African Union security culture in practice: African problems and African solutions

AARIE GLAS

The African Union (AU) and its responses to regional crises are increasingly at the forefront of many of the most pressing international issues. Africa is the site of many of world's most frequent and deadly armed conflicts and crises. The list of such conflicts is long: the Somali and Eritrean migrants feeding the crisis in Europe; the so-called 'Third World War' in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the failed and weak states of Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia; and growing concerns over terrorism rising in ungoverned spaces. Increasingly the AU and its wider African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) are at the forefront of response to these crises. Since its foundation in 2001, the AU has established an ambitious interest in preventive diplomacy and conflict management, and has a significant effect on security outcomes across the African continent.

Only fairly recently, however, has International Relations (IR) scholarship focused attention on the cultural and organizational norms that shape AU responses to regional conflict.[1] Central to this growing literature are works exploring the security culture of the AU, which have tended to do so through reference to the codified norms and principles of the AU itself.[2] Foremost among others, Williams highlights norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, anti-imperialism as reflected in the phrase 'African solutions to African problems', *uti possidetis*, peaceful settlement of disputes, rejection of unconstitutional political change, and the AU's right to intervention under particular circumstances.[3]

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[1] Paul D. Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference: the origins and development of the African Union's security culture', *African Affairs* 106: 423, 2007, p. 255. See also Tim Murithi, 'The African Union's transition from non-intervention to non-indifference: an ad hoc approach to the Responsibility to Protect?', *International Politics and Society*, 1, 2009, pp. 90–108; Malte Brosig, 'Introduction: the African security regime complex—exploring converging actors and policies', *African Security* 6: 3–4, 2013, pp. 171–90; Matthias Dembinski and Berenike Schott, 'Regional security arrangements as a filter for norm diffusion: the African Union, the European Union and the Responsibility to Protect', *Cambridge Review of International Studies* 27: 2, 2013, pp. 362–80; Sophie Harman and William Brown, 'In from the margins? The changing place of Africa in International Relations', *International Affairs* 89: 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 69–87; Jean-Baptiste Jeangene Vilmer, 'The African Union and the International Criminal Court: counteracting the crisis', *International Affairs* 92: 5, Sept. 2016, pp. 1319–42.

[2] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference'; Walter Lotze, 'Building the legitimacy of the African Union: an evolving continent and evolving organization', in Dominik Zaum, ed., *Legitimating international organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ulf Engel and João Gomes Porto, 'Africa's new Peace and Security Architecture: an introduction', in Ulf Engel and João Gomes Porto, eds, *Africa's new Peace and Security Architecture: promoting norms, institutionalising solutions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[3] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference', pp. 261–2; see also Alex Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture', *International Affairs* 89: 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 89–109; Theresa Reinhold, 'Africa's

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These norms are seen as constitutive of a uniquely 'African way of doing things'.[4]

Less analytical attention has been given to the apparent incongruities between these norms and practice. A central ambiguity in terms of principle and practice lies in the AU's aspiration towards anti-imperialism, as expressed through the principle of 'African solutions to African problems', and the dependence of the AU on extraregional actors.[5] This principle is central to the function and ambition of the AU and yet, as Møller observes, 'it is not clear whether to understand it as a moral admonition, a political rallying cry or an empirical statement'.[6] This article documents how this principle is understood and practised by officials within the AU. I contend that to understand this central principle, as it is known and practised within the AU, we should conceptualize the AU as a community of practice, a bounded and social order wherein certain norms are internalized and practised in particular ways by officials.[7] 'African solutions to African problems' is one such norm, and its understanding and practice are central to the AU 'way of doing things'.

To understand how AU practitioners confront and respond to regional security challenges through the norm of 'African solutions to African problems', this article builds on a growing literature attentive to the cultural and normative foundations of AU regional security governance, and extends this line of enquiry through the lens of practice theory.[8] It has three central empirical aims: to demonstrate that the AU is a community of practice; to show this community in operation; and to offer insight into the security behaviour of this community by reference to how the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' is *practised* at the AU. In so doing, this article also contributes to the wider debate on practices in IR by underscoring the relationship between codified norms and their expression in practice within particular communities of diplomatic officials.

To examine this central element of the AU security culture in practice, I draw on 21 interviews with AU officials and European and North American diplomatic officials working alongside the AU in Addis Ababa.[9] By contrasting what

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emerging regional security culture and the intervention in Libya', in Aidan Hehir and Robert Murray, eds, *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect and the future of humanitarian intervention* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[4] Colin Legum, 'The Organisation of African Unity: success or failure?', *International Affairs* 51: 2, 1975, p. 214, quoted in Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference', p. 265.

[5] See Williams ('From non-intervention to non-indifference', pp. 269–71) for a similar, but limited, exploration of this contradiction.

[6] Bjørn Møller, *The African Union as security actor: African solutions to African problems? Regional and global axes of conflict*, working paper no. 57, Crisis States Research Centre (London School of Economics and Political Science 2009), p. 1.

[7] Emmanuel Adler, 'The spread of security communities: communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's post-Cold War transformation', *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 2, 2008, pp. 195–230.

[8] See Vincent Pouliot, *International security in practice: the politics of NATO–Russia diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, 'The play of international practice', *International Studies Review* 59: 3, 2015, pp. 449–60.

