Peace and security in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

CONFERENCE REPORT
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The 13th War and Peace in the XXIst Century Seminar, held at the Palau de Pedralbes on the 17th January 2015 was organized by CIDOB under the auspices of the Barcelona City Council in collaboration with ESADEgeo Center for Global Economy and Politics and sponsored by the Obra Social “la Caixa”. The seminar assessed the global relevance of Africa and the current context in the continent addressing the main challenges to be faced both from security and economic perspectives.

Antoni Vives, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, opened the seminar highlighting the importance of devoting the seminar to Africa nowadays just after the recent terrorist attack occurred in Paris. Mr Vives made some comments about the attitudes of the world powers when avoiding criticism on the pain they have caused in other parts of the world.

Carles A. Gasóliba, Chairman of the board of CIDOB, made a general introduction to the seminar stressing the overall importance of Africa which is, as he pointed out, one of the fastest growing regions on the global scale. Mr Gasóliba manifested the interest of CIDOB in this new Africa which is a key part in the shaping of a new international context. China and India are already, as he explained, the leading investors and top trade partners in Africa.

Javier Solana, Honorary Chairman of CIDOB, Chairman of ESADEgeo Center for Global Economy and Politics and Former EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, stressed that holding the 13th edition of the War and Peace seminar was a highly remarkable achievement for an institution like CIDOB and a solid basis “to create an infrastructure of thinking about the problems of the world”. Mr Solana underlined the fact that Africa as a whole with a rate of 4-5% is growing above the average global economy of 3.2%.
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Pere Vilanova, Professor of Political Science and the Administration at the University of Barcelona and Associate Senior Researcher at CIDOB, as chair of the panel, launched the first set of questions for the speakers: What are the main security challenges in Africa both from short and long-term perspectives? Are they interlinked to global security? Which policies should be implemented to face these challenges? What kind of actors at national, regional and global levels should take a leading role? How can democracy, good governance and sustainability be promoted in the region? What is Africa’s role in the global governance agenda?

Richard Dowden, Director of the Royal African Society, started his intervention highlighting some basic, but crucial facts which tend to be forgotten by external observers. Africa has an enormous landmass and, as Mr Dowden mentioned, “you can fit China, the EU and the US and you would still have free space”. The huge diversity is another factor to take into consideration. More than 2,000 languages are spoken in a continent which is still affected by the arbitrary borders drawn by European colonial powers in the XIX century. Mr Dowden referred to the structural economic adjustment under the guidance of the IMF during the 90s which was conducted, according to him, in a particularly brutal way which explains the 26 armed conflicts that erupted in that decade. Things begin to change during the 2000s with the arrival of China’s massive investment and the spread of mobile phones throughout African societies. This decade witnessed the birth of a local middle class.

Mr Dowden referred as well to demographics as a crucial issue. The current population is approximately at 1 billion, but estimations indicate that it will reach 2 billion in 2050. Education system is therefore a key question. Another one, as he pointed out, is agriculture, which is static and not growing. The gap between the rich leading elite and the impoverished masses is widening as well. Having all this in mind, Mr Dowden called attention to the relatively peaceful situation in the continent, stressing the general patience of the African people. Islamist threat is a clear matter of concern, but Mr Dowden highlighted some particularities of the African eclecticism where is relatively common that people follow several faiths –including Islam and Christianity– simultaneously. He finished his intervention advising the EU to stay closely involved and follow events and developments in Africa carefully. The falling-away of Democracy and Human Rights, he alerted, will be disastrous in the long-term.

Gilles Yabi, Founder of The Citizen Think Tank for West Africa (WATHI) and former West Africa Director of International Crisis Group, centred his intervention on the political and security situation of West Africa and the Sahel. Mali was the first focus point of his presentation. In 2012 in a few weeks an armed rebellion exploded in the North of the country while a coup d’Etat took place in the capital city, Bamako. Until then Mali was considered, as he pointed out, an example of democracy and good governance in the region. According to Mr Yabi there are several key lessons to be learned from the failure of governance in Mali. The main one is that consolidation of States is something very different to democratization of these States. And the influence of regional and global factors must be considered as well. Therefore a key question to be addressed is: how to build up functioning States while taking into account their internal divisions?
Mr Yabi emphasized that the presence of AQIM (Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) in North Mali is the result of years of terrorism in Algeria and also a direct consequence of the crisis in Libya. The several deposits of weapons that went out of control in the post-Qaddafi Libya have played a crucial role in Mali, he said. Therefore the crisis in Mali is a combination of internal factors (identity issues), AQIM presence, crisis in Libya and the spread of transnational criminal networks, some of them with an impressive financial capacity that largely overcomes that of the States. And a key lesson to bear in mind is how dangerous it is to have fragile/weak States. Globalization, Mr Yabi said, brings a lot of opportunities for West Africa but also many risks and threats as well. Regarding international contributions to solve the crisis, Mr Yabi considered that the French operation is clearly the one that is tackling the terror threat in the Sahel. He also mentioned that the growing regional dependence on international security architecture is more a worrying factor than a security guarantee for West Africa.

