



Danish Institute for International Studies

Fragmented Peacekeeping: Regional Interests Define the African Union Mission in Somalia

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Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Albrecht, P. A. (2015). *Fragmented Peacekeeping: Regional Interests Define the African Union Mission in Somalia*. Danish Institute for International Studies. DIIS Policy Brief Vol. 2015 No. November

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Fragmented peacekeeping
**REGIONAL INTERESTS DEFINE THE
AFRICAN UNION MISSION IN SOMALIA**

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) achieved impressive results during 2014 and has demonstrated the potential to act as one mission rather than a collection of individual troop-contributing countries. However, national interests of Ethiopia and Kenya lead to fragmentation of the results that may be achieved through AMISOM.

In early 2007 AMISOM was created as one of the African Union's most expansive peace support operations to date. It was first deployed to Mogadishu in March 2007 with some 1,650 Ugandan troops. AMISOM's initial peacekeeping mandate was expanded on 22 July 2010 to encompass a peace

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Understand in detail what motivates AMISOM's main troop contributors socially, politically and historically.
- Accept and learn to work with national interests as a basic reality that shapes the strategic direction of AMISOM.
- Find ways to support and strengthen AMISOM headquarters, for instance, by gifting equipment for it to distribute from its headquarters.
- Provide greater support to the African Union (AU) and AMISOM to ensure that after-action reviews are produced and used in future planning.

In the case of AMISOM, national interests and strategic objectives of the mission at times overlap, but are often contradictory.

'To AMISOM we say we should not misunderstand you. We know how important you are to us. I was one of the top SNA leaders who in the past went to the troop contributing countries such as Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia to help build your forces. So now it is your turn to help us rebuild our institutions'

Maj. Gen. Mohamed Adan Ahmed, Chief of Defence Forces of the Somali National Army, 26 September 2015

enforcement focus, largely due to the emergence and consolidation of al-Shabaab, a radical neo-Salafi Jihadi Islamist organisation. By mid-2015 AMISOM had grown in fits and starts to more than 22,000 personnel, including substantial contributions from Burundi (5,432), Djibouti (1,000), Kenya (3,664), Sierra Leone (850), Ethiopia (4,395) and Uganda (6,223).

Since 2010, and especially in 2014, AMISOM and the Somali National Army (SNA) experienced a number of genuine successes by retaking areas captured by al-Shabaab. However, it is also clear that AMISOM's organisation and strategic direction are fragmented, primarily because national interests of some of the troop-contributing countries, notably neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia, are focused more on securing their own borders than on stabilising Somalia.

Success and stagnation

2014 was a crucial year for AMISOM, which projected the image of what one international adviser to the mission in Mogadishu described as a 'grinding relentless machine'. Operation Eagle was formally launched in March as a joint military offensive with the SNA recovering 11 districts from al-Shabaab. With Operation Indian Ocean, which set out to remove al-Shabaab from key towns and main supply routes, and Operation Ocean Build, which was launched to consolidate these gains, AMISOM projected levels of cohesion and direction that momentarily blurred the strong sense of national interest that defines the very core of the mission.

In the first half of 2015, however, AMISOM lost momentum, which led to a resurgence of al-Shabaab and a number of spectacular attacks in Mogadishu, Kismayo and Garowe. Why did this happen?

A weak headquarters

One answer to this question lies in the disconnection between AMISOM headquarters in Mogadishu and the sectors across southern and central Somalia where the troop-contributing countries operate. Following Operation Indian Ocean and Operation Ocean Build, key positions of a functioning organisation were vacant, including those of the Force Commander, Deputy Force Commander and – eventually – Chief of Staff. This was due to the limited political will of the contributing countries to find replacements. Despite the fact that 120 staff positions had been approved, only 84 positions were formally filled for several months into 2015. 'The reality is', one international advisor to AMISOM concluded in January 2015, 'that there is no functioning mission HQ'.

As a consequence, no after-action review took place following Operation Indian Ocean, which would have been an important lessons document that would have informed the mission's future direction. The weakness of headquarters is compounded by the fact that the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA), rather than the Joint Support Operations Centre of AMISOM, distributes mission resources. This denies AMISOM of one of the main powers of any military headquarters: controlling when and how to support those elements of the mission that are considered most in need.

By extension, this also means that the ability of the headquarters to exercise control over any one troop-contributing country has had to rely on the personal relationship between the Force Commander and the Sector Commanders, and the latter's willingness (and political backing from their governments) to follow orders issued from Mogadishu. If there are differences between the strategic direction of force

headquarters and national interests, it will as a rule be the latter that takes primacy.

