PAN AFRICAN AGENDA

Is Africa's premier continental organization, the African Union, fit for purpose?

Executive Summary

The African Union (AU) and its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) were conceived at the end of the Cold War, designed and built for a unipolar, liberal constructivist international order. However, the world is experiencing a dangerous interregnum between the dying post-World War II order and the new global order yet to emerge.[1] Global interregnums reveal an inherent tension between commitments to multilateral cooperation on the one hand, and the security dilemmas and national interest imperatives of states on the other. Such periods of intensified security dilemmas create mutually assured distrust and precipitate a "race to the bottom"[2] that undermines international law while generating instability and volatility in international cooperation. It is during such periods of uncertainty and transitional disorder that multilateral frameworks face their greatest tests, precisely when they are most critically needed.[3]

In Africa, conflict-driven fatalities, displacement and economic destruction have reached staggering levels – and are surging. States are at the centre of the conflicts, deaths, displacement and destruction.

Key findings

The key findings of this research report essentially reveal the stark failure of the AU and its APSA to prevent and respond effectively to tragic conflicts and their consequences. Although the Ethiopian war on Tigray has been the deadliest conflict in the world since the Rwandan genocide, and the war in Sudan has caused the highest level of displacement globally, they have drawn little attention and even less meaningful action from the AU, despite the war on Tigray taking place in Ethiopia – the host of the AU and the seat of other key Pan-African institutions.

What is more, the findings raise fundamental questions about the AU's fitness for purpose, leading to the conclusion that it is inadequate when it comes to preventing wars, atrocities and displacement in the face of the global structural shifts the world is undergoing.

This PAAI Analytic Paper (PAP) presents data on fatalities, displacement and the economic impact of violence (mainly conflicts), arguing that the AU and its APSA have failed in their primary foundational mandates, namely the prevention or halting of atrocity crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

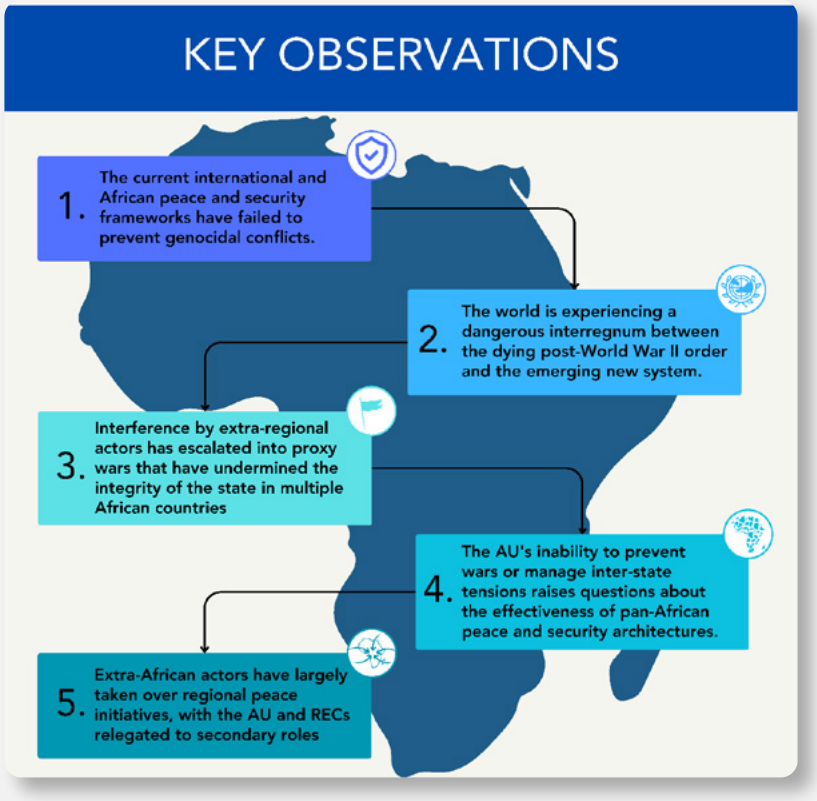
The data-driven graphs illustrate how state-based, interstate, intrastate, and one-sided conflicts in Africa have increased significantly, particularly in the past decade, accompanied by a sharp increase in conflict-related fatalities, displacement, and economic destruction across the continent.

1 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'race to the bottom' : Africa on the global chessboard and the call for renewed Pan-African agency." (UNU-CRIS). https://cris.unu.edu/beyond-%E2%80%98race-bottom%E2%80%99-africa-global-chessboard-and-call-renewed-pan-african-agency
For recent writing see; Muriithi, Tim. 2025. «African Union High-Level Review of Governance, Peace and Security Policy Frameworks.» Accord.https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/african-union-high-level-review-of-governance-peace-and-security-policy-frameworks/
Earlier writing on the similar analysis for IGAD, see Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2019. «Evolving Peace Trends and Regional Integration: Opportunities for Revitalizing Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).» Tana Papers 2019, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University. https://tanaforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Tana-Papers-2019.pdf

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

Figure 1: Key Observations



The global crisis poses both risks and opportunities for Africa. This moment presents an opportunity for strategic autonomy. Africa can redefine its global engagement by investing in domestic legitimacy and local agency. By centring political processes around African constituencies, the global interregnum offers the continent an opportunity to transition from dependency to self-reliance – a long-standing continental aspiration. There are several reasons why, in its current form, the AU requires transformation to enable this transition.

Prescription

The mandate of the AU could be summarized as: prevention, intervention, integration and representation of Africa in the international arena. These core mandates are captured in the AU's Vision Statement[4] and Agenda 2063,[5] which envisions "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and acting as a dynamic force in the international arena and under the Constitutive Act of the AU".[6]

This PAAI Analytical Paper's main focus is on the preventive, interventionist and, to a limited extent, representation mandates. On the first two – i.e., preventive and interventionist mandates – PAAI argues that the AU is not fit for purpose and requires an urgent overhaul, including revising its level of ambition. Third, for the AU to be an impactful representative of Africa worldwide, it is essential for its member states to align on common existing and emerging African positions and faithfully uphold them in relations with external actors.

4 African Union. (2025). *African Union Vision*. Retrieved October 2025, from https://au.int/en/about/vision
5 African Union. 2015. "Agenda 2063, The Africa We Want. https://au.int/Agenda2063/popular_version
6 African Union. 2000. "Constitutive Act of the African Union." Constitutive Act of the African Union. Accessed October 2025. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf.

Four bold proposals

Addressing critical shortcomings in African peace and security frameworks during a precarious transition in the global order requires bold and rapid adjustments. Employing an "opportunity lens",[7] this paper advances four bold proposals for transforming ongoing challenges into opportunities.

Transforming the AU

The AU must revisit its baseline assumptions and reconsider how comprehensive, realistically, its mandate can be in order to be effective. This requires reassessing the original mandates of the APSA, formulated in the very different context of the post-Cold War unipolar era.

A recalibration may mean scaling down ambitions and refocusing on critical core mandates that can be delivered within the available will of the states and their determination to provide funding and human resources. This would give the AU more credibility and, in the long term, enable it to expand and avoid excessive reliance on external funding for its operations. Such a revision of ambition would require negotiation and communication, so that all stakeholders clearly understand the updated goals and align their expectations accordingly. Concrete goals, milestones, and resourcing must be defined, with monitoring frameworks updated to measure progress against the new level of ambition.

Such a revision of mandate would also require leaving other responsibilities to Regional Economic Communities (RECs), member states, and subnational entities, focusing instead on core mandates that are transnational in nature. To this effect, strengthening AU-REC institutional linkages – including clearer protocols governing AU-REC relations, enhanced coordination mechanisms, and joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks – is essential.[8] A formalized division of labour with RECs, supported by clear, binding agreements delineating AU and REC responsibilities, would reduce duplication, enhance coordination, and enable both levels to concentrate resources towards their respective comparative advantages. Such arrangements would enable RECs to function not merely as regional forums but also as practical conduits for transforming continental norms into tangible institutional and policy change.

Transforming the nature of states: Towards states with multiple systems

With rising state fragility, especially in countries emerging from or trapped in wars, PAAI calls for reimagining the African state through a governance model of "states with multiple systems". It addresses the long-standing challenge of governing diversity in Africa by maintaining overall state integrity while allowing distinct governance, legal and economic systems to coexist within state boundaries.

