Africa is the General Assembly's Resolution 46/37, which was adopted at the forty-sixth session in December 1991. In it, the General Assembly "welcome[d] the initiative taken by ECCAS member States with a view to developing confidence-building measures, disarmament and development in their sub-region, by,

in particular, the creation, under the auspices of the UN, of a standing advisory committee on security questions in Central Africa". That resolution also requested "the UN Secretary-General to submit to the [forty-ninth session of the] General Assembly a report on the implementation of Resolution 46/37B".¹⁰

Non-Aggression Pact

Signed in Yaoundé on 8 July 1996 by nine ECCAS members, the Non-Aggression Pact is one of the three major pillars of inter-state cooperation in Central Africa. Although the Pact is short in its wording (6 articles only), it could nonetheless have a significant impact on peace and security in the region once it is ratified by Member States. Reaffirming their commitment to inter-state cooperation on peace and security matters, ECCAS members took the responsibility to refrain in their mutual relations from the threat or use of force or aggression, either against the territorial integrity or independence of other member States, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the Organization of African Unity or the treaty establishing the ECCAS" (Article I).

Article II calls on member states "to refrain from committing, encouraging or supporting acts of hostility or aggression against the territorial integrity or independence of other Member States". Article III encourages each Member State to "ensure that the acts referred to in Article 2 ... are not committed from its territory by resident or non-resident aliens against the sovereignty or territorial integrity of other Member States". And Article IV concludes the list of these bans by offering to Member States the "resort [to] peaceful means to settle any differences that may arise among them by having recourse to the various relevant mechanisms for resolving conflicts within the ECCAS, the OAU and the UN".

I quoted these four articles *in extenso* because they show a strong political commitment by the leaders of a sub-region that is characterized by all the activities that the Non-Aggression Pact prohibits. ECCAS Foreign Ministers did not miss this paradox when, at a meeting in Yaoundé in 1998, they urged the States that are signatories to the Pact to ratify it, and those who have not signed it to do so. Government experts and the Council of Ministers reiterated a similar request at the preparatory meeting of the Summit of the Heads of State and Government in Yaoundé in February 1999, and in Yaoundé in July 1999. Finally, in his welcome speech at the Yaoundé Summit in February 1999, President Paul Biya of Cameroon spoke extensively of the need for governments of the region to show the political will to make effective their declarations about inter-state cooperation on security matters. He argued that no security mechanism will work effectively to prevent, manage or settle political differences within and among ECCAS members if the political leaders do not show the political commitment to make it an effective instrument for peace in the sub-region.

Early Warning Mechanism (EWM)

After several years of lethargy, the sub-region is now determined to effectively launch the Libreville-based EWM. A building has been allocated by the Government of Gabon and funds secured for its initial operation. The main questions currently under debate concern staff recruitment and assistance by the UN and the OAU in making it fully operational. The previous debate concerning the relationship between COPAX and the EWM was resolved at the Malabo Summit in July 1999. It was once suggested that the EWM should be directly responsible to the Conference of the Heads of State and Government, but independent in its administrative and operational activities. Of late, consensus seems to have emerged over the need to consolidate existing cooperation arrangements and institutions in the sub-region. The argument ran as follows. None of the inter-state organizations created in Central Africa has operated effectively. It is unwise to keep on creating new institutions or mechanisms when the existing ones are not functioning properly. Central African countries should rather harmonize their economic and security initiatives and consolidate them into a single organization. However, in order for inter-state security cooperation to work effectively and efficiently, the organizations created for this task should be flexible and unhindered by a heavy bureaucratic structure.

According to this reasoning, the EWM would become an integral part of ECCAS. However, in order to avoid the lethargy that has crippled ECCAS Secretariat over the decades, it has been suggested that the post of ECCAS Under-Secretary General (USG) in charge of peace and security questions be created. The EWM would then be placed under the supervision of the USG, while maintaining a lean administrative structure and a line of command that will make it flexible and fully operational.

The EWM would accomplish three missions. First, it would regularly monitor the political, socio-economic and security situation throughout the sub-region. Secondly, it would identify all sources of tensions and detect those that appear likely to degenerate into political conflicts. Thirdly, it would be expected to alert the political leaders about potential sources of conflict and assist in implementing preventive measures decided by the region's political leaders. The proposed administrative structure provides for three operational units which would be placed under a Technical Coordinator. The first unit would be in charge of policy analysis and conflict prevention. The second would deal with peacekeeping and logistics. The third would specialize in humanitarian and refugee assistance. Overall, the EWM is expected to be lean so as to ensure maximum flexibility, greater effectiveness and direct access to ECCAS Heads of State and Government.

