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Multinational rapid response mechanisms: Past promises and future prospects

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ABSTRACT

Military rapid response mechanisms are generally understood as troops that are on standby, ready to be deployed to a crisis within a short time frame. Yet, the overall track record of the existing multinational rapid response mechanisms within the European Union, the African Union, and North Atlantic Treaty Alliance remains disappointing, and the UN does not even have a rapidly deployable capacity anymore. Meanwhile, despite that calls for the further development of these mechanisms are still being voiced politically, scholarly literature remains fragmented. This is problematic as many of the obstacles faced by these organizations are similar. This forum uniquely compares experiences from the four aforementioned organizations. Drawing on these insights, this introductory article identifies some key factors that hamper or enable the development and deployment of multinational rapid response mechanisms.

KEYWORDS Rapid response; AU Standby Force; EU Battlegroups; NATO Response Force; UN SHIRBRIG

Delays cost lives. Guided by this widely accepted premise, organizations such as the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) have invested heavily in the development and operationalization of military rapid response mechanisms over the past two decades. Even at the United Nations (UN), the idea of creating a rapidly deployable standby force for peacekeeping was brought into the spotlights again by the Chinese pledge of an 8,000-strong standby force during the UN General Assembly in 2015. Moreover, maintaining international peace and security has become a matter of burden-sharing, increasing the relative importance of regional arrangements as complements to the UN. In September 2015, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon further highlighted this reality, issuing that “[i]n situations of major conflict and mass violations of human rights ... national, multinational and regional responses are often faster to deploy and more capable of combating well-equipped and determined belligerents” (S/2015/682).

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Military rapid response mechanisms are generally understood as troops that are on standby, ready to be deployed to a crisis within a short time frame. Yet, the overall track record of the existing multinational mechanisms within the EU, the AU, and NATO remains disappointing. While the EU Battlegroups have been operational for about a decade, they are still awkwardly awaiting their first deployment. Meanwhile, the African Standby Force has struggled for years to reach full operational capability, and although the AU has deployed missions to a range of countries, this has been realized as a function of member state political will rather than the African Standby Force itself. The revitalization of the NATO Response Force with a spearhead capacity has somewhat disguised the alliance's difficulties in finding sufficient troops. Since the dissolution of the Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) in 2009, the UN does not even have a rapidly deployable capacity anymore. These failures to deliver have led to a situation in which ad hoc responses, on a national basis or through coalitions of the willing, seem to prevail in cases of imminent threats to peace and security. The Multinational Joint Task Force confronting the Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region (2015-ongoing) and the French-led interventions in Mali (2013) and the Central African Republic (2014) are

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striking examples thereof.

Nonetheless, calls for the further development of rapid response mechanisms are still being voiced politically. The 2016 EU Global Strategy once again expressed a commitment to tackle the obstacles that have hindered EU Battlegroup deployment. NATO's deployment of multinational battalions at the eastern European borders in turn seems to enhance the alliance's readiness to respond quickly to any (Russian) threat. In addition, the African Standby Force was declared operational in January 2016 and continues to receive support from partnering organizations, including the EU and the UN. And in his September 2015 declaration, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon even welcomed "African Union efforts to fully operationalize the African Standby Force and the commitment by the European Union to engaging European Union Battlegroups, where appropriate, for crisis management" (S/2015/682). Meanwhile, he expressed support for the idea of creating a UN vanguard force. Does this mean that we are finally witnessing a breakthrough in the development of multinational rapid response mechanisms, or is this yet another chapter in their largely fictional existence?

Unfortunately, scholarly literature on rapid response mechanisms remains rather fragmented. Many of the obstacles faced by these organizations are largely similar, confronting them with the same difficulties in case of urgent crises. In that sense, the lack of efforts to bring together academics working on these various response mechanisms has clearly been a missed opportunity. In an attempt to contribute to cross learning, this forum gathers insights from the four aforementioned organizations: the AU, the EU, NATO, and the UN.

Darkwa (2017) discusses the ongoing development of the African Standby Force. She notes that although the recent deployment of troops to Gambia can be considered a success, this will still be contingent upon further financial support and doctrinal development of the African Standby Force, as well as aligning political interests at the sub-regional and AU Peace and Security Council level. Reykers (2017) subsequently offers a discussion of the disappointing history of the EU Battlegroups. He highlights how the Battlegroups' lack of deployment has been the result of the standby nations' constant calculation of the high financial and political costs and limited benefits of deployment. Ringsmose and Rynning (2017) review the NATO Response Force. They posit that while the NATO Response Force was for many years a qualified failure, the Alliance's rapid response mechanism is off to a fresh beginning. The renewed Russian threat and a recommitment of the allies to contributing forces has reinvigorated NATO, although the authors equally acknowledge the need to further upgrade the NATO Response Force. Finally, Koops and Novosseloff (2017) reflect upon the challenges, failures, and (limited) successes of creating a UN Standby Force. They devote particular attention to outlining the strengths and weaknesses of SHIRBRIG, in an attempt to draw lessons for the creation of a future UN rapid response or "vanguard" capability.

To foster comparison, the four articles have been structured around the same guiding questions regarding the rapid response capabilities of the respective organization: Where do they come from? What do they look like? What have they been hindered by? And where will they go from here? The first two questions sketch the origins of each the organization's rapid response mechanisms as well as their main features and conditions for deployment. The articles subsequently address the main obstacles that they face, demonstrated by some empirical or historical examples. Finally, the articles peek into the future, attempting to set the expectations right for each organization's rapid response mechanism.

