Pre-publication manuscript, African Security, 2, 2: 69-81.

# **Problematizing Regional Organizations in African Security**

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# ABSTRACT

The African continent is plagued by some of the most brutal and violent conflicts in the world. At the same time that warfare is changing so has the state's capacity to provide security and political stability to its citizens. In this context, what is the role of new conflict management actors, in particular regional organizations? This article sets the scene for the special issue. It starts out by situating conflicts and peace operations on the African continent. It then moves on to problematize the role of regional organizations in African security with emphasis on the three key topics addressed in the special issue: (1) what are the advantages and disadvantages of African regional and sub-regional organizations vis-à-vis other security mechanisms, in particular UN peace operations?; (2) what are the official and unofficial reasons to intervene?; and (3) whose security is actually protected by the peace activities carried out by the regional organizations?

**Keywords**: Africa, war, peace, security, regionalism, regional organizations, African Union, United Nations, African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Some of the most challenging conflicts in the world over the last two decades are found in Africa (e.g. Burundi, Chad, Darfur, DRC, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Uganda). Despite the varied and complex nature of armed violence on the continent, most share a number of characteristics, which in the literature are sometimes referred to as "new wars" in contradistinction to "old wars".<sup>1</sup>

A characteristic of these wars is the new prominence demanded by, and given to, subnational actors and groups like rebel movements and mercenaries who often try to function as though they were recognized members of the international community. The actions of these actors and the nature of these crises have undermined perceptions of the state in Africa as the dominant and significant actor in the international system. These groups have succeeded in introducing new practices into the conduct of armed conflicts, effectively contesting some archetypal conceptions of modern warfare (one reason why some scholars prefer the "new wars" label). Subsequently, the dynamics of these conflicts have also influenced, and indeed transformed, the patterns of sub-regional and external involvement in, and responses to, such crises. This has at least two important implications.

First, in many of these wars and conflicts, the distinction between combatants and civilians is unclear, and also between who is "good" and "evil", "friend" and "foe", because loyalties are quickly changing. Secondly, even if most contemporary conflicts in Africa are often defined as "domestic", they are deeply embedded in a regional and cross-border context. As illustrated by the cases in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the DRC and more recently Sudan/Chad, most conflicts on the African continent spill-over into neighboring countries or draw regional actors into what is often better understood as "regional war-zones". Although the Uppsala Conflict Database shows that the number of armed conflicts in Africa is decreasing (from 18 conflicts in 1999, to 12 in 2008)<sup>2</sup>, the striking feature of African warfare is the regionalization of conflict.<sup>3</sup>

When the international community does intervene to mitigate armed struggles—most often in the form of a United Nations peacekeeping mission—the results have been mixed. Most of the difficulties are indeed connected to the heterogeneity and complexity of conflict in Africa. During the Cold War most conflicts in Africa followed the systemic logic of that order. They formed part of the bipolar struggle or were "solved" by way of interventions from superpowers, former colonial powers or powerful neighbors. However, in the post-Cold War era a new pattern has emerged whereby conflicts are allowed to erupt (often erratically) and also continue, waiting for more appropriate solutions. In this regard, some peace operations have succeeded, while many others have failed to quell violence or restore order in the countries to which they were deployed. Presently, the UN leads (or co-leads) eight peace operations in Africa (Burundi, Ivory Coast, the DRC, Liberia, Western Sahara, Central African Republic/Chad, Darfur, and Sudan). In total, there have been 26 UN peacekeeping missions in Africa since 1948.

Despite the increasing UN presence in Africa, over the last decade there has been another notable peacekeeping trend: *regional peacekeeping*, which has emerged due to several reasons. One reason is the above-mentioned pattern of regionalization of conflict, which calls for the intervention of regional organizations and/or neighboring countries to address their common regional problem. Another reason is the weakness of the UN system to come up with relevant solutions. It is clear today that the UN has neither enough resources nor the political will to engage with all security problems—hence the growing concern for security regionalism. As Haas already pointed out at the end of the Cold War, "regional security arrangements grow in direct proportion to disappointment with the UN collective security system."<sup>4</sup> According to Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, regional arrangements and agencies<sup>5</sup> can, and have been, empowered to engage in regional conflicts. Indeed, today the debate between the comparative advantages of either the UN or regional

organizations to address violent conflicts has emerged among policymakers as well as in the research community as one of the most important issues in the global security architecture.