Several conditions ought to be fulfilled if such a structure is to be effective. The first concerns the quality of the staff that would perform these tasks. Despite the existence of a large pool of expertise in the sub-region on peace, security and

economic matters, the political leaders have over the years chosen not to appoint the most qualified people to such highly sensitive positions. Yet the EWM needs a professional staff, highly qualified people who are familiar with the techniques of data collection and who possess the necessary analytical skills, to operate effectively. Secondly, even if the Libreville-based EWM is efficiently run by a professional team of the highest calibre, it would still not work properly without national and local observatories in different parts of the sub-region to facilitate the rapid circulation of early warning information. For example, it is impossible for the staff in Libreville to assess accurately and independently that a particular event in South Kivu or eastern Burundi, for example, signals potential conflict and should therefore be given prompt attention. To ensure effectiveness, it is equally important for the sub-region to mandate representatives of "civil society" and non-governmental organizations to gather early warning information for its use. This collaboration can easily be established at the level of national and local observatories.

These options are nonetheless fraught with many complications. First of all, for the national or local observatories to work effectively, they should be independent from the security forces and intelligence services of the Member State where they are established. This, of course, is not always possible. Central Africa is replete with reports of governments denying the existence of a domestic problem (until it has got out of hand) or refusing offers of assistance in conflict management by other African governments. Moreover, because of their concern for "national security," Member States can at any time classify as "sensitive" any information of a political nature. In such cases, nobody but the appropriate national intelligence agency can freely gather or disseminate the relevant information. Examples abound in the sub-region of representatives of the media or members of non-governmental organizations arrested for writing or disseminating so-called "sensitive" stories or information.

The relationship between Governments and civil society is notably fraught with suspicion and animosity. On several occasions, sub-regional authorities have tried to silence, undermine or keep civil society organizations in check, only to provoke the wrath of the international community.

Relationship Between the EWM, COPAX and ECCAS

The debate over the nature of the relationship between the EWM and COPAX is closely associated with another debate surrounding the nature of COPAX in relation to ECCAS. Overall, the lack of consensus over these issues constituted the major stumbling block in the development of COPAX's draft statute and protocols. Two main conflicting interpretations divided government experts and Council of Ministers. The first group supported the institutional separation of COPAX and ECCAS, and proposed to turn the former into an independent agency with

headquarters somewhere other than Libreville, where ECCAS Secretariat is temporarily located. Proponents of this option argued that ECCAS was an organization that required a complete and time consuming restructuring if it is to overcome its weaknesses. Since the Heads of State and Government wanted COPAX to be fully established and operational as quickly as possible, they should not wait until the restructuring of ECCAS. Furthermore, the peace and security mission entrusted to COPAX required flexibility and direct access to the Heads of State and Government. Therefore, to make it an organic component of a cumbersome and inefficient bureaucratic structure such as ECCAS would render COPAX unnecessarily bureaucratic, which would adversely affect fulfillment of its mission. ECCAS members should therefore keep economic cooperation separate from their concern for peace and security, even if the possibility of collaboration between the two organizations on some common projects, such as providing assistance to refugees, were to remain open. COPAX should remain a platform for political leaders to hold dialogue and consult among themselves on security matters. The Summit of the Heads of State and Government would be the sole deliberative organ. It would be assisted in its deliberations by the Council of Ministers of Defence, Interior and Foreign Affairs. A Committee of Ambassadors accredited to the UN and the OAU would advise the Council of Ministers and serve as its permanent liaison with international organizations and external donors.

Not everyone agreed with the idea of COPAX becoming an independent organization. Two justifications were offered in support of this opposition. Some noted that the sub-region always seemed to rush into the decision to create new institutions when all the existing ones barely functioned. It was therefore argued that the sub-region should first strive to revitalize and restructure the organizations created so far before thinking about new ones. At the meeting of government experts and the Council of Ministers in Yaoundé in February 1999, some delegates even sought to do away with the idea of COPAX on the ground that the sub-region did not need a security mechanism but did need a strong commitment to make the EWM fully operational. Furthermore, it was argued that the sub-region should seriously consider the financial difficulties confronting the existing organizations and resolve them prior to the creation of new agencies. Questions were raised as to why the Heads of State and Government of the sub-region would decide to establish COPAX as an independent institution when they lacked the financial autonomy to effectively run ECCAS, the EWM and other sub-regional organizations? Others argued that it was desirable for COPAX to keep its organizational and operational autonomy, the sub-regional mechanism should remain an integral part of ECCAS. The post of an Under Secretary-General of ECCAS should be instituted to oversee COPAX operations and liaise with the Council of Ministers and the Heads of State. COPAX should therefore remain what the name "Supérieur Council" suggests, that is, a platform for the Heads of State and Government to