[9] Interviews were conducted by the author in September 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Interviewees comprise six practitioners within the AU and 15 officials from non-AU (European and North American) states working in support of the AU. While this is not an ideal vantage point from which to view AU practices, as ethnography within the AU would be preferred, it both affords sufficient insight into the daily operation and underlying assumptions of AU practice and allows the distinguishing of one community of practice from another operating alongside it. All interviews were conducted in English. Specific details, including dates and formal titles, have been removed to ensure anonymity. A female pronoun is used for all interviewees. For a similar

is assumed to be normal, natural and efficacious for one community (i.e. officials of AU member states and the AU Commission) with another (i.e. European and North American officials working alongside the AU), the particularities of the AU's security culture in practice become apparent.[10] In the empirical discussion that follows I underscore the particularities of the AU security culture by reference to how those within the AU community of practice understand and practise regional norms, and how external actors confront and understand the particularities of common sense and shared behaviours within the AU community.

This article is structured in two parts. In the first, I outline and operationalize the concepts of 'practice' and 'community of practice', and demonstrate that practitioners at the AU are one such community. In the second, I offer a detailed exploration of this community of practice's understanding and practice of 'African solutions to African problems'. I do this in four steps. First, I argue that 'African solutions to African problems' is a norm central to the AU's joint enterprise. Second and third, I explore the AU community's commonsense understandings of the norm and its limitations, and the resources available to AU practitioners in its pursuit. In the fourth, I explore the apparent contradiction and congruence between principle and practice to argue that the particularities of this norm are best understood as a practice of the AU community. I conclude with a note on the theoretical contribution of this investigation and a summary of the substantive arguments.

The African Union community of practice

Communities and practice

A community of practice is a bounded group of individuals who share joint enterprise, like-mindedness, and common repertoires or tools of action.[11] Practices themselves are socially meaningful, iterated and competently performed actions—behaviours endowed with meaning that *work* in the eyes of their enactors.[12] In this way, practice is at the same time both doing and knowing.[13] The practice of multilateral treaty-making, for example, carries with it deeply held knowledge about diplomats' identities and the sovereignty of states that endows the putting of pen to paper with meaning beyond the action.[14] Meaning, and the recognition of its competent expression in action, are necessarily subjective. The bounds of those subjectivities are the bounds of particular—if amorphous and

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methodology at work in another regional community setting, see Aarie Glas, 'Habits of peace: long-term regional cooperation in southeast Asia', *European Journal of International Relations* 23: 4, pp. 833–56. For discussion of methodology in this regard, see Pouliot, *International security in practice*, ch. 3, and Ted Hopf, 'Review: *International security in practice: the politics of NATO–Russia diplomacy*', *Perspectives on Politics* 9: 3, 2011, pp. 772–3.

[10] Glas, 'Habits of peace'.

[11] Adler, 'The spread of security communities'; Etienne Wenger, *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Christian Bueger, 'Communities of security practice at work? The emerging African maritime security regime', *African Security* 6: 3–4, 2013, pp. 297–316.

[12] Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices: introduction and framework', in Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds, *International practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 6.

[13] Bueger and Gadinger, 'The play of international practice', p. 453.

[14] Aarie Glas, Clifton van der Linden, Matthew J. Hoffmann and Robert A. Denemark, 'Understanding multilateral treaty-making as constitutive practice', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 3: 3, 2018, pp. 339–57.

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often overlapping—communities. Within such groups, individuals share inter-subjectively held background knowledge: what individuals think from, rather than about.[15] It is this commonsensical quality of practice that makes possible some behaviours and precludes others, and thereby structures and shapes relations within and beyond communities of practice.

As Adler and Pouliot summarize, practices 'develop, diffuse, and become institutionalized' through socialization and learning within bounded communities.[16] While not exclusive to institutionalized contexts, practices are often centred on particular organizational settings.[17] Within those settings, particular repertoires of action are shared—both material means, such as documents, databases and other institutional resources, and ideational means, such as common representations of self and other, and shared concepts to make sense of the world.[18] In this way, 'communities of practice are intersubjective social structures that constitute the normative and epistemic ground for action, but they are also agents, made up of real people who—working via network channels, across national borders, across organizational divides, and in the halls of government—affect political, economic, and social events'.[19]

A community of practice is identifiable by its intersubjectivities—by shared knowledge, identity and discourse.[20] One means of observing a community of practice is by identifying boundaries of shared like-mindedness and common repertoires of action. Contrasting what is unproblematically assumed given and natural by one group of practitioners (e.g. AU officials) with what is similarly assumed by a group of practitioners who engage with this community as external others (e.g. European and North American officials working alongside the AU) brings into relief the contours of a community of practice.

Recognizing communities of practice is analytically useful in order to observe and understand the everyday conduct of politics within and beyond organizations. This, itself, is important because, as I explore below, the mundane practice of politics within communities affects wider patterns of rule-making and, in this case, security policy and practice among regional states.[21] Collective understandings of what constitutes normal, natural and efficacious behaviour, and the practices that are made possible by this background knowledge, have impacts

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[15] Vincent Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality: a theory of practice of security communities', *International Organization* 62: 2, 2008, p. 260; Ted Hopf, 'The logic of habit in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 16: 4, 2010, p. 541. See also Adler, 'The spread of security communities'; Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices'.

[16] Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 17. See also Janice Gross Stein, 'Background knowledge in the foreground: conversations about competent practice in "sacred space"', in Adler and Pouliot, eds, *International practices*, pp. 87–107.

[17] Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments', *International Studies Quarterly* 45: 4, 2001, pp. 487–515; James N. Rosenau, 'Before cooperation: hegemons, regimes, and habit-driven actors in world politics', *International Organization* 40: 4, 1986, p. 863; Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground: constructivism in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 3: 3, 1997, p. 345; Hopf, 'The logic of habit', p. 547.

[18] Bueger, 'Communities of security practice at work', pp. 301–302.

[19] Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 17; see also Adler, 'The spread of security communities', p. 199.