The new paradigm of "states with multiple systems" acknowledges the path of dependency created by colonial borders, while embracing Africa's continuing quest for integration. The "states with multiple systems" framework helps to address these vulnerabilities, and offers a pathway that emphasizes the value of indigenous, customary, hybrid and poly-governance models, particularly where centralized states have failed to serve their populations.[9] What is needed is a fundamental reimagining of the African state, one that recognizes multiple centres of power and legitimacy. Instead of a single, unitary system of authority, states might embrace layered governance, where formal institutions, laws, bureaucracies and elected officials are hybridized with non-state actors such as chiefs, elders, religious leaders, militias, traditional and modern civil society, and community councils.

By accommodating varied identities under a common national framework, this model provides a mechanism for integrative (con)federalism, reducing the risk of fragmentation and protracted conflict. More essentially, it offers alternatives to separatism by embedding autonomy within an overarching national framework. Decentralization will not only address longstanding challenges related to peace and development, but may also engender a fundamental change in the role of district- and county-level administrations

7 UNDP Africa. 2020. "UNDP's Renewed Strategic Offer in Africa: Africa's Promise." Accessed October 19, 2025. https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/publications/undps-renewed-strategic-offer-africa-africas-promise.

8 The Framework for Cooperation Between the African Union Commission and Regional Economic Communities on the Implementation of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Dr. Mehari Taddele Maru - March 2017

9 Wunsch, James S. 1990. The Failure of the centralized state: institutions and self-governance in Africa. Westview Press. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780429310799/failure-centralized-state-dele-olowu-james-wunsch-vincent-ostrom-john-harbeson

by bringing powers and responsibilities closer to the citizenry.

With diminishing external financial aid and shrinking multilateral support for peace operations, the continent faces both a challenge and an opportunity: to pursue self-reliance and strategic autonomy through local action, resource mobilization and strengthened political legitimacy.

Ensuring the primacy of domestic politics

This proposal emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen domestic political processes and local governance mechanisms as the primary means of addressing political differences and ongoing wars, and preventing violent conflict. Rather than relying on external actors for its peace and security, Africa must invest in and employ domestic and local political processes to resolve political differences peacefully. Because they are close to and understand local contexts, local constituencies have expertise and legitimacy in representing the needs and aspirations of their populations, offering context-specific solutions to local manifestations of global disorder. This also enables innovative African-led approaches that transcend traditional state-centric models of governance and security. Localization thus strengthens both the credibility of governance and the effectiveness of problem-solving.

In light of Africa's unique demographic advantage as the youngest continent, Gen Z represents the most potent strategic asset for building strong constituencies and achieving sustainable progress on all the above proposals. As increasingly connected, vocal and diverse generations enter the electorate, political contestations and protests over livelihoods, employment and governance are becoming more pronounced.

Employing a triple geopolitical strategy

By reaffirming the primacy of domestic politics and empowering local voices, Africa can better shape its own future, anchored in accountability, inclusivity, and self-reliance. This moment calls for a Pan-African agenda of self-sufficiency and constituency-building from local to continental levels. Rethinking sovereignty not merely as territorial control but also as a responsibility to the people means embracing governance models that allow multiple systems to coexist within states and encourage cooperation across borders.

By fostering Africa's agency through collective action, the continent can promote its own interests, forge beneficial partnerships with other states and alliances, and assume its proper role in the development of a more inclusive and stable international order.

Description

The descriptive section offers a concise narrative of the historical evolution from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the AU, and defines the core mandates of the AU in relation to peace and security. This section relies heavily on organizational documents, legal texts and policy frameworks, meeting records and empirical data on the AU›s performance with regard to its core peace and security mandate.

The analytical sections apply data analysis on deaths, displacement and destruction in Africa, examining why the AU failed in its core mandate of preventing, and intervening in, atrocious wars in Africa, including in its host state, Ethiopia. It applies theoretical lenses to analyse how organizational culture and political economy – mainly the power and resources – of multilateral organizations either facilitate or impede the implementation of mandates, focusing particularly on the tension between traditional diplomatic norms and the push for a more effective, results-oriented intergovernmental institution with enhanced popular legitimacy and geopolitical agency. The political economy approach offers valuable insights into understanding the complex interplay between the AU and its member states; how they shape AU actions despite high levels of aspiration, and how their interests and financing shape the implementation of core mandates. The analysis pays special attention to how states such as Ethiopia affect critical decisions within the PSC, shape the decisions of key offices such as the AU Commission Chairperson, and are able to undermine AU preventive and intervention mandates. The relevant indices and databases that measure fatalities, atrocities, mass displacements and economic impact are used to identify regional determinants of peace and security.

Building on the descriptive and analytical sections, **the prescriptive section** advances bold proposals for the transformation of the AU. Despite limitations with regard to conducting interviews and surveys, this analysis focuses on three critical areas: institutional mechanisms for delivery of public goods to improve performance and popular legitimacy; strengthening interventionist and integrationist capabilities; and enhancing geopolitical positioning in an increasingly challenging and multipolar world.

Methodology

To assess the multidimensional costs of armed conflict in Africa and the failure of the AU to fulfil its core preventive and interventionist mandates, this research employs a three-tiered methodological approach, using three critical indicators that capture both the human and the economic toll of wars that the AU was supposed to prevent, respond to, or resolve.

First, it provides data on the drastic surge in conflict-related fatalities, representing the most fundamental violation of human rights and the deprivation of the right to life itself and, with this, a cascade of human rights violations.

Second, it offers figures that show the tragic state of the displacement of people, as displaced populations are stripped of their fundamental rights to home, land, property, livelihoods, education, and numerous other civil, political and socioeconomic entitlements – internally, within a country as IDPs, and externally, crossing international borders as refugees.

These two dimensions of human suffering reveal the immediate and direct harm inflicted upon civilian populations caught in conflict zones.

Third, beyond the human cost, the economic destruction of war and displacement underscores the broader destabilizing effects of conflict on national development. More than half of the total economic impact of wars is the result of displacement. This proportion reflects not only the direct costs of humanitarian assistance and emergency response, but also the profound livelihood and productivity losses, disrupted markets, strained public services and wasted development opportunities caused by displacement.

The three indicators – fatalities, displacement and economic impact – supported by numbers, figures and graphs, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the catastrophic consequences of Africa's contemporary conflicts, and the urgency of strengthening conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms.

In addition, the study integrates primary sources, including indices and survey findings on public perceptions of the AU and RECs, with a review of secondary academic literature, and draws on earlier policy and research work with the AU and its member states to analyse the state of peace and security. These include the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG);[10] the Human Development Index (HDI);[11] the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Index;[12] the Global Peace Index (GPI);[13] data on IDPs,[14] refugees and asylum seekers (Origin);[15] and the Statistical Risk Assessment for Mass Killing.[16]

The data and conclusions from these indices reflect the failure of the AU in its core mandate of prevention of, and intervention in response to conflicts, and demonstrate how atrocious wars, mass displacement and massive destruction undermine its legitimacy.

10 Mo Ibrahim Foundation. 2024. "Ibrahim Index of African Governance." *Mo Ibrahim Foundation.* https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf.

11 UNDP. 2025. *Human Development Reports.* Accessed October 2025. https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks.

12 Sachs, Jeffrey D, Guillaume Lafortune, Christian Kroll, Grayson Fuller, and Finn Woelm. 2022. *Sustainable Development Report.* University of Cambridge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://www.sustainabledevelopment.report/reports/sustainable-development-report-2022/#authors

13 Institute for Economics & Peace. 2022. "Global Peace Index; Measuring Peace in a Complex World." Accessed October 2025. https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-2022-web.pdf

14 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2025. https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/.

15 UNHCR. 2025. *UNHCR Refugee Data Finder.* Accessed October 2025. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download?url=23jhML.

16 Early Warning Project. 2024-25. *Ranking of All Coutries.* https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/ranking-of-all-countries.