Mr Yabi focused on the situation in Nigeria as well. According to him, Boko Haram is a reflection of the failed governance in Nigeria which includes the absence of public policies addressing marginalization and serious problems many people face in their daily life. The existence of completely neglected areas is another reason to understand the growth of this terrorist group. In the case of Burkina Faso, Mr Yabi stressed the relevance of the popular mobilization that triggered the withdrawal of the project of a constitutional reform. The role of the youth willing to change the political landscape was another factor highlighted by Mr Yabi. Long-term challenges persist and the question of which political model might be more suitable for the country remains open. Mr Yabi concluded his presentation by emphasizing that Africa has big potential and possibilities, but insisted the seriousness of the remaining challenges.
The second panel of the seminar was opened by Nicholas Westcott, Managing Director for Africa, European External Action Service (EEAS), who introduced three key points to initiate the discussion: inclusive growth, impact of the global downturn in Africa and the diversification of global growth with new emerging powers.

Mwangi Kimenyi, Director of the Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings Institution, highlighted the necessity to think in Africa as a very diverse continent, with several peculiarities. He remarked the strong differences between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa and considered that during the last decade Africa has performed very well despite the fact that many problems remain unsolved. Great opportunities can be seen in the continent nowadays since major democratic reforms were done, resulting in more predictable governments, more voice for people and more freedom of press (which some years ago was unthinkable). However the region faced critical conflicts in countries like South Sudan or Nigeria. Mr Kimenyi compared the current situation and the situation in the 90’s and affirmed that “today’s conflicts are less intense and more limited in time.”

Related to growth, Mr Kimenyi confirmed that commodity prices were a relevant instrument to boost the economic emergence, but he also underlined that quality of growth today is better. Investments were done in areas such as Banking, Telecom and Farming could be named as important growth driver. In this context, he stressed the need for further develop regional integration in Africa, which -in his view- is crucial to promote development.

Finally, Mr Kimenyi emphasized that colonial ties remain strong, but Africa is creating (and must create) new partnerships, specially with emerging countries. Today, Africa is more open than before and investments are welcome, but this also carry some troubles, for instance, illegal capital flows or the emergence of criminal groups controlling business and transports in some areas. Other challenges Mr Kimenyi described were the necessity of a more productive agricultural sector, the lack of infrastructure and the current low levels of transparency.

Kapil Kapoor, Director of Strategy and Operational Policy of the African Development Bank Group, continued the discussion speaking about the major challenges Africa is facing nowadays. In addition to the –already mentioned- lack of infrastructure, population growth must to be taken into account. Comparing Asian partners of Africa with those from OECD countries, the speaker said that with the latter ones democracy and governance are also debated, whereas with Asian countries discussions are focused only on economy and investments. In the same line, Mr Kapoor pointed out that in the short-term China -which is heavily investing in Africa- will be no longer competitive in several products, then production will derive in Africa, where millions of jobs will be created.

Mr Kapoor remarked that during the last 15 years the exponential growth in trade that Africa has shown, which attracted capital and FDI flows into the continent. Last year around the 70% of the foreign income of the continent was FDI, while ODA has been decreasing. Mr Kapoor introduced
interesting data which proved the rapid emergence of African middle class: 1.5 trillion dollars have been spent by the middle class in Africa last year, which in average is over the Indian or Russian middle class’ spending. This means increasing levels of consumption and a very interesting opportunity for investors. As a result of this, energy consumption and production will need to increase as well. Nevertheless, he also stated that youth population needs more and better jobs, since new generations are better educated than before. They represent a valuable and encouraging factor for developing good governance, since they are claiming for more responsible governments in the region.

Federico Bonaglia, Acting Deputy Director of the OECD Development Centre, gave the last second panel’s speech. Although huge opportunities can be found in Africa, he affirmed, some risks are still present in the region: security and development. He warned about two specific
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topics including population and climate change. Firstly he affirmed that a demographic transition is taking place and “population in Africa will account for the 25% of the world by 2030”. However the growing population is not necessarily a problem itself, the question is how to provide them with jobs (specially to the youth population). This will be, in the view of Mr Bonaglia, a major challenge in the years to come, since at the same time it is a factor of instability.

Even when African CO₂ emissions represent only 3% of the global amount, Climate Change is a serious threat, remarked the speaker. The availability of water resources is limited and the risk of desertification is present in several areas, causing internal migrations for instance. Additionally, security issues directly affect the “state formation”. Federico Bonaglia named arms trafficking, criminal networks and drug trafficking as some of the main security threats Africa has to cope with.