[20] Adler, 'The spread of security communities', p. 200.

[21] Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 23.

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on patterns of relations within and beyond communities of practice. They may lead to enduring patterns of cooperation, or enable and perpetuate sub-optimal approaches to conflict management.[22]

I contend that officials within AU member states and the AU itself comprise one such community of practice, an intersubjective grouping of individuals wherein there exists a particular normative and epistemic foundation of action. I defend this claim below, and suggest that recognizing an AU community of practice centres analytical focus on the everyday conduct of politics therein, facilitating insight into how and why the AU practises what appears to be a contradiction between principle and behaviour. In short, conceptualizing the AU as a community of practice allows us to gain insight into the practice of the AU security culture.

The AU as a community of practice

The AU is at the heart of a growing and overlapping complex of institutions, organizations and communities, within and beyond the continent, that together constitute an emerging security complex.[23] Within this locus of regional security relations is a discrete community of practice.[24] Therein, practitioners share joint enterprise in the AU's mandate to provide peace and security on the continent through the varied institutional mechanisms of the APSA.[25] The APSA offers the institutional tools of a common repertoire of action to recognize, respond to and prevent regional conflict, centrally through the Peace and Security Council and the supporting Peace and Security Department (PSD) within the AU Commission.

As I will show in greater detail below, the particularities of this common repertoire of action are not limited to institutional mechanisms, but encompass shared understandings of the AU's function. Central among these is the particular and common understanding of how to practise the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' within the daily operations of the AU. Moreover, this community is undergirded by the like-mindedness of AU practitioners, who share common background understandings of what constitutes normal, natural and efficacious behaviour.

A core element of this like-mindedness stems from a common experience of European colonialism and a wider distrust of the international community.[26] This factor is well documented and predates the emergence of the AU itself.[27] As Williams observes, 'how African states and organizations think about and practise security is intimately related to how they understand their self-image(s) and what

[22] Glas, 'Habits of peace'.

[23] Brosig, 'Introduction'.

[24] Paul D. Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', *African Affairs* 7: 3, 2014, pp. 147–62.

[25] Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture'; Lotze, 'Building the legitimacy of the African Union', pp. 117–18.

[26] Benedikt Franke, 'Africa's evolving security architecture and the concept of multilayered security communities', *Cooperation and Conflict* 43: 3, 2008, pp. 318–19.

[27] Paul D. Williams, 'Keeping the peace in Africa: why "African" solutions are not enough', *Ethics and International Affairs* 22: 3, 2008, pp. 309–29; Franke, 'Africa's evolving security architecture'; Møller, *The African Union as security actor*.

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it means to be "African".'[28] In this regard, AU officials are united in a common rejection of extraregional interference as 'othering' behaviour that reifies their regional commonality. As one AU Commission official summarized: 'There is a sense of African-ness, of belonging *here*. It ties us together, sharing a common destiny.'[29] This shared sense of belonging marks the bounds of a community of practice. Moreover, as I document in detail below, it is this dispositional tendency to abhor extraregional interference in continental peace and security affairs that informs the central principle of the 'African solutions to African problems' and its expression in practice within this community.

The AU community of practice is composed of AU member state officials, representing their respective states, and AU officials acting in an organizational role within the Commission and the institutions of the APSA. The particularities of the AU community of practice are informed by the particularities of these agents themselves, and their iterated interactions within the organizational bounds of the AU. Two related qualities are salient in this regard: the nature and capabilities of AU member states; and the relative autonomy of the AU officials within the organization.

A central common feature of many AU member states is that they are domestically weak and often illiberal.[30] Many AU member governments operate in environments of extreme political contestation in respect of their function and legitimacy.[31] This reality is clear to many practitioners working alongside AU member states in their day-to-day operations. As one German official suggested with frustration: 'Many of the member states really should not be states. We [at the AU] have member states that don't make sense as countries.'[32] This has given rise to a particularly autonomous sphere of interaction at the AU, in which weak states delegate substantive decision-making authority to their officials.[33] The relative autonomy and insularity of the AU suggest a context where particular practices are likely to emerge.[34] Indeed, this appears to be the case, so that AU practices are perceived as distinct from those of other communities. Evidence of this was given in discussions with EU officials working alongside the AU.

One European head of mission to the AU suggested that AU member state officials and AU Commission officials themselves tended to be 'spontaneous' in a way that is 'not normal for diplomacy' and 'simply would not happen in Europe,

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[28] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference', p. 257.

[29] Interview, AU Commission official, Sept. 2015 (emphasis in original).

[30] Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Roseberg, 'Why Africa's weak states persist: the empirical and the juridical in statehood', *World Politics* 35: 1, 1982, pp. 1–24; Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: sovereignty, international relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Christopher Clapham, 'Degrees of statehood', *Review of International Studies* 24: 2, 1998, pp. 143–57; Rick Fawn, '"Regions" and their study: where from, what for and where to?', *Review of International Studies* 35: 1, 2009, pp. 5–34.

[31] Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, *Regions and powers: the structure of international security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Scarlett Conelissen, Fantu Cheru and Timothy M. Shaw, eds, *Africa and international relations in the 21st century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture'.

[32] Interview, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) official, Sept. 2015.

[33] Heidi Hardt, 'From states to secretariats: delegation in the African Union Peace and Security Council', *African Security* 9: 3, 2016, pp. 161–87.

[34] Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments'.