Introduction

Thirty years after the Rwandan genocide, the vow of "never again" has become devoid of meaning, given how the death toll from various wars has reached an unprecedented scale since the end of the Cold War. According to the Uppsala University Conflict Data Program (UCDP), "[I]n 2022, fatalities from organized violence increased by a staggering 97% compared to the previous year, from 120,000 in 2021 to 237,000 in 2022.[17] It signifies the highest death toll since the Rwandan genocide in 1994."[18] The UCDP report underlines the historically high number of active global conflicts, with 55 state-involved conflicts recorded in 2022, a significant increase on the annual average recorded by UCDP between 2000 and 2013.[19] Moreover, one-sided violence targeting civilians rose sharply in 2022, resulting in around 11,800 civilian deaths at the hands of 45 different states or organized groups.[20]

This edition of PAP provides a decadal and five-year comparative analysis of combatant and civilian fatalities as a result of fighting[21] in Africa during two decades of the AU – the first decade after its establishment (2003–2013) and the subsequent decade (2014–2024), in particular the last five years.

Recent data and figures from reputable institutions such as the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the Mo Ibrahim Governance Index (IGI), and other relevant sources underscore major trends of displacement and economic destruction due to wars and conflicts.

Escalation of conflict and fatalities

As shown in Figure 3 below, since the end of the Cold War, conflicts across Africa have claimed millions of lives. Such conflicts include the Rwandan genocide and, more recently, the wars in Ethiopia (particularly in Tigray), Sudan (Darfur), and the DRC (eastern provinces). Comparing the two decades reveals a marked escalation in violent conflict, especially in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, and the Sahel. Conflict-driven fatalities, displacement, and economic destruction have all increased substantially. The broader trend across the continent indicates that state-based conflict fatalities have increased in multiple regions. State-based conflicts rose from 39 in the early 2000s to 50 by 2024, with intrastate conflicts showing the sharpest growth since the end of the Cold War.[22]

17 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2022. "Number of Deaths." https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2022

18 Ibid

19 Ibid

20 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2023. "Number of deaths in armed conflicts has doubled." https://www.uu.se/en/news/2023/2023-06-13-number-of-deaths-in-armed-conflicts-has-doubled

21 These fatality figures include only combatant and civilian deaths from direct fighting, excluding deaths from conflict-related disease and starvation. The data comes from UCDP, which provides a conservative estimation that makes it the less rejectable conflict dataset, despite typically slow and low reporting. For example, the UCDP's figures for both wars on Tigray and Sudan were grossly deflated, and fatality estimates in the media were underreported and late to be published. This reflects a broader pattern: international think tanks and media regard geopolitical conflicts in the Global South as less significant than those in the Global North, as reporting on conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan is far lower than on Ukraine or Gaza, for example. See following pages for more details.

22 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2023. "Number of deaths in armed conflicts has doubled." https://www.uu.se/en/news/2023/2023-06-13-number-of-deaths-in-armed-conflicts-has-doubled ; Öberg, Magnus, Therése Pettersson, Garoun Engström, and Shawn Davies. 2024. «Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups.» Journal of Peace Research. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00223433241262912

Figure 3: Death due to conflicts since the end of the Cold War

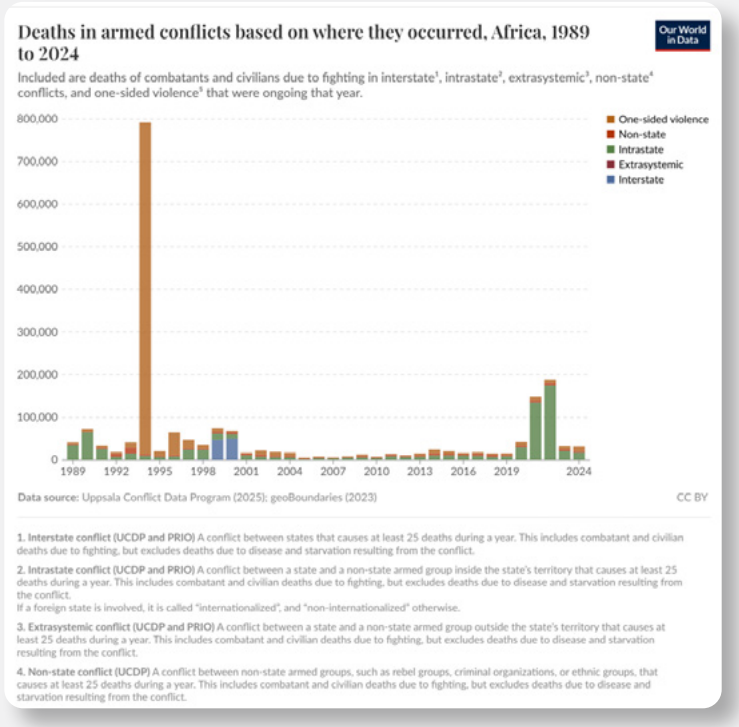


Figure 4: Fatalities in Africa 2004–2023

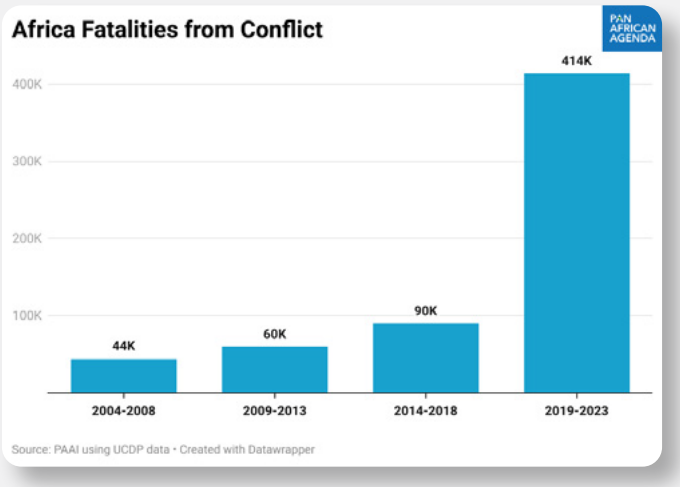
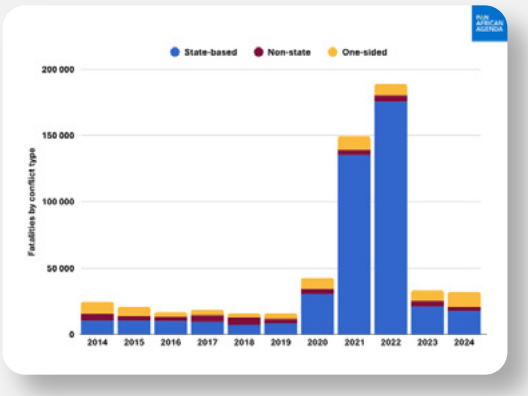


Figure 5: Surge in fatalities in African state active conflicts



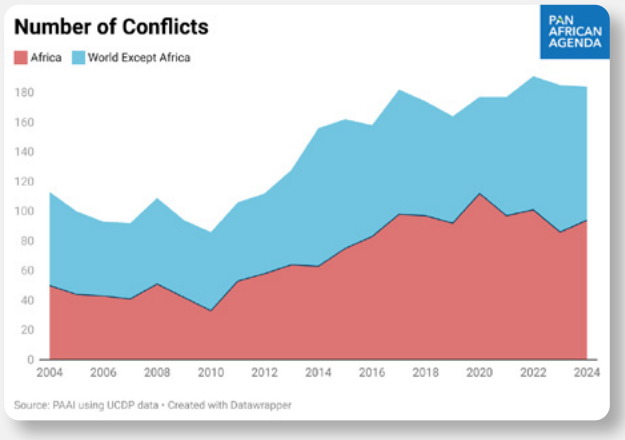
Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024

Fatalities surged dramatically in the second decade. Between 2003 and 2013, there were approximately 122,148 conflict-related deaths, while between 2014 and 2024, fatalities reached over 532,413.[23] The 2020–2022 Ethiopia–Eritrea war against Tigray forces accounted for the largest share of these deaths.

As shown in figures 6 - 9, the number of conflicts has increased, while the number of state-involved conflicts is not only higher than in other regions but also on the increase. While intrastate wars remain predominant, the resurgence of interstate tensions, such as the risk of renewed hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, poses new challenges. The proliferation of arms races and mutual distrust among African states – and among communities within states – reflects weakening national and regional collective security mechanisms. These dynamics, if unaddressed, threaten to further undermine continental stability.