How does this debate apply to Africa? Over the last two decades the continent has provided the ground test for major regional peacekeeping interventions. Peacekeeping operations have been deployed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia (1990-1998 and 2003), Sierra Leone (1997-2000), Guinea Bissau (1998-1999), and Cote D'Ivoire (2003-2004); the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in Lesotho (1998) and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (1998); the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) in the Central African Republic (2002-2008); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) also in the Central African Republic (2008-); and finally, the AU in Burundi (2003-2004 and 2007-), Sudan (2004-2007), Somalia (since 2007), and Comoros (2006 and 2008). IGAD also has experience in peacemaking in Sudan and Somalia.

Moreover, African leaders have been leading the way in the establishment of regional mechanisms to handle peace and security issues. The creation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2002 is perhaps the most important development in the security field during the last decade. In addition to creating the necessary decision-making bodies in Addis Ababa such as the Peace and Security Council, the Military Staff Committee and the Panel of the Wise, APSA will comprise of the African Stand-by Force (ASF) based on five regional brigades to be established by each of the sub-regional organizations (ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, ECCAS, UMA). The setting up of the regional brigades, in compliance with the African security architecture framework, has to accommodate—often with some difficulties—the existing peace and security schemes that have been developed by these very same regional organizations.

When the African Heads of State and Government decided to reshape the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) one of the main impetuses behind the transformation was the declared will to tackle "African problems through African solutions". This vision has also been forcefully supported by the international community, in particular Western powers. There exist, however, fundamental differences of outlook and style among the regional organizations, reflecting different perceptions of threat, historical experience and cultural background, with correspondingly different strategies towards the maintenance of peace and security.

This special issue is motivated by the fact that the role of African regional organizations in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peace-building still remains an underresearched topic. We argue that the determination with which the international community has delegated power to regional organizations has not been matched by a thorough understanding of this process. The special issue gives prominence to some key questions that hitherto have not received enough systematic and comparative treatment in the debate: (1) what are the advantages and disadvantages of African regional and sub-regional organizations vis-à-vis other security mechanisms, in particular UN peace operations?; (2) what is the interaction between the "official" versions to intervene and the underlying interests of involved actors?; and (3) whose security is actually protected by these organizations? problematizing these three questions in detail it is necessary to situate security regionalism in a wider conceptual and theoretical context.

### DEBATES ABOUT SECURITY REGIONALISM<sup>6</sup>

Regionalism and security can be related in many different ways. One has to do with the choice of unit of investigation—e.g. a regional security complex—defined by Barry Buzan as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national security cannot realistically be considered apart from one another".<sup>7</sup> The concept has later been rethought in a multisectoral and constructivist direction, making the actual delimitation of the unit more nuanced, but not easier since different security sectors (economic, environmental, societal) may define different regions.<sup>8</sup> The idea of securitization further adds to this fluency of the concept.<sup>9</sup>

In an alternative approach developed by Lake and Morgan, regions are defined in terms of the mode of security management or "regional order".<sup>10</sup> Regional orders can shift from simple balance of power systems or concerts to more comprehensive communities or integrated polities. Lake and Morgan suggest an alternative definition of regional security complex: "the states affected by at least one transborder but local security externality".<sup>11</sup> More recently, Tavares suggested that the regional unit of analysis should be defined by its content and proposed the idea of regional peace and security clusters (RPSC), defined as a set of peace and security relations that occur in a broad territory (region), driven by agents, operating at various levels of regional integration, who use various instruments to change the patterns of security, conflict, and positive peace.<sup>12</sup>