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of course'.[35] Another EU official working at the AU echoed this sentiment: 'The EU is based very much on laws. We just don't have it here [at the AU]. Not at all. Period.' The result, in the view of a number of European officials, was an organization so divorced from the norms of diplomacy that it was, as two separate interviewees phrased it, a 'nightmare' to work with.[36] As an example of this departure from 'normal' diplomatic practice, one European official familiar with working with the AU's Continental Early Warning System, part of the APSA, suggested:

It works. We support coordination there. There are quarterly meetings. This brings them [officials from the regional economic communities (RECs) and from the AU] together, and there is a sharing of data. At the working level, it is something that works smoothly. But this is not so at the [domestic] political level. It is odd. It is the same people, from the same states. But they are in different forums at different levels … They have a pretty free hand here … And it is a problem later; a challenge for us to coordinate then.[37]

These challenges are evidenced in the problems associated with domestic implementation of AU policy. As a European permanent representative to the AU put it: 'There are reams of agreements signed by the 54 [AU member states] still unimplemented and largely unknown.'[38] A North American official similarly observed that the AU 'produces a huge amount of documents, but these are rarely implemented. This is a façade.'[39]

These and other similar comments suggest that the AU is usefully conceptualized as a community of practice. Within the AU, practitioners share joint enterprise, shared notions of common sense and self-image, and common repertoires of action, both institutionally and ideationally. This is not to make any assertion about the practices of the community in a *normative* sense, however. As Adler suggests: 'Communities of practice are not necessarily about good or bad practices, but rather about what people happen to practise, for better or worse.'[40] It is necessary to reveal what and why AU officials happen to practise in order to offer a practitioner-focused account of how 'African solutions to African problems' are understood and enacted by AU officials, and to explain the form and function of the organization. In so doing, a 'community of practice' framework makes it possible to investigate the particularities of the AU security culture.[41]

A 'security culture comprises a variety of interlocking beliefs that manifest themselves as behavioural norms'.[42] Recognition of these beliefs and norms 'help[s] us to understand why certain regional organizations act the way they do'.[43] However, most explorations of the AU and wider regional African security culture derive

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[35] Interview, European state head of mission, Sept. 2015.
[36] Interview, European official, Sept. 2015; interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[37] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[38] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[39] Interview, North American official, Sept. 2015.
[40] Adler, 'The spread of security communities', p. 200.
[41] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference'.
[42] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference', p. 258. See also Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Thinking about strategic culture', *International Security* 19: 4, 1995, pp. 32–64; Peter J. Katzenstein, *The culture of national security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[43] Dembinski and Schott, 'Regional security arrangements as a filter for norm diffusion', p. 365.

behavioural qualities of relations from the *discursive* assertion of norms presented in official documents and proclamations. For example, Williams argues that 'evidence of the AU's security culture can be found in the documents and statements of the AU and its officials, its predecessor, as well as foreign policy pronouncements of its member states'.[44] Such an investigation offers important insights into consciously referenced norms of appropriate conduct and the principles and norms institutionalized within the AU, and other regional organizations such as the RECs. However, attention to codified or institutionalized norms alone offers little insight into what is done in practice, or into the taken-for-granted 'common sense' from which much action stems.[45] On the contrary, an exploration of internalized norms and how they are expressed in practice within a particular community allows us to gain insight into how the norms of the AU security culture are actually known and enacted by members of the community.

To understand AU process and policy, attention must be paid to how its officials confront, understand and practise the norms of the organization and the wider complex of which it is a central part. Chief among them is that of 'African solutions to African problems', to which I now turn. In the following section, I underscore the common enterprise of the AU community of practice in this regard, the 'common sense' held among its practitioners, and the material tools available to them.

The AU community of practice, in practice

Common enterprise: African solutions

At the core of the AU's *raison d'être* and its common enterprise, as with its forerunner the Organization of African Unity (OAU), is an intention to 'try Africa first' when responding to armed conflict on the continent and to devise solutions to regional problems without relying on foreign support.[46] This common enterprise rests on shared assumptions of efficacy and appropriateness. Central to this like-mindedness are both an inherent exclusivity—continental problems are necessarily best attended to by those nearest them—and an inherent hostility towards the extraregional and imperial powers from which emergent post-colonial states had violently freed themselves. This shared belief, widely conceptualized as 'African solutions to African problems', is implicit within the 1963 OAU Charter, in which a key aim is 'to safeguard and consolidate the hard-won independence as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our states, and to fight against

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[44] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference', p. 257. See also Jürgen Haacke and Paul D. Williams, 'Regional arrangements, securitization, and transnational security challenges: the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations compared', *Security Studies* 17: 4, 2008, pp. 775–809; Benedikt Franke and Stefan Gänzle, 'How "African" is the African Peace and Security Architecture? Conceptual and practical constraints of regional security cooperation in Africa', *African Security* 5: 2, 2012, pp. 88–104. One excellent exception to this trend is Hardt, who draws on interviews to document informal delegation practices within the AU Peace and Security Council: see Hardt, 'From states to secretariats'.

[45] Pouliot, *International security in practice*. On the distinction between textualist, culturalist and practice-oriented theory, see Bueger and Gadinger, 'The play of international practice', pp. 450–2.

[46] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference' and 'Keeping the peace in Africa'.