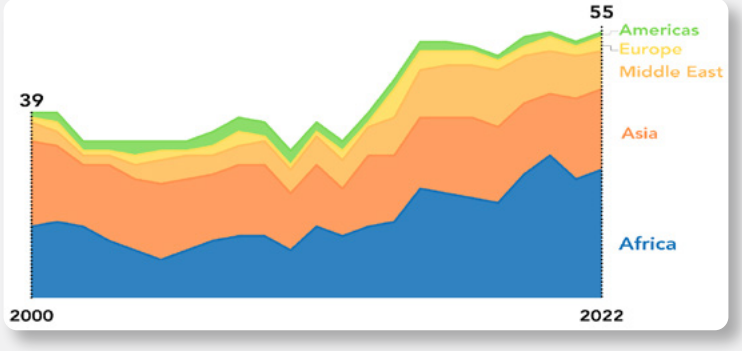
While the AU and APSA were established in the early 2000s with the mandate to prevent armed conflict and thereby reduce fatalities, displacement, and destruction, the human and economic costs of war on the continent have reached unprecedented levels. A comparative analysis of fatalities across five-year periods (Figures 4 and 5) reveals an alarming escalation. Between the periods 2004–2008 and 2019–2023, fatalities increased eightfold from 44,000 to 414,000 (an increase of 841%), corresponding to a compound annual growth rate of approximately 12% over the two-decade span. During the first decade following its establishment in 2002, the AU and its member states went to great effort to prevent conflicts and intervene in ongoing conflicts. However, as subsequent sections demonstrate, these preventive and interventionist initiatives have diminished considerably in the organization's second decade of operation.

Figure 6: Number of conflicts in Africa vs rest of the world



Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024

Figure 7: Africa vs other regions in number of state-involved conflicts, 2000–2022



Data: PAAI, 2025, data from Uppsala Conflict Data Program

23 UCDP, 2003-2024. It is important to note that these figures represent only confirmed deaths, and that the actual number of fatalities is much higher.

Figure 8: Types of conflicts

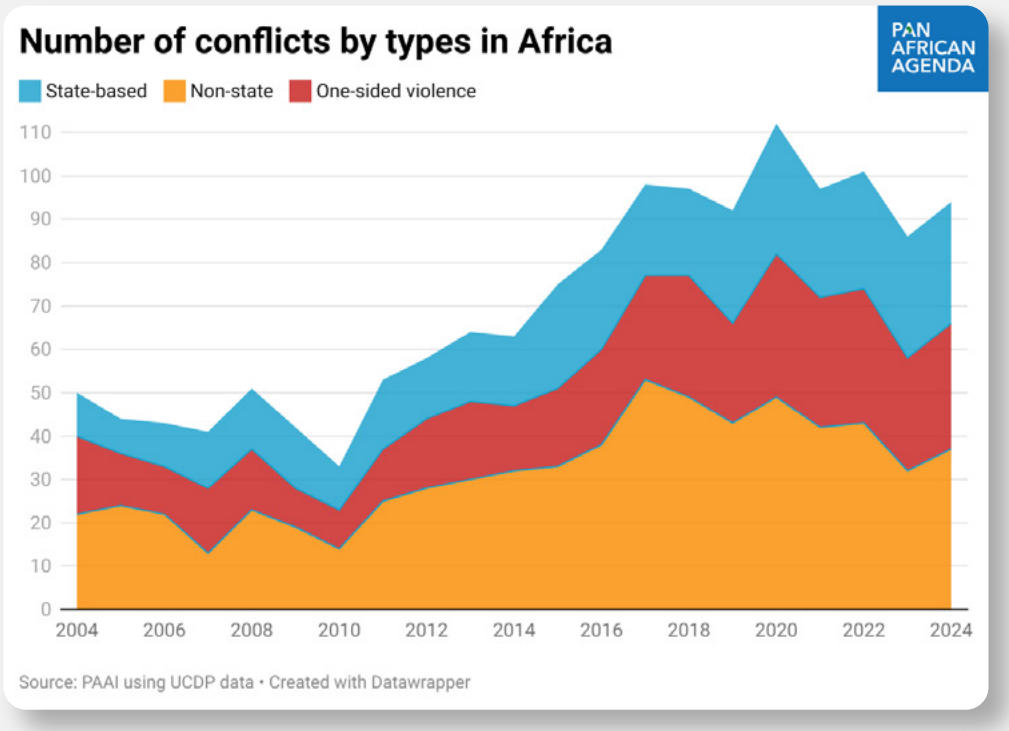
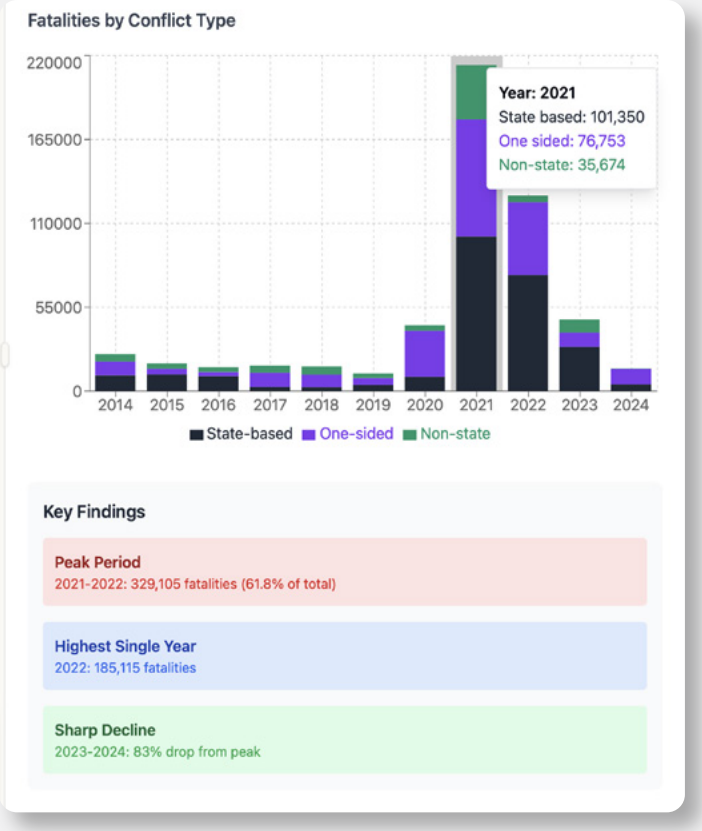


Figure 9: Surge in fatalities in state-based conflicts



Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024

The Tigray War

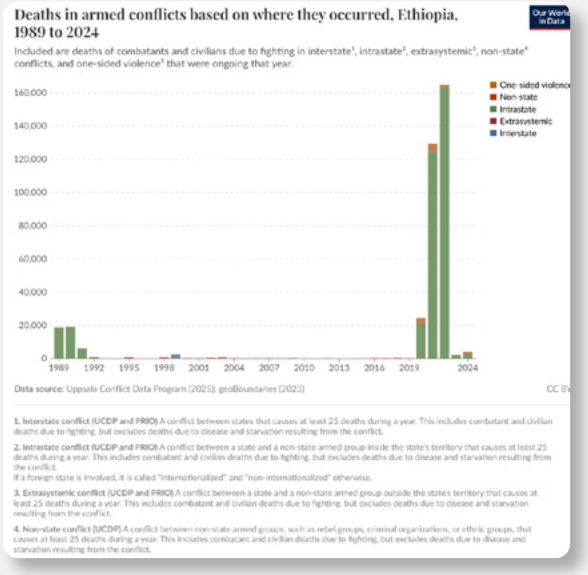
An example of the failure of the AU's preventive and interventionist mandates

Between 2020 and 2022, Africa saw an estimated exceeding 378,000 deaths due to fighting, of which approximately 319,000 (84%) occurred in the Ethiopia–Eritrea war against Tigray forces. This conflict is one of the deadliest internationalized intrastate wars in recent history. The figure excludes indirect deaths from disease and starvation caused by the siege and blockade of humanitarian aid during the war. Overall mortality, including indirect causes, is estimated to exceed 600,000, making it the deadliest conflict on the continent since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[24]

This estimate is nonetheless a conservative estimate. In most cases, UCDP fatality estimates, particularly for African conflicts – including those in Tigray, Sudan, and the DRC – are significantly lower than estimates from other sources.[25] While UCDP fatalities capture deaths directly from conflict, they do not include fatalities from indirect causes, such as weaponized starvation and lack of access to basic medical services due to the deliberate siege and blockade imposed on Tigray by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. Estimates from Ghent University, which include deaths from starvation, blockade, and denial of basic health services, would significantly increase these figures.[26] Other independent assessments suggest the total death toll, inclusive of those from starvation and disease in Tigray, may be much higher, with some estimates of over 600,000.[27] If the Tigray war is excluded, the continent still saw a 17% increase in fatalities over the decade – a significant rise, though far less dramatic than the spike during 2021–2022.