Another link between regionalism and security concerns the regional implications of a local conflict. These depend on the nature of the security complex and the way various security problems are vertically and horizontally linked in particular regions, which can be highly varying. Most and Starr have demonstrated, with substantial empirical data, that if a war begins on a nation's border, that nation might then become involved in a new military conflict depending upon the perceived changes in the nation's vulnerability, uncertainty, risks, and the opportunities that accompany the onset of the military conflict. In general, they assume that the likelihood of diffusion is particularly high among states in a region because such states interact more extensively than other states.<sup>13</sup>

The regionalization of conflict is tightly connected to the third link: the role of the region for regional security, conflict management and peacebuilding. That there may often be a role for regional cooperation in the case a conflict has spread within a region is more or less self-evident. However, it has also become increasingly evident during recent decades that many so called "national" or "domestic" conflicts can only be understood and dealt with in their regional contexts.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly the case in Africa, which explains the importance of this special issue.

Indeed, with the rise of so-called "new regionalism" in recent decades, regional organizations have become actors in their own right. A number of them—including AU, ASEAN, ECOWAS, EU and SADC—have acquired some kind of institutionalized

mechanism for conflict management and regional peace-keeping. Regions, through their regional agencies, have transformed from objects into subjects, making their relationship to the UN much more complex than current policy and academic debates tend to recognize. This leads us to the first of the three key questions addressed in this special issue.

### **REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS vs OTHER SECURITY MECHANISMS**

Most observers claim that the UN constitutes the foundation of a rules-based world order. Go-it-alone strategies outside a UN framework—for instance, through NATO plurilateralism or US unilateralism — are anathema.<sup>15</sup> Regionalism constitutes the main rules-based alternative to UN-based multilateralism, and its role has been intensively discussed at various junctures during the last century. Yet, even if the UN Secretary-General's reports *In Larger Freedom* (2005)<sup>16</sup> or *A Regional-Global Security Partnership: Challenges and Opportunities* (2006) conclude that multilateralism and regionalism can be complementary; the prevailing belief is that "UN primacy must be kept in all cases".<sup>17</sup> This is the vision enshrined in the UN Charter. It authorizes the regional bodies to engage with pacific settlement of local disputes (Art. 52), including traditional peacekeeping (Chapter VI), before referring them to the Security Council; or with peace enforcement (robust peacekeeping) after Security Council authorization (Art. 53). In this conception the region is simply an intermediate actor that undertakes tasks determined at and delegated from the multilateral level. The main purpose of regional agencies, according to this perspective, is to contribute to a multilateral system controlled by the UN Security Council.

Some proponents of this line have certainly developed greater recognition of the role of regional organizations. Ramesh Thakur, for instance, has acknowledged that there is an increasing gap between legality and legitimacy in multilateralism and that the UN cannot deliver a legitimate world order on its own. Regional arrangements closer to home can in this view counter perceptions of "external imposition" by a distant global UN. Yet this approach stresses that, to be legitimate, such regionalism must be compatible with, and contribute to, UN-based multilateralism. For Thakur, regional organizations can fill some of the gaps within multilateralism, but they must do so within the UN framework.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it is a vertical order whereby multilateral sanction is necessary for regional interventions to be legal and fully legitimate.

However, contemporary realities of global politics do not accommodate this idealized hierarchical order. Emerging regional formations assume a degree of actor capacity that traditional regional agencies lacked when the UN Charter was drafted. For example, whereas the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS), signed in 1948, mentions that the organization is a regional agency for UN purposes (Chapter VIII), the AU's right to intervene is somehow disassociated from the UN Charter. Whereas the UN Charter authorize regional agencies to enforce peace with the overall objective "to maintain international peace and security", the AU has given itself the right to intervene when, for example, there are "threats to legitimate order". The role of the UNSC in such interventions is yet unclear. This shows