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neo-colonialism in all its forms' through the use of 'common institutions'. It is also foundational within the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000), where it informs the interest in the 'promotion of self reliance' (article 4), and it is under-scored in subsequent agreements, most explicitly within the 2001 Solemn Declaration of the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), which proclaimed the 'emphasis on seeking African solutions to African problems'. This declaration was itself reaffirmed through the institu-tionalization of the AU's emerging security architecture (e.g. the 2002 Peace and Security Protocol). It was further upheld, and its underlying interest in 'African solutions to African problems' implicit, in the Solemn Declaration on a Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP) of 2004, which explicitly stated that the AU bore 'primary responsibility for promoting peace, security and stability in Africa'.[47] In terms of codified norms, then, the AU has actively sought to address regional crises itself, repudiating engagement with extraregional actors.[48]

At the same time, however, the AU exhibits a history of reliance on actors from outside the continent.[49] Trends in AU finances demonstrate this clearly. As Lotze has established, the AU relies on external partners for 60 per cent of its financial contributions.[50] In 2012, for example, only 3 per cent of AU Commis-sion programmes were financed by member states, the remaining 97 per cent being funded from external sources. The disparity is also stark at the Peace and Security Department, where external support has recently accounted for an average of 90 per cent of annual contributions to the membership's 10 per cent.[51] In practical terms, this has meant that the AU itself is woefully understaffed. In 2012, for example, the AU Commission was staffed by 669 people, while the European Commission, on which it is modelled, had 33,000 employees.[52]

Many observers, then, among both scholars and state officials working with the AU, have identified a contradiction between principle and practice. Williams summarizes the state of this disjuncture when he notes that the norm of 'African solutions to African problems', initially 'a way to demonstrate Africa's aspira-tion of conducting largely autonomous conflict management activities free from outside meddling', evolved over time, and that 'as the extent of the challenges became clear, its interpretation softened somewhat to welcome external assistance while still emphasizing the desire of African institutions to lead'.[53] Nonetheless, it remains a central element of the AU's ambition, and at the heart of the common enterprise of its practitioners.

[47] Solemn Declaration on a Common African Defence and Security Policy, 2004, Article IV Paragraphs 29–31; see also the 2005 African Union Non-Aggression and Common Defence Pact.

[48] While this impulse in large part drove the formation of the OAU in 1963, the OAU did not attempt direct solutions until the 1981 'Neutral Force' in Chad and limited peacekeeping operations thereafter. See Møller, *The African Union as security actor*, p. 7.

[49] See Williams, 'Keeping the peace in Africa', pp. 316–18.

[50] Lotze, 'Building the legitimacy of the African Union', pp. 120–24.

[51] Lotze, 'Building the legitimacy of the African Union, p. 121. Within a number of interviews in 2015, both AU and European officials suggested this dependence had grown to as much as 97 per cent in terms of peace and security operations, broadly speaking.

[52] Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture', p. 96; Lotze, 'Building the legitimacy of the African Union', p. 123.

[53] Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', p. 149.

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AU common sense

Interviews with AU practitioners suggest that belief in the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' is an inherent and commonly held conviction that shapes the daily operation of the organization. Within this community, it is a given that AU practitioners will turn first to the AU and its instruments, and rely on African states and mechanisms rather than extraregional ones. An interview with a high-ranking PSD official brought this common sentiment to the fore:

I believe in African solutions to African problems. This is over here. This is our neighbourhood. You can study the region. You can study culture. You can study what you like. But it is not the same. Only we can find real solutions. Only we can give the solutions we need. [The 2011 NATO intervention in] Libya shows this! We had a roadmap. They ignored us. And now look: they are crying like babies with the migrants.[54]

This is commonsensical knowledge within this community of practice. Practitioners *know* that regional problems require regional solutions. As the PSD official continued: 'This approach is about ownership. It is about us knowing where the troubles lie so *we* can do something about them'.[55] This thinking unites AU practitioners as 'we', and excludes extraregional others. It is clear to many donor state officials from North America and Europe as well.

One North American official expressed a widely held view among AU partner states that the AU is 'very insular' in its daily operations. As a result, she said, she consistently faces issues of 'non-access' as the representative of a donor state, despite the technical expertise and financial support she and others provide.[56] This was echoed by a European permanent representative, who suggested that 'non-access' was 'a huge problem' that hindered her ability to support and engage with the AU, despite the organization's need for this support.[57] The norm of 'African solutions to African problems' in practice means a limitation on engagement with extraregional states as a result of shared underlying ideas of African exclusivity and anti-imperialism at the heart of the AU.

The inference that the issue of access and engagement derives from assumptions about an imperial legacy was underscored by a number of conversations with European officials who suggested that it was 'easier' to gain access if they looked 'African', even if they clearly came from a non-member state, as one European of African ethnicity discovered through practice.[58] Another European official noted with a laugh: 'It's funny. It helps to have a Belgian who has Burundi roots.'[59] As a third suggested, 'they don't want any suggestion or hint of imperialism here, so if you're a white American access is hard'.[60] Similarly, as an EU official observed, the EU is 'seen as a colonizer—we're colonizers, still! Still the rhetoric pops up …

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[54] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015.
[55] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015 (emphasis added).
[56] Interview, North American official, Sept. 2015.
[57] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[58] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[59] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[60] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.

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We see it. It is even there in AU–EU dealings outside the public … we all know the sense is there. We see this history and this reality. It is just something we have to work around, and will have to for a hundred years to come.'[61] Another EU official said:

It is always there. And sometimes—I have been really surprised, but I know we all have experienced it—it is above the surface. On more than one occasion, explicitly it has been suggested that I … not suggested that I am spying. But that I have motivations beyond what we state. It's ridiculous, of course, for any one of us; completely unfounded. But it's there. It has happened to everyone, more than once.[62]

This was a common experience among both North American and European officials, and the underlying reasoning was also commonly shared. As another EU official suggested, this self–other construct was 'a uniting narrative. It comes from a shared experience.' And she asked, rhetorically: 'What else do they share?'[63]

Dispositionally, then, there is a like-mindedness in rejecting engagement with extraregional partner states founded on commonly held knowledge of the need for 'African solutions to African problems'. However, practices are not shaped by commonly held background knowledge alone. They are also shaped by material realities. And in reality, African problems are vast. The peace and security challenges that face the continent transcend regional boundaries, regional interests and regional capabilities to respond to them.[64] The practice of 'African solutions to African problems' is shaped, therefore, by challenges and opportunities, or issues of demand and supply, beyond the underlying like-mindedness of AU practitioners.