Following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022,[28] fatalities declined sharply, demonstrating the critical value of diplomatic mediation in resolving complex internationalized conflicts.

Figure 10: Deaths due to conflicts in Ethiopia since the end of the Cold War



The data shows that the Pretoria Agreement, or the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – signed as a result of US pressure and facilitated by AU mediators on 2 November 2022, in Pretoria, South Africa – brought about a sharp reduction in global fatalities, both in Africa and globally. As examined in subsequent sections of this analysis, progress in mediating the conflict in Tigray remained limited prior to the deployment of US

24 Financial Times. 2023. "War in Tigray may have killed 600,000 people, peace mediator says." https://www.ft.com/content/2f385e95-0899-403a-9e3b-ed8c24adf4e7 ; Ghosh, Bobby. 2022. "The world's deadliest war isn't in Ukraine, but in Ethiopia." Bloomberg. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-22/ethiopia-s-war-toll-grows-as-the-world-looks-away?embedded-checkout=true ;, José Naranjo. 2023. "Ethiopia's forgotten war is the deadliest of the 21st century, with around 600,000 civilian deaths." El Pais. https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-01-27/ethiopias-forgotten-war-is-the-deadliest-of-the-21st-century-with-around-600000-civilian-deaths.html

25 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2022. "UCDP Newsletter #9: The War in Tigray." https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/newsletter/issue9.html

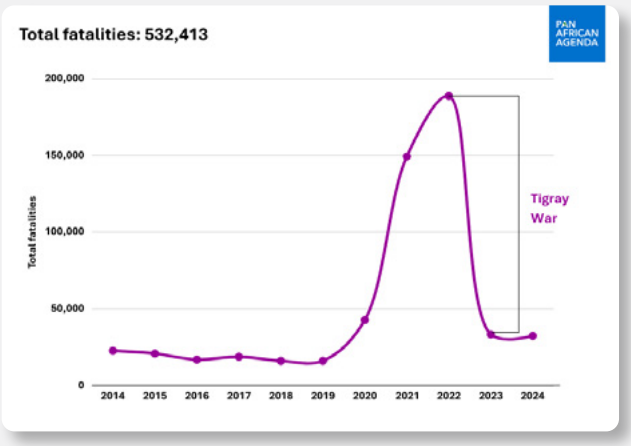
26 Ghent university

27 Financial Times. 2023. "War in Tigray may have killed 600,000 people, peace mediator says." https://www.ft.com/content/2f385e95-0899-403a-9e3b-ed8c24adf4e7; Weldemichel, Teklehaymanot G. 2025. "Tigray war: Modern geographies of mass violence and the invisibilization of populations." Political Geography 118. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629825000307

28 "Agreement for Lasting Peace Through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Between the Government of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)." 2022, https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Download-the-signed-agreement-here.pdf?

special envoys. While a mutually painful stalemate had been achieved in 2022, this demonstrates that when the US commits to meaningful engagement and leverages its diplomatic influence, particularly through the assignment of a dedicated special envoy with a mandate focused on the cessation of hostilities, and other tools at its disposal (such as the threat of sanctions or trade restrictions), considerable diplomatic dividends can be achieved. Despite important questions regarding the comprehensiveness of the Pretoria Agreement and the effectiveness of its implementation, it has prevented new deaths and displacement as a result of active conflict, underscoring that the US has the leverage to prevent future wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Figure 11: Surge in fatalities during Ethiopia and Eritrea's war in Tigray



Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024

Figure 11 tells two stories at once. The first is one of the failure by the Pan-African and international community, institutionally the AU and the UN, to prevent, intervene in, or stop the world's deadliest war since the Rwandan genocide. Despite being an internationalized war that occurred in Ethiopia's capital, home to the AU and its premier organs of peace and security, it was deliberately ignored and no impactful intervention was made by these institutions. This underscores a profound failure of the AU and its APSA and, by the same token, that of the UN and the international community.

Second, the contrasting message of hope is that preventive diplomacy, when applied with determination, can still end such deadly wars, even in a time of geopolitical interregnum. The sharp decline in fatalities following the 2022 CoHA demonstrates that preventive diplomacy and mediation, when conducted with determination and backed by states with leverage, can end even the most devastating wars. The CoHA is a significant humanitarian accomplishment, preventing further catastrophic loss of life and proving the value of diplomatic engagement in resolving complex internationalized conflicts. Yet, the resulting peace agreement remains fundamentally fragile, reversible, and vulnerable to collapse. The root causes of the conflict are unresolved, and the agreement has been abandoned by the signatories, the AU, and other international observers.

Mass displacement and devastating economic impact

Displacement trends show a concerning trajectory, as evidenced by data from the IDMC and the UNHCR. Furthermore, the IEP has documented escalating economic destruction attributable to armed conflicts across the continent.

Countries facing conflict experience large-scale population movements, with people becoming IDPs or refugees. Of the 153 million IDPs globally in 2014–2024, 76.3 million originate from Africa, constituting 50% of the global total. Between 2014 and 2024, Africa also produced 81 million refugees and asylum seekers.

The data on total internal displacement from 2014 to 2024 reveals distinct regional trends and an overall escalation in forced displacement globally. Internal displacement in Africa demonstrates a consistent upward trajectory, rising from approximately 4 million IDPs in 2014 to over 11 million in 2024: a nearly threefold increase over the decade. While Africa's displacement burden has grown steadily, the most dramatic surge occurred outside the continent, particularly from 2020 onward, when global displacement, excluding Africa, increased sharply from approximately 8 million to a peak of nearly 16 million in 2022–2023, likely driven by conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine and Syria. Collectively, global internal displacement reached unprecedented levels of approximately 27 million persons during 2022–2023, with the numbers from Africa underscoring the inadequacy of existing conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms on the continent.

Although non-African displacement has declined somewhat since 2022, Africa's displacement remains substantially elevated compared to pre-2020 levels. By 2024, Africa accounted for over half of the global IDP population. In 2024 alone, of the 73.6 million people internally displaced by conflict and violence across the world, well over 45% were in Africa. In the same year,

out of 46 million global refugees and asylum seekers[29], 9.9 million (22%) were from Africa. Sudan alone had over 15 million IDPs and refugees, representing nearly one-third of its population.[30] These numbers indicate a high vulnerability to state fragility and risk of atrocities. In 2024, nine of the global top 20 countries facing a heightened risk of atrocities and a large population displacement in 2024 were in Africa, with Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Guinea among the top 10 high-risk countries with recently reported incidents of mass killings.

