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# **INSIGHTS**

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## **THE 15th CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF STATE OF THE COMMUNITY OF CENTRAL AFRICAN STATES, 17 MARCH 2023**

Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, hosted the 15th session of the Conference of Heads of State of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) on 17 March 2023. The importance of the proceedings was underlined by the highest-level representation from all the member States. It should be recalled that, as in other intergovernmental organisations, the Conference of Heads of State is the supreme decision-making body in this community. It determines policy and guides action. The previous session of this body was held on 24 March 2019 in N'Djamena. On that occasion, the Conference discussed the CEMAC Economic and Financial Reform Programme (PREF-CEMAC), the process of rationalising the Regional Economic Communities, the revitalisation of Multilateral Surveillance, and the liquidation of the "Air-CEMAC" Community Company, the finalisation of institutional reforms within the Community, the implementation of the free movement of

persons (especially with the adoption of the CEMAC Common Policy on Emigration, Immigration and Border Protection) and the Community's autonomous financing mechanism, among other issues.

The 15th session of this community body is being held four years after the previous one. This break with institutional tradition was dictated by the onset of a persisting Covid-19 pandemic, which led to delays, cancellations and even changes in the format of international meetings. However, the disastrous economic impact of this health crisis prompted drastic economic measures and imposed far-reaching structural reforms on the States of the sub-region, thus imposing itself on the agenda of the 15th Conference.

**Peace and security as an underlying context**

The context surrounding this conference is marked by economic difficulties. These include the sharp fall in crude oil world market prices (the region's main export) and its impact on budget balances. The same is true of the restrictive measures imposed first by Covid-19 and then by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which have proven necessary to contain inflation and preserve the food and energy security of Community countries. Although the integration concept is heavily influenced by economics, it is eminently political. In the register of regional integration and cooperation policies, the notion of peace is essential insofar as the quest for well-being and economic growth is linked to peace and security at national and sub-regional level<sup>1</sup>.

The 15th session of the CEMAC Conference of Heads of State was held against a worrying security backdrop. On a cross-border scale, the terrorist threat of Boko Haram continues in the Lake Chad region, with sporadic attacks. Maritime piracy also persists in the Gulf of Guinea. At the level of the CEMAC member states, socio-political crises are attracting attention. This is the case in Cameroon, where, despite a lull, the North-West and South-West regions remain plagued by corporatist and secessionist demands. In the Central African Republic, the situation also remains precarious and uncertain. As a sign of the concern over peace progress in this country, the question of the return of the Inter-State Customs Commission and School to their headquarters in

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<sup>1</sup> Opening speech by H.E. Paul Biya during the 15th ordinary session of the Conference of CEMAC Heads of State, 17 March 2023.

Bangui was once again raised<sup>2</sup>, and the Conference envisaged this in the very short term.

The situation in Chad could not be overlooked, with the incursion of rebel groups occasionally featuring in the national and regional news. On 20 April 2021, an offensive by the Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad resulted in the death of President Idriss Déby Itno. This tragedy raised fears about the stability of the sub-region, particularly in the fight against the terrorist group Boko Haram<sup>3</sup>.

### **A cautious approach to the challenges**

Between the N'Djaména and Yaoundé conferences and under the proactive leadership of President Paul Biya, current Chairman of CEMAC, the institutional construction of the Community continued with determination. However, the worrying economic situation over the past decade has made it necessary to hold further ad hoc meetings. Yet back on 23 December 2016, the Extraordinary Summit of CEMAC Heads of State in Yaoundé adopted a series of resolutions to reduce budget and external deficits, as well as to boost economic activity in the CEMAC zone. This had the effect of mitigating the sharp fall in the zone's foreign exchange reserves (from more than 9,000 billion CFA francs in 2013 to

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<sup>2</sup> The Commission's headquarters were moved to Malabo in 2013 as a result of a deteriorating security situation. A return to Bangui has been envisaged since 2015, but delays in rehabilitating the Commission's buildings in Bangui blocked the move.