Moreover, the Mr Bonaglia referred to the impact of the global downturn in the region. He informed that in spite of the fact that Africa has well managed to “survive” the financial crisis, lower prices of commodities -and in particular oil- can entail troubles in countries heavily dependent on oil revenues like Angola or Gabon. Having lower income will carry to modify exchange rates in order to adjust budgets. Also diversification is a challenge for those oil export countries. Finally, Mr Bonaglia focused on the energy issue, saying that generating more and better energy capacities and to attract investors in that field will be crucial in the mid-term.

THE DAWNING OF A NEW AFRICA ON THE 21st CENTURY

Once the debate was open, Nicholas Westcott, explained that the key for development in Africa is to foster domestic investments, because -in his view- small entrepreneurs face lots of obstacles such as high taxes and bureaucracy. He also talked about the lack of efficient African armies, stating that “a democracy that cannot defend itself cannot be a democracy”.

Professor Pere Vilanova launched an interesting open question: “Is there a US foreign policy towards Africa?”. In first place, Richard Dowden answered negatively, considering that the US has a pragmatic view of Africa. Additionally, he underlined that a great part of the illicit capital flows to Africa, involves Western enterprises. Nevertheless Mr Dowden believes in African people -not in their governments- because they have suffered and survived to extreme situations.

Mwangi Kimenyi also agreed on the lack of a US foreign policy on Africa, stressing that they only aim to protect their interests, informing -as an evidence of this- that the highest recipient of US aid is (by far) Egypt. He sustained that the financial crisis and the current oil prices drop, did not heavily impacted on Africa. Mr Kimenyi, referring to climate change, said that Western rhetoric on Africa about not exploiting natural resources to better preserve environment is contradictory with Western’s behavior.
Entering into debate, Javier Solana emphasized that the continent has changed, the Africa seen from West is not the same Africa seen from inside, and nowadays is not only linked to Western countries. At the same time he stressed the African necessity to solve land issues, lack of water resources and the risk of desertification caused by climate change. Mr Solana pointed out that -surprisingly- South Africa was not mentioned once during the whole session. Moreover, regional structures are becoming more relevant, then regional integration must be fostered added the speaker.

Kapil Kapoor retook the discussion on investment highlighting that Africans are investing more in Africa than before and indicating that dependence on ODA (as percentage % of GDP) is decreasing as FDI are increasing. In the last decade both tax gathering and collective purchasing power have risen, he stated. As a conclusion, investments risks are more related to political issues than to economic performance. In the words of Gilles Yabi, Africa have lots of opportunities but at the same time will have also major challenges such as reducing violence, drugs and human trafficking, generating better climate for investments and providing jobs to youth.

The floor was opened to questions from the audience and several topics were introduced. Firstly an assessment of the progress seen in Africa in the last years -in particular regarding the EU as a partner- was demanded, in addition to an evaluation of the EU force in Central African Republic. Mr Westcott affirmed that EU partnership is successful as well as the performance of the EU mission in CAR.

Another question was related to South-South relations, between Africa and Latin America. Both Mr Kapoor and Mr Bonaglia agreed with the necessity of strengthening those links and to foster experience exchanges among actors from both regions. Furthermore, Mr Kimanyi mentioned -with the exception of Brazil and former Portuguese colonies- linguistic barriers and a lack of mutual knowledge as intrinsic hurdles between both regions. Besides, comments on elections, EU values in Africa and misperceptions from Western countries were also done from the audience.

Jordi Bacaria, Director of CIDOB, presented the conclusions of the seminar. He proposed as a significant fact the issue that Africa became in the world radar: is a key part of this global interconnection between the East and the West, the North and the South. A second conclusion is the paradox between the feeling of serious concern about security and, on the other hand, optimism in the sound and world-integrated economy. The third conclusion is that Africa is in between exponential demographic and economic growth and the need to provide jobs to young people, which configures a relevant challenge in the mid-run.

Development and security need better and stronger local governance, regional and global policies, remarked Mr Bacaria. Nowadays regional cooperation is limited, but initiatives as ECOWAS could be a starting point and an evidence that regional integration could be feasible. These West African countries have joined forces to face regional challenges, however, a lot of troubles remain unsolved. At global level more collaboration is extremely necessary to tackle main security threats.
New dynamics are changing the future scenarios in Africa. Demography, migration, climate change and natural resources are some of the most important factors to take into account in the next years. Africa is progressively integrated in global value chains, and this definitely will generate growth, but the question is how to produce and sustain an inclusive growth. Finally, professor Bacaria, emphasized that there are serious reasons to be optimistic, not only based on growth rates, but also on recent improvements in democracy and freedom of expression.