Figure 12: Displacement of Africans vs the rest of the world

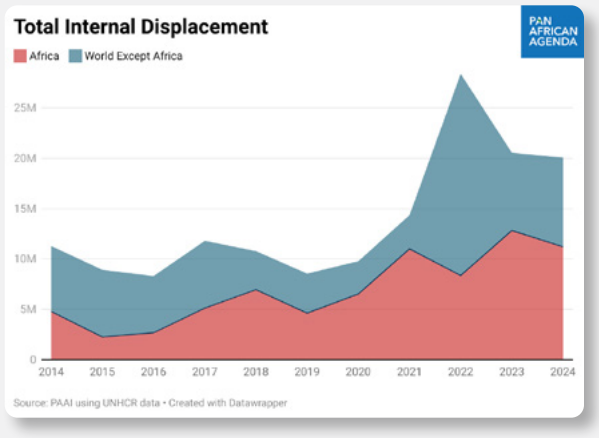


Figure 13: African countries with the largest intenal displacement

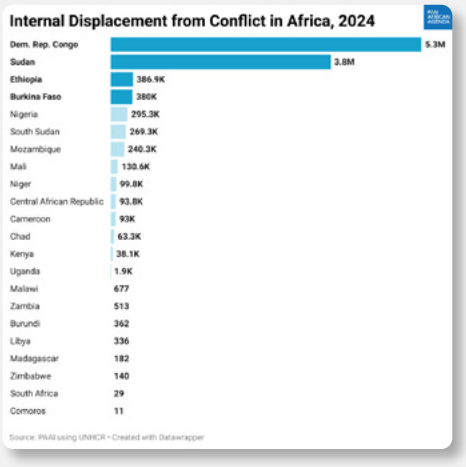


Figure 14: Total internal displacement in Africa vs the rest of the world

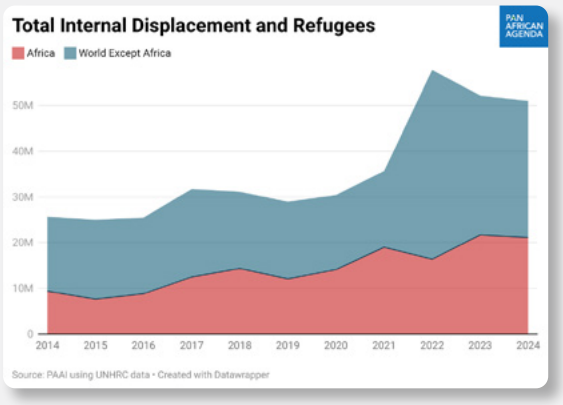


Figure 15: Total internal displacement in Africa vs the rest of the world

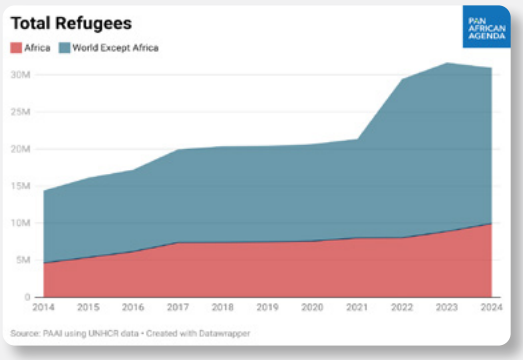
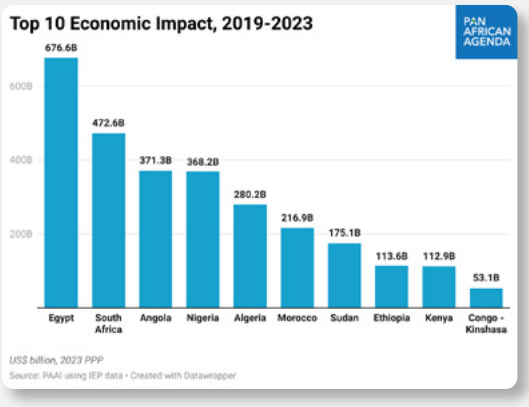


Figure 16: Top 10 African countries affected by the economic impact of violence



29 UNHCR. 2025. "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024." https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/global-trends-report-2024.pdf

30 UNHCR. 2025. "Operational Data Portal: Sudan Regional Crisis." https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation?_gl=1*px7rgp*_gcl_au*MTcwOTIwMzg2MS4xNzQ0MDI2MzIz*_rup_ga*MTc2MDE5NTIyMi4xNzIwNTY2MjY0*_rup_ga_EVDQTJ4LMY*czE3NTAwMDc5OTAkbzQwNiRnMSR0MTc1MDAwODc2MCRqMTQkbDAkaDA.*_ga*MTc2MDE5NTIyMi4xNzIwNTY2MjY0*_ga_X2YZPJ1XWR*czE3NTAwMDgxMzQkbzMwMSRnMSR0MTc1MDAwODc2MCRqMTQkbDAkaDA

Figure 17: Total economic impact, 2017–2023

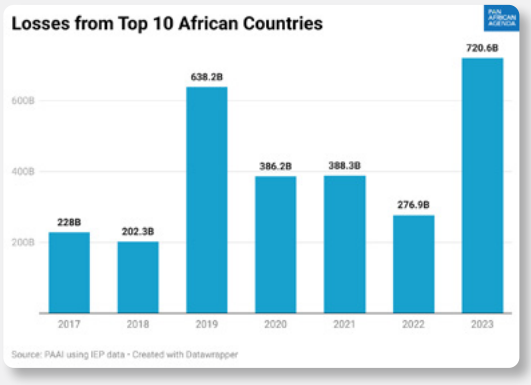
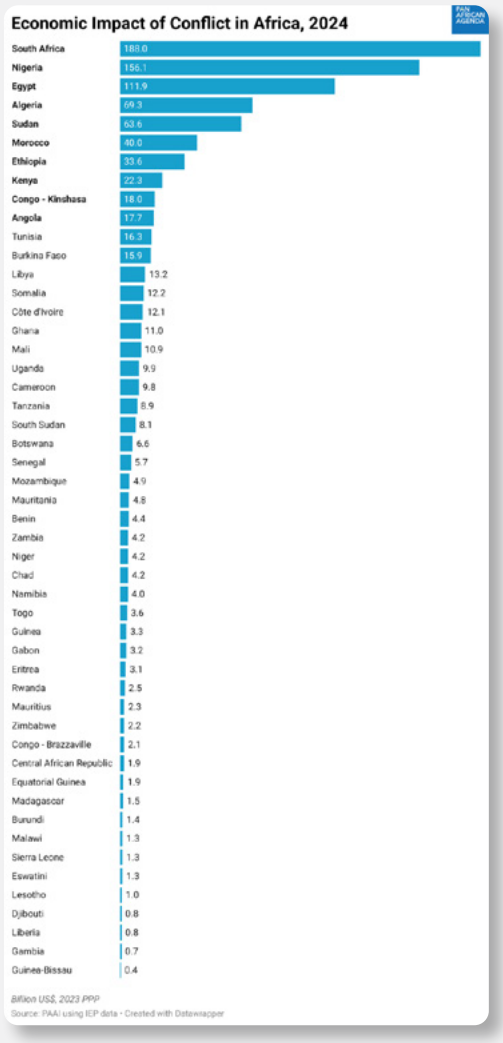


Figure 18: Total economic impact of violence in Africa, 2024

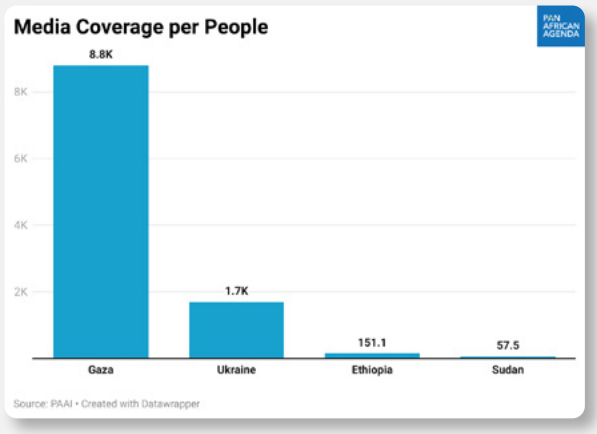


Displacement as a result of violence carries the heaviest economic impact. According to data from the IEP, the composition of the economic impact of violence in 2023 shows that refugees and IDPs accounted for the largest share, representing approximately 56% of the total impact.[31] This was followed by GDP losses from conflict, which made up around 34%. The economic impact of violence in Africa stands at US$929 billion, constituting 5% of the total global impact of violence (US$19.1 trillion).[32]

Peace architectures in crisis

Despite the massive toll of major wars in Africa and the resultant human cost in casualties and humanitarian crises, these conflicts receive far less international attention than those in Ukraine or Gaza. Data from the UCDP in 2021 indicates 165,025 deaths in the war on Tigray, with total fatality estimates suggesting a range between 50,000 and 500,000.[33] In the same year, 2021, the estimated number of deaths for Ukraine was 92,629.[34] The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have undoubtedly had horrendous humanitarian and geopolitical consequences. Yet, when considering both the human toll and the level of attention paid to it, data suggests conflicts in Africa receive comparatively less international attention, and thus the international responses to these African crises have been woefully inadequate.