Repertoires and action, and their constraints

Centrally, the AU community of practice is tasked with monitoring and responding to a myriad potential and actual conflicts and crises. An AU official presented her daily reality and the challenge of responding to regional peace and security issues in striking, but mundane, terms, as she pointed to a US Defense Department map of the continent: 'Look, I have six elections right now [in 2015]. Twenty next year. We've had fifteen this past year … Look at the UN and at peacekeeping. They have, I think, sixteen active missions. Eight are on this continent. This tells you about us [AU member states].'[65] She continued:

You don't have to be a genius to do this [perceive potential crises]: if there are elections, you know your states are vulnerable. If there is a youth bulge, or if there is slow or no [economic] growth, or if you are in a bad neighbourhood, or if you have a history of violence [your state is at risk]. You don't have to be a genius to figure out where the risks are, and there are lots here.[66]

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[61] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[62] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[63] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[64] See Williams, 'Keeping the peace in Africa'.
[65] Interview, AU PSOD official, Sept. 2015.
[66] Interview, AU PSOD official, Sept. 2015.

In the view of many AU officials, the sheer prevalence of regional crises is a constant problem that tests the capacity of existing resources and institutions. One local AU expert working in support of the PSD suggested that the core challenge faced by the AU is the 'urgency of the situations. We are constantly facing crises and conflicts—real regional conflicts. Intra- and inter-state conflicts. Asymmetric threats. It is complex.'[67] Officials external to the AU recognize this reality as well. One EU official suggested that AU member states are 'firefighters constantly reaching for an extinguisher'.[68] A second European official used the same language, suggesting succinctly that 'the AU is always firefighting'.[69] This experience with continual crises unites the AU community of practice in its enterprise, but also presents the underlying limitations of its aspirational norm to African solutions to African problems.

However, it is not only the frequency of regional problems that tests the feasibility of regional solutions. As one European permanent representative to the AU suggested, 'African problems are too big' for regional solutions alone. The AU, she continued, offers 'the idea of the solution, but not entirely its operation'.[70] As a result, the notion of 'African solutions to African problems' was, in her words, 'quite ambitious to say the least. Actually, somewhere between ambitious and hubristic, in reality.' The disjunction between this underlying common sense and principle of the AU community of practice and the means available to realize it was echoed by many extraregional officials. For example, one EU official suggested: 'Everyone [at the AU] talks about this [principle]. But no one knows what it is. Are there "African" problems? There certainly are not "African" solutions, not alone anyway.'[71]

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is a case in point. One member of the EU delegation to the AU summarized the AU mission thus:

AMISOM was not really an AU mission. There are very few member states who contribute troops and the AU has played very little in terms of a logistical role or capacity. It is reliant on the UN and the EU. Their boots are on the ground, which is better than ours, but that is the limit of the African solution … Let's be honest. They don't put their money where their mouth is.[72]

This wide-reaching critique is not lost on AU practitioners. A PSD official made this clear in her discussion of the AMISOM mission as one of many exhibiting the same reality:

We do the dying. It is always, 'you Africans go and die, and we will come and stabilize'. That is the UN. To just take over. This is the UN: to make a mission, without a mission. That is the lesson from Somalia. We are good at shooting, but still not at prevention … this is our weakness. Our weakness is prevention. That and relapse, which is the same. Preventing it [crises] from reoccurring.[73]

[67] Interview, AU Commission official, Sept. 2015.
[68] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[69] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[70] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[71] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[72] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[73] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015.

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The same sentiment came from an AU state representative at the Commission, who suggested that AMISOM showed the limitations of the AU's role. In short, 'They pay us to die.'[74] In somewhat less stark terms, a high-ranking Peace Support Operations Division (PSOD) official with years of experience at the AU suggested that it was demonstrative of

an emerging model. It is shared responsibility. I hate [the term] 'division of labour' but that is what it is. It is based on our comparative advantage—another one [term] I hate. But it is based on what each of us can bring on board. We [at the AU] are more likely to delegate out of our capability gap, but we are more likely to respond quickly and to put our boots on the ground when others wouldn't. But beyond this, what is emerging is a bigger change. The UN was the only major player in this game [crisis response] and in terms of peace processes. But this is changing, there is a challenge to this space. We are growing our interest here.[75]

Thus, while AU officials tend to think from the norm of 'African solutions to African problems', in practice the ability to respond to these risks and enact this principle is challenged by both the prevalence of crises and their severity. At the same time, adhering to the norm in practice is also shaped by the dearth of support from AU member states, and the supply of extraregional support available in its stead.

Among members of the AU community of practice, it is a lack of political will, and not a lack of material means, on the part of their member states that is commonly perceived as the core limitation on their ability to effect change.[76] Perceiving an inability to rely on member states, the AU community of practice turns rather automatically to others. This hints at a commonly held repertoire of action for this community of practice. One PSD official candidly stated:

There is a problem with funding [from member states]. This is a problem of putting your money where your mouth is. We need to ask the EU. We need to go to the UN. We need to go to Europe to [provide the costs to] fly in our mediators … [However] it is much deeper. I'll give you an anecdote. In Addis [Ababa] we have summits for the heads of state. But who comes? Some presidents, some prime ministers. But it is not well attended—not as well as we would like. But when they [heads of state] are called to Paris, then you will find them all. This is a deeper problem we have. It is a lack of faith in ourselves, and a lack of belief in us. So, then there is a lack of belief in our institutions.[77]

The perceived willingness of African heads of state to attend the 2013 Elysée Summit for Peace and Security in Africa, in Paris, stood in contrast to her perception of member states' commitment to AU summits, and member state support of the AU more generally.