that the conventional hierarchical relationship between multilateralism and regionalism is being transformed, sometimes even challenged.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, research on the relationship between multilateral and regional interventions is above all limited to peacekeeping, conflict prevention and humanitarian intervention, and this debate is somewhat separated from the broader literature about regions and regionalism.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the literature under the banner of intervention is overwhelmingly dominated by a normative position that favors multilateralism as the preferred mode of intervention.<sup>21</sup> This has lead to a lack of genuine debate between multilateralists and regionalists, and to a lack of systematic comparative research on the two different modes of managing security and building peace. This special issue seeks to remedy this weakness by providing elucidatory empirical data on the role of regional organizations in comparison to other modes of security management. As a starting point, it notes that African organizations are one out of a wide range of other actors that may provide peace and security (e.g. the UN, states, foreign powers, international NGOs) and calls for a critical assessment of the advantages or disadvantages of delegating power to the regional and sub-regional organizations. This is an issue of critical importance in the academic and policy debate.

It is sometimes argued that regional organizations offer large comparative advantages compared to UN operations or other types of interventions (unilateral, plurilateral or *ad hoc* interventions).<sup>22</sup> First, as the members of a regional organization share the same cultural background, they are likely to be more in tune with a conflict at hand. Second, personal relationships with the leaders have developed in the past, which results in greater understanding of the situation and may result in fruitful dialogue based on personal trust. Third, as time management is essential in a crisis situation, regional organizations could offer a more timely response, compared to bureaucratic global organizations as the UN or foreign states. Fourth, as the members of a regional organization are the ones who would suffer more directly the impacts of the conflict, they have a legitimate vital interest at stake in preserving regional stability. Do these theoretical comparative advantages apply in the African context?

#### **WHY INTERVENE?**

The synergies that have been created towards supporting African agencies trigger an important question: what leads African regional and sub-regional organizations to intervene in violent conflicts? Is the decision-making process led by a "just" and egalitarian intention to prevent and resolve conflicts or may one find unofficial triggers for the interventions? It is almost commonsense to say that international policies are enveloped by a cloud of rhetorical statements that sometimes camouflages the true intentions of policymakers. This special issue aims to highlight this ambivalence by pinpointing the interests and the pressures involved in a country's decision to support a regional peace operation. Our objective in this regard is to deconstruct the stated and official reasons in order to try to capture a more comprehensive picture of African peace operations, including the fundamental question "what is happening on the ground" as a way of better understanding why peace operations and interventions are actually carried out in Africa. In the decision to intervene there may be ideological or political interests. One may also find personal linkages between leaders, kinship affiliations, or family

ties that help to understand the outcome. Peacekeeping is also a lucrative business and economic interests may be at stake.

In order to better understand the importance as well as complexity of this question, let us try to preliminary assess the reasons behind the AU's intervention in Darfur. Its original mandate was to monitor compliance with the N'djamena Agreement, assist with confidencebuilding measures and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance. From a regional stance, Sudan offered an opportunity for the AU to demonstrate its ability to resolve African conflicts. South Africa and Nigeria were elected to the AU's Peace and Security Council in March 2004 and wanted to embolden the AU. Darfur was, therefore, a Peace and Security Council test case of its ability to play a central role in preventing and resolving conflict across the continent.

Apart from these triggers, also troop-contributing countries (Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, Gambia, and Kenya) seem to have played their interests in the intervention. Nigeria and South Africa, similarly to what happened in other interventions, were led by their hegemonic status that prevents them from shying away when a major conflict, heavily monitored by the international press, was ready to engulf Africa. As the foreign policies of Nigeria and South Africa are fully continental, to stay away from intervening in a vital conflict like Darfur was no option. Smaller countries had different agendas. Rwanda for instance, was led to intervene for reasons that were associated to its 1994 genocide and to prevent the Sudanese people from suffering an equal level of oppression and violence. It is illustrative that when Rwanda first deployed its troops in Darfur in 2004, the AU mandate did not specifically authorize AU troops to protect civilians, but Rwandan President Paul Kagame insisted that Rwandan troops would intervene if civilians were threatened.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Rwanda was strongly persuaded by the US to intervene. The US regarded Darfur as a major obstacle and compelled Rwanda, a regional ally, to intervene. Washington supplied the military equipment and the logistics necessary for the intervention (namely it airlifted the Rwandese army).