Figure 19: Media coverage per people in humanitarian need: Africa vs others



Source: PAAI 2025, data from Media and Journalism Research Center

31 Institute for Economics & Peace. 2024. "Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World." https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf

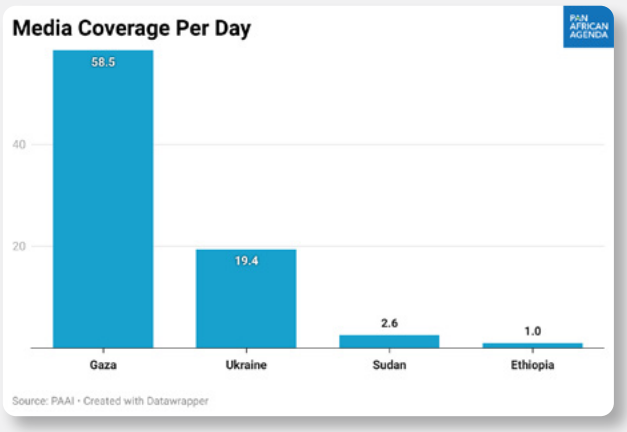
32 Ibid

33 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2022. "UCDP Newsletter #9: The War in Tigray." https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/newsletter/issue9.html

34 Ibid

Ethiopia (particularly Tigray), Sudan (notably Darfur), and the DRC (especially the eastern region) rank among the world's five most urgent humanitarian crises, with staggering levels of fatalities, atrocities, displacement, and economic destruction. However, global media attention to these conflicts has been far less than that devoted to Ukraine and Gaza. The disparities are stark. The war in Ethiopia's Tigray region alone has resulted in 10 times the deaths in Gaza, nine times that in Sudan, and twice that of Ukraine. Yet, in terms of global media coverage, Tigray received only 0.96%, while Gaza dominated with 58.5%, Ukraine followed with 19.43%, and Sudan received 2.57%. This translates to Tigray securing roughly 61 times less coverage than Gaza, 20 times less than Ukraine, and almost three times less than Sudan.

Figure 20: Media coverage per day of humanitarian crises: Africa vs others



Source: PAAI 2025, data from Media and Journalism Research Center

The reasons for this invisibility are complex. They include the communication blackout imposed by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments during the conflict, as well as structural biases within international media systems. As media scholar Marius Dragomir and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism highlight, global humanitarian coverage is highly uneven.[35] Gaza and Ukraine average 58.5 and 19.4 articles per day respectively, while some of the world's most devastating crises – such as Chad (0.06 articles/day) and the DRC (1.5 articles/day) – receive minimal sustained coverage.[36]

Large bodies of literature provide crossnational and longterm quantitative evidence that geopolitically significant conflicts elicit extensive coverage and influence policy attention,[37] while many lethal conflicts, especially in the Global South, are underreported.[38] These disparities reflect a broader hierarchy in global journalism that distinguishes between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims.[39] The long-standing "logic" of newsworthiness prioritizes geopolitical proximity, elite involvement, dramatic visuals, and ideological resonance over humanitarian need.[40] Violence and suffering in the Global South are too often rendered invisible structurally,[41] exposing deep inequities in how global journalism values certain lives over others, as well as a failure to reflect the true severity, gravity, and human cost of these conflicts. This disparity is also indicative of a broader decline in the global commitment to address wars and atrocities in Africa, especially when compared to the attention given to African crises in the past, such as Sudan in the early 2000s or Ethiopia in the 1980s.

35 Media and Journalism Research Centre. 2025. "A global research hub for media, journalism and power." https://journalismresearch.org/

36 Ibid

37 Hawkins, V. (2011). Media selectivity and the other side of the CNN effect: The consequences of not paying attention to conflict. Media, War & Conflict. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635210396126; Minear, L., Scott, C., & Weiss, T. G. (1996). The news media, civil war, and humanitarian action. (Book);

38 Bachman, J. S. (2023). The geopolitics of human suffering: A comparative study of media coverage of the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine. Third World Quarterly. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2228715; Xu, Z., & Zhang, M. (2023). How news media visually dehumanize victims of humanitarian crises through framing disparities: A quantitative comparative analysis. International Communication Gazette. https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485231216583;

39 Baum, M. A., & Zhukov, Y. M. (2015). Filtering revolution: Reporting bias in international newspaper coverage of the Libyan civil war. Journal of Peace Research. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314554791

40 Evans, M. (2010). Framing international conflicts: Media coverage of fighting in the Middle East. International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics. https://doi.org/10.1386/MCP.6.2.209_1;

41 Baden, C., & TenenboimWeinblatt, K. (2018). The search for common ground in conflict news research: Comparing the coverage of six current conflicts in domestic and international media over time. Media, War & Conflict. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217702071

The 2024 Global Peace Index (GPI) identifies three key geopolitical trends that explain increased fatalities. It states:

Geopolitical shifts further complicate global conflict management. The transition from a unipolar world dominated by the United States to a multipolar one has intensified competition and prolonged conflicts. Traditional powers like the US and the EU are stretched thin, limiting their ability to manage global tensions effectively. Meanwhile, emerging powers such as China, Russia, and regional middle powers are increasingly vying for influence in conflict-affected areas around the world.[42]

These same geopolitical factors contribute to the weakening of global and African peace architectures.

Ineffectiveness of AU conflict prevention and intervention

The AU and its APSA, while established to prevent violent conflicts and protect civilians, have not curtailed rising fatalities, displacements, or destruction.

Five-year comparisons show worsening trends: the UCDP has reported a surge in fatalities, the IDMC and UNHCR have recorded increasing internal and external displacements, and the IEP has documented shocking levels of economic losses due to conflicts.

Embodying the slogan "African solutions to African problems" in its first decade, the AU embarked on major preventive and mediation efforts. AU peace support missions began in earnest in the early 2000s with initial deployments to Burundi (2003) and the Comoros (2008). The African Mission in Sudan (AMIS) was launched in 2004 in response to the Darfur crisis, but it was soon transformed into a joint AU–UN hybrid operation (UNAMID) due to operational and logistical constraints. Similarly, other AU-led missions such as AFISMA in Mali (2012) and MISCA in the Central African Republic (2013) were quickly transitioned into UN peacekeeping operations – MINUSMA and MINUSCA, respectively – reflecting persistent challenges in sustaining AU-led peace support efforts.

The AU's longest-running and most significant mission, deployed in Somalia since 2007, initially as AMISOM, later ATMIS, and now AUSSOM, is facing an existential crisis due to its reliance on external funding sources. The sustainability of AUSSOM and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2719, which would authorize UN-assessed funding for AU peace operations, remain uncertain, pending commitments from major donor states, particularly the US.[43]

However, African commitment also progressively declined during the AU's second decade. The AU's credibility suffered a major setback following its failure to implement the December 2015 decision to invoke Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act, which authorized intervention without host-state consent in Burundi (the proposed 5,000-strong MAPROBU mission).[44] This would have been the first AU operation invoking the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) principle, but the initiative faltered due to divisions within the PSC, opposition from member states such as Tanzania, logistical and financial constraints, and the lack of UN Security Council support.[45]

The failure to act in Burundi was followed by similar inaction in subsequent atrocity wars in Darfur (Sudan), Tigray (Ethiopia), and the eastern DRC.

The governments of Burundi (2015), Ethiopia (2020–22), and Sudan (2023–) successfully resisted AU prevention and intervention measures by leveraging their status as major troop contributors and dominant military actors – and, in the case of Ethiopia, its status as host state of the AU's headquarters. Consequently, AU credibility has eroded, especially as geopolitical rivalries and internal divisions have deep-

42 Institute for Economics & Peace. 2024. "Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World." https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf, Page 3.