<sup>3</sup> C. Roussy, " Chad : would President Idriss Déby's demise further destabilise the region " (Interview), 22 April 2021, <https://www.iris-france.org/156662-tchad-le-deces-du-president-idriss-deby-risque-t-il-de-destabiliser-un-peu-plus-la-region/>, accessed 27 April 2023 at 7:03pm.

less than 3,000 billion CFA francs in 2016), thereby allaying fears of devaluation of the CFA franc. Under Cameroon's effective presidency, two other extraordinary meetings of the Community's political body were held. These include the Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State on the economic and monetary situation in the CEMAC zone held in Yaoundé on 22 November 2019 and the Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State on the macroeconomic situation in CEMAC and recovery measures which took place in Yaoundé on 18 August 2021. The first meeting examined the economic, financial and monetary situation in the CEMAC zone and analysed the outlook for the sub-region's economies. The second held via videoconference due to Covid-19, assessed the macroeconomic situation of the Community in times of pandemic and analysed appropriate recovery measures to strengthen the resilience of Member States economies, while accelerating their structural transformation.

Many observers and analysts had listed a variety of issues based on current events in the sub-region on the Conference agenda. Among these, the Heads of State were expected to take a position on the future of the CFA franc in the CEMAC zone, in line with the decision taken on 21 December 2019 on the end of this currency in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). The Conference's position was also expected on the use of cryptocurrencies as a means of payment, following the Central African Republic's decision on 22 April 2022 to give legal tender status to Bitcoin and later to

*Sango Coin*<sup>4</sup>. Other issues, ongoing since the last conference in 2019, continue to draw attention, especially the implementation of PREF-CEMAC and the merger of CEMAC and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). Added to this are the ineffectiveness of the autonomous mechanism for financing CEMAC through the Community Integration Tax (CIT) and the hopes pinned on the implementation of eleven priority integration projects over the period from 2021 to 2025<sup>5</sup>. On the economic front, the measures taken to deal with the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine and the internal crises in the Member States were eagerly awaited. The principle of the free movement of people agreed in 2017, but regularly undermined by delays in the introduction of the CEMAC passport and dramatic expulsions of Community nationals, such as in Equatorial Guinea in October 2022, a few months before the Conference, could have been included in the discussions. Without ignoring them, the CEMAC Heads of State often opted for caution in their decision-making, if the final communiqué of the Conference is anything to go by<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Sango is the digital currency (cryptocurrency) of the Central African Republic, adopted on 03 July 2022. On 22 April 2022, the CAR became the 2nd country in the world, after El Salvador, to adopt Bitcoin as its official currency.

<sup>5</sup> "CEMAC: Member countries take stock of financing and implementation of integration projects", <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20230221-CEMAC-les-pays-font-le-point-du-financement-et-de-le-x%C3%A9cution-des-projets-int%C3%A9grateurs>, accessed on 27 April 2023 at 17:23; "Table ronde pour le financement des projets intégrateurs de la CEMAC (Paris, 16-17 November 2020). Final Communiqué".

<sup>6</sup> CEMAC, "15th Ordinary Session of the Conference of Heads of State of CEMAC (Yaoundé, 17 March 2023). Final Communiqué".

One of the most eagerly awaited decisions concerned the renewal of staff at the head of EU institutions. The principle of rotating the heads of all CEMAC institutions and specialised bodies by alphabetical order was introduced in 2010, abrogating the Fort-Lamy consensus<sup>7</sup>. Baltasar Engonga Edjo'o (Equatorial Guinea) took over from Daniel Ona Ondo (Gabon) as President of the CEMAC Commission. As Vice-President, Charles Assamba Ondogo (Cameroon) took over from Fatima Haram Acyl (Chad). For their part, Francial Giscard Bodin Libengue-Dobele Kpoka (Central African Republic), Fulgence Likassi-Bokamba (Congo), Nicolas Beyeme Nguema (Gabon) and Ngabo Seli Mbogo (Chad) were appointed Commissioners of the CEMAC Commission. Based on this turnover, changes have been made in the other Community institutions<sup>8</sup>. These include the appointment of Chad's Doumapi Taingam to the Directorate General of the Inter-State Customs School (EIED) and Gabon's Esaie Ovono Eyi Mezui to the Permanent Secretariat of the Central African Police Chiefs Committee (CCPAC).