There are many important questions related to the question of what triggers the interventions. For instance, why has the African Union intervened with a peacekeeping mission in Burundi and Darfur/Sudan crisis but remains dislocated from the conflict in Uganda (active since 1987)? Other interventions like ECOWAS in Liberia and in Sierra Leone are believed to have camouflaged the economic and political self-interests of Nigeria. The increasing enthusiasm of the international community over African regional organizations has overlooked some of the unofficial (biased) causes for military interventions in conflicts. Once the biased causes for interventions are identified, shall regional organizations still be considered an asset in peace and security? Are regional organizations instrumentalized by regional players in the complex game of influence, ethnic interests and individual motivations? The articles in this special issue seek to identify causes and types of intervention beneath the official and rhetorical tone of political discourse.

#### WHOSE SECURITY?

Conventionally, security is closely associated with the security of the state. In this sense, security is tied to territorial integrity, national security and state-centric welfare provision objectives rather than the individual per se. In the early- to mid-1990s, however, a paradigmatic shift occurred wherein state security was problematized, and the individual became the locus of human security concerns. The focus upon human security in combination with state security is significant for understanding the change of the security discourse and the fundamental challenge to sovereignty during the 1990s. Implied in concepts such as "human security", "human development", "human emergency", and "humanitarian intervention" is the idea of a transnational responsibility for human security and welfare (the responsibility to protect, R2P). This discourse has after 9/11 been overshadowed by the discourse on global terrorism but the R2P concept has still wide support. This normative order has had a deep impact on regional organizations, not least in Africa.

Though subject to debate regarding its extent, most observers will agree that globalization in its various forms tends to erode the policy-making capacity of states, at least in the South, which in turn implies a need to problematise state/national security. In the case of many African states, globalization challenges governments to provide public goods, such as domestic security.<sup>24</sup> In an oft-discussed study, Berdal and Malone argue that the forces of globalization also generate an environment that enables elite groups in weak states to engage in self-interested economic dealings not only domestically but also internationally by means of "trade, investment, and migration ties, both legal and illegal, to neighbouring states and more distant, industrialized economies".<sup>25</sup> In effect, a blurring takes place between the international and domestic realms – something that is either largely ignored or artificially separated by traditional or realist discourse.<sup>26</sup>

The false dichotomy between international and domestic affairs has significant implications for human security (and human development). A conventional state-centric approach "legitimates states' policies with respect to citizens by placing the domestic domain beyond the parameters of inquiry ... [as] the exclusive referent object of security was the state; what happens to the state matters and what happens to the people within is of second-order importance".<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, sometimes the state is merely a fiction (at least in certain parts of the world, including parts of Africa), and as an actor the state may be fuelling conflict and threatening human security. At other times the state undoubtedly provides human security in a hostile environment. It is therefore important to recognize that non-state actors are also part of the security logic, both in a positive and a negative sense. In this partly new situation it is relevant to ask "who threatens who" and "who should be secured from what"? The state cannot be taken for granted, but it cannot be wished away either. The state is thus both part of the problem and the solution of security. One important task is to unpack the state and investigate when and for whom the state and regional security mechanisms is a threat or a shelter.

## ORGANIZATION

This special issue gathers some leading scholars on Africa's security. In the first article Ulf Engel and João Gomes Porto provide an update on the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). In particular they reflect on the principles underlying the architecture's design, which is discussed as a security regime in-the-making. Engel and Porto show the fundamental role played by the new AU Commission and identify some of the constrains that it is facing in the setting up of APSA.

Their article sets the stage for the thorough assessment carried out by Paul Williams on the AU's peace operations. Between 2003 and 2008 the AU deployed peace operations involving approximately 15,000 soldiers to four states: Burundi, Sudan, the Comoros and Somalia. Williams provides an overview of the AU's peace operations in these cases and addresses fundamental questions about how successful these operations have been; what challenges they raise for the Union's peacekeepers; and whether this tempo of operations is sustainable?