This perception of a lack of support from member state leaders is shared within the community of practice at the AU. In particular, it was echoed by an AU Commission official who suggested that the obstacles in the way of funding from member states are 'not just an issue of capacity. I think it is the fear too. The fear

[74] Interview, AU member state representative, Sept. 2015.
[75] Interview, AU PSOD official, Sept. 2015.
[76] See also Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', pp. 152–3.
[77] Interview, AU Commission official, Sept. 2015.

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of giving away authority … That is the problem. Members fear losing power. We know this. They fear losing sovereignty. It is not Europe, this is here … This is a challenge we live with, that we have day to day, that follows us.'[78]

A PSOD official made much the same point. From her perspective, 'Leadership is the problem here. There is a leadership gap. We don't have it. It is not just money. It is vision. It is interests. It's states conferring dominance to the AU. It's the distance of the AU from the states; how far we are here from the capitals.'[79] This suggests not only that the bounds of the AU community of practice do not extend into the halls of government of member states, but also that practitioners within the AU community share a common perception of that divide, and of their own distance from member state governments and inability to rely on those governments for the means to realize their mandate.

This reality was also apparent to many extraregional officials working alongside the AU. One member of the EU delegation underscored the issue by suggesting I consider the regional response to Boko Haram as illustrative of her experiences at the AU: 'Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria all have their hands out requesting money and support [from beyond the AU], saying "please, help us". It is not really a lack of capacity [on the part of AU member states]. It is an issue of priorities.' From her perspective, as she continued: 'It is not just capacity. It is thinking. They [AU officials] see and think differently [from EU officials], always asking for more [from donors]. But it is not just this. It is not just capability. Capability is one part [of the problem]. But their thinking is the other.'[80]

While the reluctance of member states to contribute sufficiently hinders the ability of the AU community of practice to rely on those member states, the AU community of practice finds a ready supply of extraregional support. This reality is perceptible within the AU itself, where the recently completed Julius Nyerere Peace and Security Building, inaugurated in 2016, is German-funded and the AU headquarters itself, the AU Conference Centre and Office Complex inaugurated in 2012, is Chinese-funded. That officials work 'between Berlin and Beijing' within the grounds of the AU is a common refrain.

A European permanent representative to the AU described this reality, suggesting that 'the AU finds it hard to keep up with the clamour [of donors]. They are the wooed partner. They've got all the European partners, and Canada, Australia, New Zealand, [Prime Minister] Abe in Japan. They're all there, and the AU simply struggles to cope. And it's made worse by this "African" [solutions to African problems] rhetoric and disposition.'[81] Another European official suggested something akin to a race to provide funding: 'We all [donor partners] want visibility and input. We want to be here. There is competition then.'[82] The result of this clamour of support is limited scope to press for a larger role for outside donors in AU decision-making. As one North American official suggested:

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[78] Interview, AU Commission official, Sept. 2015.
[79] Interview, AU PSOD official, Sept. 2015.
[80] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[81] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[82] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.

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Our only leverage as an external partner, really, is by threatening to or actually pulling away our donations. But that is not going to happen. And they [AU officials] know that. So, there is not much we can do … [This is for] two reasons: First, we agree with the ideas of the AU, with the spirit of it. It's important. And second, we need the AU. We need it to solve problems here. It is impossible to imagine addressing the continent's problems without the AU.[83]

The result is a tension. As another European official summarized: 'They expect our support, that's clear. But they don't want us in the room.'[84] A European permanent representative to the AU suggested in more vivid terms that it reflects an 'angry dependency, like a teenager who wants the car but doesn't want to have to ask for the keys'.[85] Among donor states, then, there is a common sentiment that they, as one European official summarized, 'are seen as an ATM'.[86] This was also apparent from discussions with AU officials, who recognized that the continual reliance on extraregional support invited unwanted intervention in 'African solutions' themselves. As one PSD official noted, this extraregional support is 'not altruism. They have interests. Do they want to see the Somalia diaspora [grow in Europe]? And they can't even talk about piracy! Even mentioning piracy would drive up insurance premiums on shipping. It is not altruism.'[87] And yet, given the lack of support from member states, she was, in her words 'a beggar in chief' when it came to soliciting support from non-AU members.[88]

The AU community of practice is united by a common enterprise, common-sense understandings of the desire for 'African solutions to African problems', and by a pragmatic and practical dependence on extraregional actors, given the limitations of the resources available to it. As the discussion above has demonstrated, for external officials and scholars alike this reality suggests a disjuncture between the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' and AU practice.[89]

Contradiction or congruence?

One European official suggested bluntly that there is 'a complete dichotomy' between the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' and AU practice.[90] In the words of another, there is an 'obvious contradiction' between the two.[91] A third suggested, more starkly, that 'it is a kind of colonization itself, ironically. It makes little sense. Japan is in Djibouti; Italy too. Even the Chinese. They are all opening bases. This is really "our" solution over security issues. And donors have their own interests, their own conditions that they [AU member states] may not like.'[92] The same apparent contradiction has been summarized more forcefully still

[83] Interview, North American official, Sept. 2015.
[84] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.
[85] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[86] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[87] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015.
[88] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015.
[89] See e.g. Møller, *The African Union as security actor*.
[90] Interview, EU official, Sept. 2015.
[91] Interview, European permanent representative to the AU, Sept. 2015.
[92] Interview, GIZ official, Sept. 2015.

by a number of scholarly observers, such as Franke and Gänzle who suggest that the AU is 'characterized by the schism between the constant evocation of African ownership and the equally constant failure to implement it effectively'.[93] However, as this analysis has begun to demonstrate, there is a practical sense that drives the AU community of practice's understanding of this norm.