<sup>7</sup> Agreement adopted in 1973 which laid down the rules for the appointment of posts within the sub-region: Governor of BEAC to Gabon and Vice-Governor to Congo or Chad; BEAC headquarters in Yaoundé; Community Executive Secretariat headquarters in Bangui; Executive Secretary to Cameroon; BDEAC headquarters in Brazzaville; Court of Justice headquarters in N'Djamena; Central African Stock Exchange headquarters in Libreville; Central African Banking Commission (COBAC) headquarters in Douala; Parliament headquarters in Malabo. See P. E. J. Batchom, "La rupture du consensus de Fort-Lamy et le changement du rapport de force dans l'espace CEMAC", *Études internationales*, Vol. 43, n° 2, 2012, pp. 163-183.

<sup>8</sup> See CEMAC, "15th Ordinary Session of the Conference of Heads of State of CEMAC (Yaoundé, 17 March 2023). Communiqué final", pp. 6-8.

It should be remembered that this session of the Conference of CEMAC Heads of State also served as a handover between the outgoing Chairman of the Conference, President Paul Biya (Cameroon), and the incoming Chairman, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra (Central African Republic).

### **Preserving regional cooperation**

The next session of the Conference of Heads of State is due to be held in the Central African Republic. Once again, there will be many issues at stake. These include assessing the progress made under the CEMAC Economic and Financial Reform Programme since the adoption of the revised PREF-CEMAC document for the period 2021-2025. Streamlining the Regional Economic Communities will also remain on the agenda of this body, as the merger of CEMAC and ECCAS is far from complete. Numerous political, financial and security obstacles still need to be overcome<sup>9</sup> if this irreversible process is to be completed and integrated into the dynamics of the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Pending this meeting, the Member States will continue to meet the challenges of regional solidarity. A clear example of this is the recent dispute between Cameroon and Chad. Yet the excellent relations between the two countries had been demonstrated in Yaoundé during the meeting between Cameroonian President Paul Biya and Chad's transitional President Mahamat

<sup>9</sup> A. S. Ben Barbonsou, "Processus de fusion CEMAC-CEEAC : bilan à mi-parcours, enjeux et défis de la réforme pour une meilleure intégration sous-régionale en Afrique centrale", *Thinking Africa*, Research Note No. 105, September 2022.

Idriss Déby Itno on 16 March 2023, prior to the opening of the last CEMAC conference. The unconcerted drawing up of contracts for Chadian oil<sup>10</sup> subsequently led to Chad recalling its ambassador to Cameroon for consultations. The risks of this diplomatic crisis are obvious for both countries, but also for the sub-region. Cooperation between Chad and Cameroon has been boosted since 2000 by the construction of the pipeline between Doba and Kribi. This infrastructure generates substantial foreign currency for both neighbours, which could be jeopardised by a deep crisis between them. But beyond this, dissension between Chad and Cameroon could affect the success of the Mixed Multinational Force in the fight against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad area and, more broadly, security initiatives in the CEMAC. It is clear that this crisis can only be resolved through dialogue and a trade agreement. Indeed, "gentle commerce ", in the words of Montesquieu, strengthens understanding between countries and reduces the risk of them going to war. The philosopher considered that "the natural effect of trade is to bring about peace". This is the essence of regional integration.

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<sup>10</sup>A. Antem, " An analysis of the diplomatic crisis between Cameroon and Chad: What are the implications for the Central African sub-region? ", On Policy Magazine, 6 May 2023,<https://onpolicy.org/an-analysis-of-the-diplomatic-crisis-between-cameroon-and-chad-what-are-the-implications-for-the-central-african-sub-region/>, assessed on 11 May 2023 at 10h45.