The four following articles zoom in those sub-regional organizations that have been particularly active in the security field. Cyril Obi provides a comparative analysis of two decades of ECOWAS-initiated peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire, as a basis for understanding Africa's most advanced regional peace and security mechanism. Obi analyzes the evolution of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Framework and identifies its merits, shortcomings and challenges.

Tim Murithi assesses the conflict system affecting the Horn of Africa, with a specific focus on the role of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Sudan and Somalia. The article shows that these two interventions simultaneously illustrate the strength and weakness of IGAD as a sub-regional actor. More specifically, the Sudan case demonstrates IGAD's appropriateness in managing the conflict between the North and South, given the marginalization of the AU and the UN. On the other hand the Somalia case illustrates the chronic limitations inherent in not only IGAD but also other regional organizations in Africa.

Angela Meyer deals with regional peace operations in Central Africa. After a short general overview of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa's (CEMAC) peace operation in the Central African Republic (CAR), her article concentrates on the reasons why its capacity to create self-sustaining security has been rather limited. The main emphasis is placed on the underlying interests of involved governments, which have largely compromised the mission's ability to serve the population's needs as well as broader human security. This gap between rhetoric and reality raises the question of whose security is actually protected. Meyer concludes by discussing major challenges for CEMAC's successor, the Economic Community of Central African States' (ECCAS) Mission de Consolidation de la paix en Centrafrique (MICOPAX).

Maxi Schoeman and Marie Mueller analyze the ability of SADC as a sub-regional organization to provide peace and security within and between its members, using the conflicts and interventions in Lesotho and the DRC as case studies. The authors pay particular attention to the discrepancy between "official" and "unofficial" reasons to intervene and to the issue of "whose security" is protected? Shoeman and Muller conclude that although the

SADC region cannot be described as a zone of war, there is nevertheless no genuine capacity for promoting the well-being of the people of the region and that SADC is inherently a "sovereignty-boosting" form of regional governance, rather than an ascending security community.

This special issue also incorporates a practitioner's perspective by João Gomes Cravinho, Portuguese Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and one of the people responsible for the design of the EU-African Union Strategic Partnership. Cravinho argues that African regional organizations have an opportunity to consolidate and develop their vision of peace and stability on the continent. The main problem, according to Cravinho, is that these regional organizations still lack the depth of resources and experience for them to act alone. As a result of the external dependence, the author also challenges the popular vision about "African solutions to African problems".

Finally, the guest editors make a comparative conclusion and reflect upon new avenues for research.

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>2</sup> Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen. "Armed Conflict, 1946-2008," *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (2009): 577-587.

<sup>3</sup> Rodrigo Tavares, "Regional Clustering of Peace and Security," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 21, no.2 (2009): 153-164; Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg "Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97," *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 5 (1998): 621-634.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Haas, *The Pacific Way: Regional Cooperation in the South Pacific* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 93.

<sup>5</sup> The distinction between the concepts of "agency" and "arrangement" concerns the degree of formality of the entity in question. A regional agency is a recognized organization with legal personality and an organizational structure (i.e. secretariat) located in a member country. A regional arrangement, on the other hand, is a grouping of states under a treaty for a specified common purpose without any organization to personify that arrangement. In this second case,

organizational functions are carried out by the member states themselves (see Rodrigo Tavares, *Regional Security: The Capacity of International Organizations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Some arguments in this section build on Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, "Regional Security in a Global Perspective", in *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture*.

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<sup>12</sup> Rodrigo Tavares, "Understanding of Regional Peace and Security: A Framework of Analysis," *Contemporary Politics* 14, no.2 (2008): 107-27.

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<sup>19</sup> Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, "The UN and Regional Organizations in Global Security: Competing or Complementary Logics?," *Global Governance* 12, No 3 (Fall) (2006): 227-232.

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