deliberate and initiate policies on peace and security matters. In this connection, it was suggested that, rather than setting COPAX as another sub-regional organization with its own administrative structure, the Heads of State and Government should consider making the EWM the Technical Secretariat of COPAX. In conformity with its role of assisting political leaders in the management of peace and security in the sub-region, the EWM would then advise the Summit of the Heads of State. It would also implement and follow up on the Summit's decisions and keep the records of sub-regional deliberations and decisions on peace and security matters.

This, in bold strokes, was the substance of the debate over the nature of COPAX and its relationship with the existing sub-regional organizations and institutional arrangements. As is often the case, when arguments and counter arguments are made, the technical issues were either ignored or marginalised; or considerations of purely "national interests" took precedence over them thereby stalling the entire decision-making process. During the drafting of the ECCAS security mechanism an impasse of this kind occurred because governments of the sub-region chose to rely primarily on their experts. In so doing, they allowed real and imagined national concerns to dominate and complicate the discussions and thereby obfuscate the technical demands of the mechanism. This was most evident in Yaoundé last February during the meeting of government experts and the Council of Ministers. Happily, the Heads of State broke the impasse by integrating the COPAX into the ECCAS and establishing the post of USG in charge of security matters. They also promised to set funds aside for the revitalization of ECCAS.

A Sub-Regional Parliament?

While ECCAS and its organic units (COPAX and the EWS) are struggling to regain a new life and become fully operational, a different idea has quietly gained ground among the political leaders of the sub-region. It is the idea of a sub-regional parliament, which entered the discourse on peace and security in the sub-region for the first time at the conference on democratic institutions and peace in Central Africa.¹¹ In his opening statement at that conference, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea made an impassioned defense of the linkages between democracy, peace and social justice. He eloquently argued that peace and security could not be achieved "without giving [the people] the opportunity to participate in the political process of the State, in order to build their own future". President Nguema even suggested that "centres of tension in Central Africa [...] appear when the imperatives of social justice and participatory government are lacking".¹² He concluded his speech by proposing the establishment of a "sub-regional parliamentary assembly responsible for protecting the interests of the people". Central Africa, President Nguema asserted, must find:

the necessary means of achieving good governance and rational management in order to promote the economic development, peace, security and well-being of our nations and to consolidate African solidarity, mutual governmental support and cooperation in national development.¹⁴

As proposed by the Equatorial Guinea President, the sub-regional parliament will constitute the third pillar of inter-state security cooperation in Central Africa, alongside COPAX and the EWM. It is the political framework that would harmonize peace, security and economic cooperation and generate the political will to bring together the peoples of the Central African sub-region through their elected representatives. In this context, the proposed sub-regional parliament would be a pre-eminent platform for the promotion of democratic values and practices, as well as the creation and dissemination of a culture of tolerance and peace among the peoples of Central Africa.

The idea of a sub-regional parliament rests on the fundamental democratic principle of popular sovereignty. While the Heads of State and Government have achieved significant progress towards the establishment of a sub-regional security mechanism and various instruments for securing peace, it behoves them to involve the people of the sub-region in the implementation of these peace and security arrangements. After all, the people are the primary victims of mounting instability and the proliferation of political tensions and armed conflicts across the region. Therefore, they have a sovereign stake in matters of peace and security there.

If it ever becomes operational, the sub-regional parliament would achieve several objectives. Chief among them would be the harmonization of parliamentary procedures for the ratification of treaties and accords signed by the executive authority. Secondly, there exists at the moment no institutional oversight of the political and security agreements that the Heads of State usually sign but rarely care to implement. A sub-regional parliament would thus establish a system of accountability that would compel the Heads of State to live by their political engagements. A third objective concerns the development of common regulations on trade, migration and population movement across the sub-region. The protection of the rights of the people against state violence or brutality is another priority, as is the rendering of justice to those who have been victims of discrimination based on gender, religious, ethnic or regional identity. The sub-regional parliament may sponsor cultural and artistic exchanges among the people and fund activities aimed at promoting the culture of peace and tolerance in the sub-region. Finally, it would be in charge of budget authorization and the appropriation of funds for all sub-regional organizations.