Shared challenges, joint enablers?

Drawing on the insights of the contributions to this forum, we can discern some key factors that can hamper and enable the development and deployment of multinational rapid response mechanisms. Key challenging factors include a competition for limited military, economic and political resources, commitment aversion, and lengthy decision-making procedures. Key enabling factors are leadership, cooperation, and flexibility.

Each of these multinational rapid response efforts have suffered, and continue to suffer, from limited resources, both in terms of financial means and in terms of troop commitments. Koops and Novosseloff (2017) rightly point at the gap that exists in the UN between publicly committing troops and actually

turning these promises into deeds. Not only is maintaining high-level readiness an expensive endeavor, financial underpinnings which hardly contain sustainable burden-sharing provisions seriously affect commitment. That also means that costs-lie-where-they-fall principles, such as in the EU and NATO, are obstacles in an urgent need of revision. In addition, national defence cuts have led to reluctance among many states when it comes to committing their troops to multilateral mechanisms of which the utility is seriously questioned. Focusing on AU operations, Darkwa (2017) therefore highlights the need to arrive at more predictable funding. She recommends adopting a system of UN assessed contributions as an acknowledgment of the contribution of AU missions to international peace and security, balanced by the still unrealised commitment of increased self-funding by African member states.

Rapid responses obviously also require rapid decision-making. Yet, each of the addressed rapid response mechanisms has suffered (at least to some extent) from often lengthy procedures. Consensus or unanimity voting arrangements, such as in NATO or the EU, significantly hamper the ability to react quickly when confronted with an urgent crisis. Moreover, problems of authority which follow from ambiguous decision-making procedures are an inherent challenge to intergovernmental tools. Ringsmose and Rynning (2017) highlight this point by referring to proposals about granting SACEUR deployment authority or upgrading the North Atlantic Council's ability to anticipate crises. Rapid decision-making procedures are a necessary prerequisite for building a credible and reliable rapid response mechanism.

As illustrated in each of the contributions, the viability of multilateral rapid response mechanisms goes hand in hand with the availability of, and support from, "framework" or "lead nations." Their importance lies not only in their capacity to have the political ownership. With the necessary political will in place, they may be willing to also carry the main costs of deployments. In that sense, the presence of lead nations surely is a key enabling factor. However, practice has recurrently shown that where such lead nations are lacking, and particularly where the decision to stand up and deploy a force is decided by a majority or by consensus (as with the EU Battlegroups), the likelihood for successful deployment drops to near zero.

While the AU, EU, NATO, and the UN all suffer from serious deficiencies on nearly all the aforementioned factors, and while these mechanisms may not (often) be deployed, the contributors to this forum nonetheless agree that the standby arrangements should not necessarily be classified as absolute failures. They contribute to the modernization of national armed forces, the development of sub-regional, regional, and even global standards, as well as enhanced interoperability and military and political partnership development. This may actually be one of the key benefits of these mechanisms, although not aligned with the core objectives that they are most often assigned to.

For instance, the EU Battlegroups, although never deployed, and the NATO Response Force, have together made significant contributions to the rapid modernization and integration of European forces. With joint training and deployments they have become more inter-operable, and have developed an expeditionary mind-set.

What this forum furthermore shows is that regional arrangements are increasingly important and prominent building blocks in the global peace and security architecture. The AU, the EU, and NATO have all engaged in some form of cooperation and in sequenced deployments with the UN and often also with each other. As institutional arrangements strengthen cooperation channels that can be of use in times of crisis, the presence of regional rapid response mechanisms is a capacity that should hence not be left unused. Sequential deployments can go both ways, and transition is one area that is in desperate need for more work on organizational and member state levels.

Meanwhile, however, in a time of limited resources, priorities will be made. Cooperation is hence inherently confronted with a risk of competition. Reykers (2017) highlights in that regard the constant calculation of political and economic risks, as well as of political capital that can be gained or lost among domestic and international audiences when deciding whether to contribute troops. Darkwa (2017) similarly details the political “tug-of-war” over two different rapid deployment mechanisms on the African continent. The gains which states can get out of the various rapid response tools are therefore likely to become increasingly important. As mentioned, these gains surely do not solely take the form of providing security, they can also include gains in terms of offering political capital and training benefits. Similar standards are therefore advisable.

A key trait is also the contrast between the espoused goals of these rapid response mechanisms and the political reluctance and sparsity of actual deployments. More often than not, ad hoc arrangements are preferred and deployed. These have the advantage of drawing upon cooperation, training, and institutional arrangements developed through the years of cooperation in the framework of the rapid response mechanisms, but without creating precedents narrowing the manoeuvring space and tying down future political, military, and economic capital. This highlights the enduring need for flexible rapid response mechanisms that can accommodate the needs of a selected group of member states that have the necessary self-interest to contribute troops to risky missions, and that can muster the financial capital either directly or through partnerships with other countries with a strong interest in the outcome, but with little interest in deploying troops, such as the United States.

On a final note, and adding to the complexity, the nature of conflict and crises are changing. Some of the threat scenarios that initially motivated the

establishment of rapid response mechanisms are no longer relevant, while new ones have been added. Although the mechanisms have been key to reform and change among many of their participating member states, their objectives as well as modalities for deployment must now be adapted to new challenges, as well as to new financial and resource realities among contributing countries.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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