In practice, rather than setting specific tasks, the headquarters marks out a general direction, which was ultimately what happened in 2014's operations. For instance, if a Sector Commander has been ordered to attack a particular location, this may have been overruled in favour of another location of greater national interest to the troop-contributing country in question. There have also been instances where fighting has continued after a campaign was formally concluded by the Force Commander.

Diverging strategies

In early 2015, AMISOM's strategic direction shifted from actively fighting and putting pressure on al-Shabaab to focusing on stabilisation, and allowing the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to begin institution-building. However, it quickly became apparent that despite AMISOM's notable successes in 2014, al-Shabaab was able to block supply and access

routes in and out of many of the towns from which it had been expelled. One of the reasons for this is the sheer scale of the operation in Somalia, which according to informal estimates would require twice as many troops as are currently available to AMISOM.

Equally important is the conflicting national interests of neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia relative to the



Top: A Ugandan AMISOM soldier launches surveillance equipment over the town of Qoryooley, Somalia in April 2014, one month after the town was captured from Al-Shabab militants © UN Photo/Tobin Jones

Bottom: A Kenyan Air Force helicopter lands at Kismayo Airport in southern Somalia, October 2012 © UN Photo/Stuart Price

objectives of AMISOM to stabilise Somalia. Al-Shabaab's attacks on Westgate, a shopping centre in Nairobi, and most recently on Garissa University College in eastern Kenya, have fundamentally shaped and continue to shape the strategic direction of the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) within southern Somalia, where it is based. The national objective of Kenya has been to disrupt al-Shabaab's ability to operate across the border to Kenya. In practice, this has established a Kenyan strategy to occupy key nodes and force al-Shabaab to fight on terms set by the KDF rather than hold and defend ground as well as pursue the enemy (al-Shabaab). AMISOM is following a counter-insurgency strategy. From that perspective, clearing and holding populated areas, which will allow stabilisation activities to take place, are crucial. The principles of counter-insurgency are not central to Kenya's main preoccupation with controlling the border.

Similarly, Kenya is driven by strategic and economic interests in maintaining control of the southern port city of Kismayo. In early 2014, it was announced that most of Kenya's troops were to leave Kismayo and be replaced by Sierra Leonean troops. This decision was motivated by the Somali government's criticism of the KDF working on a domestic agenda. By 2015, Kenyan troops remained in charge of Kismayo (and Sierra Leonean troops left AMISOM due to the ebola crisis in West Africa which prevented the Sierra Leonean battalion of 850 personnel from being replaced). Neither FGS nor the AU was able to enforce the replacement of KDF.

Training militias

Due to historically tense relations between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, Ethiopia has no interest in the establishment of a strong consolidated central government in Somalia, let alone a capable army. However, like the Kenyans, Ethiopia has a keen interest in controlling its border with Somalia. Before Ethiopia joined AMISOM in January 2014 – accelerated by the

attack on Westgate in Nairobi and to access resources available through UNSOA – the Ethiopian Defence Force was believed to have an estimated 8,000 troops in the country. (There continue to be many more Ethiopian forces present in Somalia than are formally part of AMISOM). In sum, AMISOM may provide some political legitimacy and resources, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that Ethiopia is in Somalia to serve AMISOM. Rather, contributing to AMISOM directly serves Ethiopian interests.

The preoccupation with border security is evident from Ethiopia's (and Kenya's) willingness to invest in the training and payment of local militias. And given historically weak relations between Mogadishu and rural areas of the country, militias welcome the support because it allows them to take primacy in their own areas. Apart from supporting FGS in the fight against al-Shabaab, one of AMISOM's main tasks is to support capacity-building of the SNA.

However, entirely independent of both AMISOM and the SNA leadership, and in general contradistinction to the international community's agenda, several hundred Somalis are being trained and paid by the Ethiopian forces. In this way, different groups of armed Somalis – which may or may not be presented as SNA members – are supported with one aim in mind: the establishment of border security. It exposes the obvious weakness of the FGS, and by extension the SNA. More importantly, it questions the willingness of the troop contributing countries to support, and thus AMISOM's ability to fulfil, the mandate of the mission.

It also shows the limited room to manoeuvre that is available to the broader international community in Somalia. None of the above should detract from the successes that AMISOM has had. However, realism, not idealism, should be the mantra guiding expectations of the mission.

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Cover photo: Members of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces stand in formation during a ceremony in Baidoa, Somalia, in January 2014 to mark the inclusion of Ethiopian troops into AMISOM © UN Photo/Tobin Jones