Conclusion

Despite personal animosities, ideological differences and sharp disagreements

over matters of mutual concern, the Heads of State and Government of the sub-region have shown an inclination to agree on common issues, as well as take significant decisions to build political confidence, promote peace and security, and promote economic cooperation and integration in the sub-region. More progress needs to be made primarily towards the implementation of such decisions, and the encouragement of the peoples of the sub-region to participate in designing and implementing the political and security architecture that would guarantee them their basic life entitlements.

Observers of the political and security situation in Central Africa agree that today's security environment is not qualitatively different from that which prevailed a decade ago. Political tensions, armed conflicts and general insecurity continue unabated. However, it should be noted that the political leaders in the sub-region are now bolder than before in their determination to openly tackle the issues that they used to skirt around not long ago. By itself, this political courage is noteworthy.

Still, political dissent is still ruthlessly suppressed, though modest gains have been made in other areas by the political opposition and civil society organizations among others. Gradually, non-governmental organizations have emboldened themselves by taking on abusive regimes throughout the sub-region. Some political space has been gained through this persistent struggle, which is equally remarkable.

Economic conditions have not improved for the majority of the population of the sub-region, and there is no hope of changing these conditions soon, particularly when one takes into account the enormous cost of civil violence and strife throughout the sub-region. In this context, the idea of a sub-regional parliament is propitious, particularly if it would enable the people of Central Africa to pressure their leaders to accelerate the process of sub-regional economic integration and allow greater popular participation in the exploitation of the vast mineral resources and arable land which are being exploited for private gain. It is encouraging to see the Heads of State and Government commit themselves, as they now do; but this task is too important to be left solely to them.

Notes

- * International Peace Academy, and Sarah Lawrence College, New York, USA. The opinions expressed in this article are mine.
- 1. The DRC was recently admitted as a member of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).
- 2. Notable among them is the Economic Community of Central African States, ECCAS, or, as it is known in French, Communauté Economique des Etats d'Afrique Centrale (CEEAC). Based in Brazzaville, the ECCAS is soon to be chaired by Equatorial Guinea. Another was the defunct CEPQL, Communauté Economique des Pays des Grands Lacs, grouping the former

Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi. All that remains of the CEPGL are a few identity cards, called CEPGL cards, still in use until the onset of the war in August 1998, for border crossing between the DRC and Burundi.

3. Gabon, Congo, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea and Chad use the CFA. Rwanda has the "Franc rwandais," Burundi the "Franc burundais," Sao Tome and Principe the "dobra," and Angola the "new kwanza." It is not unusual for many to concurrently use more than one currency. In the DRC, for example, there are three "national" currencies: the new "Franc Congolais" (Congolese franc), introduced with much fanfare in June 1998, the old "new zaire" inherited from the Mobutu era of high inflation and seniority, and the US dollar, the preferred currency since the early 1990s.
4. UNDP. Human Development Report 1997. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 146-148.
5. Gabon, the country that is the most frequently associated with these practices, cites the great movement of refugees and armed elements from neighboring Congo, as well as the economic and social problems wrought by the presence of illegal immigrants from West Africa, as the major justification for its tough immigration policy.
6. United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa. *United Nations Concern for Peace and Security in Central Africa*. (New York: United Nations, 1997), p. 1.
7. Ibid., p. 1.
8. These are small bands of armed robbers that cause much insecurity to traders and their produce mainly in Cameroon and Central Africa. They also operate, especially in the Central African Republic, as poachers, illegally hunting rare and protected species. The weapons used in the commission of these crimes come from two main supply channels that allegedly include demobilized fighters in Chad and army deserters in Central Africa.
9. Eight Heads of State and Government and one Vice-President participated in the Summit and signed the decision establishing a security mechanism for Central Africa. Rwanda and Angola did not attend the Summit.
10. For the reports of the UN Secretary-General dealing with the UN Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa and the most relevant resolutions by the General Assembly and the Security Council, see Notes 6 above.
11. UN Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa. *Subregional Conference on Democratic Institutions and Peace in Central Africa. Conference Report*. (New York: United Nations, 1999). The Conference was held in Bata, Equatorial Guinea, from 18 to 21 May 1998.
14. Ibid., p. 17-18.
15. Ibid., p. 18.