This particular practical understanding of 'African solutions to African problems', and the divide between normative aspiration and daily practice, was brought into stark relief during an interview with one PSD official in her office. Midway through our discussion her secretary called her away. When she returned she excused herself to make the first of two phone calls to the Danish Embassy during our interview. The first was brief, requesting an undisclosed amount of support for an undisclosed reason. It was clear the party at the other end was anticipating this call, and after a few minutes of discussion the call ended with the responding party apparently having requested a few minutes' time to consider the request. After a ten-minute break, and a return to our interview, the official again excused herself and made a brief call back to the Danish Embassy while I waited. The conversation on the phone appeared largely routine and predetermined, merely confirming what she knew was coming. After a brief expression of gratitude, she hung up the phone and remarked:

Listen, why did I just call the Danes? Why did I not call the Nigerians? I needed $100,000. That is pennies for Nigeria. It is for the Danes too. But it is a quick call. I can move with them. But I can't call the Nigerians. If I called the Nigerians, it would be a big 'blah, blah, blah' and hullabaloo. They can buy Lamborghinis, but when we ask for support it's a hullabaloo. It is a question of values. So, I call the Danes.[94]

This vignette of the AU in daily practice is illustrative of how the AU community of practice functions and how the requirement for 'African solutions to African problems' is confronted and understood by its members. First, the pragmatic dependence on foreign support is just that: a pragmatic and rather automatic one based on the limitations and opportunities that practitioners see themselves facing. AU officials do not see AU member states as reliable and committed partners.[95] Second, for members of this community of practice, the recourse to extraregional partners does not undermine the like-minded belief in the norm of 'African solutions to African problems'. That remains the common sense of the community, undergirded by the anti-imperialist and exclusionary ideas that permeate the organization. Rather, for the members of the AU community of practice, unwavering belief in African solutions coexists with a pragmatic dependence on extraregional partners to respond to African problems. While the PSD official does not automatically reach for the phone to call on AU member states for support, she still has faith in the legitimacy and appropriateness of the AU as *the* means to resolve problems. For extraregional observers, this behaviour is at odds with the

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[93] Franke and Gänzle, 'How "African" is the African Peace and Security Architecture?', p. 90.
[94] Interview, AU PSD official, Sept. 2015.
[95] See also Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', p. 158.

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norm of 'African solutions to African problems', while for those within the AU community of practice itself, behaviour and the norm are congruent.

In short, while there remains a belief in and an assumption of the importance of 'African solutions to African problems' among AU officials, they pragmatically reconcile this impulse with what is known to be productive and efficient behaviour—what works.

Conclusions

The AU has been and will continue to be the locus of regional cooperation on continental peace and security issues. Central to its function is the norm of 'African solutions to African problems'. As scholars and diplomats from beyond the region have argued, the norm articulates an ambition—to devise and execute regional solutions without support from or reliance on extraregional actors—that has not been realized. For many, there is an inherent contradiction between norm and practice. However, this article has focused attention on the practitioners within this community to argue that coexistence of the norm of 'African solutions to African problems' and the AU's continued dependence on extraregional actors is better understood as a practical reality of the AU, a practice wherein AU officials uphold both the norm and their pragmatic dependence as mutually congruent.

In exploring this reality, the article has advanced three central arguments. First, and substantively, I have argued that the AU is usefully conceptualized as a community of practice. Its practitioners in Addis Ababa share a joint enterprise, notions of common sense and self, and repertoires of action, both institutionally and ideationally. Conceptualizing practitioners in this way draws attention at once to both the knowing and the enactment of norms within the AU. Second, I have argued that what appear to extraregional actors to be contradictions in the AU's normative order are, for members of the community of practice, reconciled in and through practice on a daily basis. In so doing, I have explored the particularities of the AU security culture in practice. Recalling Neumann's concise summation—'practice speaks: this is how things are done around here'[96]—the AU way of 'doing things'[97] and 'how things are done' within the AU are indeed particular to its community of practice. Exploring them requires attention to how norms are understood and enacted in practice.

Third, and at the level of theory-building beyond the particular case, I have argued that both the understanding and the performance of norms are the products of the particular contours of communities of practice. It is in and through an examination of a community of practice that we can observe the often distinct collective understanding and unproblematic behaviour that follow from abstract, codified norms. In this case, 'African solutions to African problems' is indeed a regional norm. AU officials know it is appropriate. However, in practice it is expressed through a pragmatic resignation towards dependence on foreign others.

[96] Iver B. Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn', *Millennium* 31: 3, 2002, p. 637.
[97] Legum, 'The Organisation of African Unity'.

In this way norms and practices are often interrelated in ways underappreciated in the existing practice literature. Abstract and codified norms, such as 'African solutions to African problems', are imbued with meaning and orientated towards action in particular and pragmatic ways by different communities of practice.

In making this argument, this article has advanced a partial exploration of aspects of the contemporary AU security culture,[98] without addressing the norms or practices of wider continental security dynamics.[99] The investigation conducted here suggests the utility of exploring other aspects of the AU security culture, and other and overlapping communities of practice that are likely to exist within the continental security complex. Giving attention to communities of practice may illuminate the relationship between often abstract and codified regional and global norms and their particular practice within the African security complex.

[98] Williams, 'From non-intervention to non-indifference'.
[99] Brosig, 'Introduction'.

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