43 UN Security Council. 2023. "Resolution 2719." https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2719(2023)

44 Wilen, Nina, and Paul D. Williams. 2018. "The African Union and coercive diplomacy: The case of Burundi." (Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations). https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2018/12/Accepted-Manuscript-AU-and-Coercive-Diplomacy-the-Case-of-Burundi.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

45 For more read: PSC Report. 2016. "The AU's challenged responsibility to protect in Burundi." (ISS Africa). https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/the-aus-challenged-responsibility-to-protect-in-burundi; Tim Muriithi. 2009. The African Union's Transition from Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference. FES. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/ipg-2009-1/08_a_murithi_us.pdf ; Williams, Paul D. 2018. Fighting for Peace in Somalia A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007-2017. Vol. July. 11 vols. Oxford University Press. https://global.oup.com/academic/product/fighting-for-peace-in-somalia-9780198724544?cc=ke&lang=en&

ened. These cases underscore a lack of commitment to implement the normative frameworks of APSA and highlight a recurring pattern of institutional ineffectiveness and paralysis. They show how the AU's normative commitment to "non-indifference" is constantly undermined by traditional norms of sovereignty and non-intervention.

Throughout this period, the AU has also supported regional ad hoc security initiatives, including the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. However, these initiatives are undermined by more fragmented arrangements such as the Alliance of Sahel States – the coalition of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, often supported by Russia's Wagner Group (Africa Corps).[46]

In a nutshell, the operational effectiveness of APSA with regard to its preventive and interventionist efforts has declined over time.

Furthermore, the reliance on ad hoc coalitions of states, rather than institutionalized multilateral mechanisms, is an additional challenge, if not an emerging alternative, to Africa's collective security architecture, APSA. This trend mirrors developments observed in mediation diplomacy, where ad hoc bi- or trilateral arrangements involving non-African actors mediate conflicts in Africa without oversight from AU APSA organs. In mediation diplomacy, the AU has appeared unable, or at times unwilling, to fully exercise its mandate. The long-term impacts of these ad hoc security and mediation arrangements on APSA-mandated organs remain to be seen. However, the absence of APSA organs and their close oversight of security or mediation processes could undermine the established continental framework.[47] One point has become clear: the AU has largely been reduced to a performative role in managing conflicts on the continent or has only symbolic involvement in processes managed by non-African states, including the DRC–Rwanda mediation; in Ethiopia, Sudan, Ethiopia–Somalia tensions; and the Ethiopia–Eritrea standoff. This marginalization both reflects and reinforces a widening vacuum in regional preventive diplomacy, one increasingly filled by external actors such as Türkiye, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the US.

Inadequate and unpredictable funding, limited troop contributions, insufficient equipment, weak mandates, low political will among member states, a lack of assertive and adaptive leadership at the AU, and a rigid organizational culture have consistently undermined its resolve and capability to exercise its core mandates.

Beyond symbolizing African aspirations for self-reliance in managing continental crises, AU peace operations and mediation efforts frequently fall short of their broader objective of achieving a peaceful continent. The normative and institutional frameworks of the AU have yielded limited success in preventing or halting wars, mass displacement, and atrocities.

46 Egbejule , Eromo. 2025. "Sahel-based jihadists are extending their reach. Can a fractured region push back?" The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/18/sahel-based-jihadists-are-extending-their-reach-can-a-fractured-region-push-back; de Carvalho, Benjamin , and Ulf Engel. 2022. "The African Union and Peace Operations in Africa." (Routledge); Dersso, Solomon. n.d. "The AU's Normative and Operational Challenges in Peacekeeping." Institute for Security Studies.

47 Brosig, Malte, and John Karlsrud. 2024. "How ad hoc coalitions deinstitutionalize international institutions." (Oxford University Press). https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/943636a8-8566-4bad-8717-8d26f1e17b87/content

Analysis: Why the problem is structural

Global structural shifts, particularly in the main determinants of power – economy, demography, technology, military, and diplomacy – have triggered a dangerous interregnum. This has unleashed a dangerous race to the bottom[48] among great and middle powers seeking to accumulate and exercise more power and is shaped by geopolitical rivalries. It is marked by systemic and deliberate violations of international law and the erosion of international multilateralism and prioritizes narrow national interests over the collective security of states and the human security of the population under their jurisdiction. The race lacks even minimal standards of international law, exacerbates local conflicts, undermines governance, and impedes sustainable development across the continent.

This pattern is strikingly reminiscent of the Cold War era, when global powers used local conflicts as sites of proxy competition. As a result, states across Africa and beyond often found their sovereignty and agency constrained by the competing agendas of external great powers. Today's interregnum, like that earlier period, risks trapping African states in cycles of violence shaped less by domestic priorities and more by geopolitical rivalries and external interference. Africa is not just caught in the crossfire; it has become a geopolitical chessboard for external powers pursuing influence and strategic interests via proxy wars.

This race to the bottom not only undermines international law but also creates instability, distrust, and volatility in international cooperation, exemplified by the Gulf states' actions in Africa and Yemen. External actors now dominate by leveraging their asymmetrical military, economic, and diplomatic power, often at the expense of local agency. This dynamic has particularly disadvantaged fragile states such as Sudan, Libya, and the DRC. African states are left at a disadvantage as local political and military actors fall under the sway of external alliances, with their proxies embedded in domestic politico-economic-military networks. As a result, the capacity of domestic political actors to mobilize and leverage influence to stop wars led or supported by external geopolitical powers has been muted. With this, the primacy of domestic politics in conflict resolution – a key component of APSA and the AU's African Governance Architecture – has been severely compromised. The current interregnum has particularly undermined African architectures designed to prevent wars and atrocities. Domestic political mobilization to end wars, whether through internal participatory processes or through the leadership of African institutions such as the AU and RECs, has been severely weakened.

This has resulted in fractured states (as witnessed in Libya, Sudan, the DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia, and certain Sahel countries), paralyzed the AU and RECs such as ECOWAS and IGAD, brought about massive civilian casualties, and led to an institutional credibility crisis for both African and global peace architectures. Institutions designed to prevent atrocities and wars through mediation, peacekeeping and, when necessary, intervention, are increasingly sidelined.

The US, a long-time champion of genocide prevention, peacebuilding, and collective security under the auspices of the UN, has recently made some dramatic shifts, questioning whether its interests are still best served through the UN. Similarly, the R2P principle, a global commitment to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, once celebrated as a ground-breaking global promise, suffered serious reputational damage after NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya and has been unable to recover from its legitimacy crisis. The Libya mission started as an UN-approved operation to protect civilians but quickly transformed into a campaign to over-

48 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'Race to the Bottom': Africa on the Global Chessboard and the Call for Renewed Pan-African Agency." (UNU Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies). https://cris.unu.edu/beyond-%E2%80%98race-bottom%E2%80%99-africa-global-chessboard-and-call-renewed-pan-african-agency . According to most definitions, the original authoritative source of the definition of "race to the bottom" is Justice Louis Brandeis, who coined the term in the 1933 U.S. Supreme Court case Louis K. Liggett Co. v. Lee (288 U.S. 517), where he described competition between states to attract corporations as "one not of diligence but of laxity." Cornell University Law School defines it as "a causal chain in which parties compete for a desired result by making increasingly larger concessions. Although some parties may temporarily out-compete others, the concessions lead to adverse consequences that may go unnoticed until it is too late to change course." This phenomenon is in contrast with traditional competition, which tends to improve goods and services.

throw the government. The consequences were severe. Many countries, including Russia, China, India, and Brazil, strongly opposed this shift, as did the AU.[49] Since then, R2P has had limited success. In Syria, despite horrific atrocities, attempts to invoke R2P were repeatedly blocked in the UN Security Council through vetoes and political deadlock. Similar paralysis has occurred in discussions about Myanmar, Yemen, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Gaza. What was designed to unite the international community instead became a casualty of increasing great power rivalry. The AU and ECOWAS have occasionally invoked R2P and normative frameworks of the African peace and security architecture in crises in the Côte d'Ivoire and The Gambia, but this is becoming rarer, as witnessed in the clearly unconstitutional changes of government in the Sahel and atrocities in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes regions, where the existing normative and institutional peace framework was disregarded and ineffective. The core problem remains structural. R2P depends on UN Security Council authorization for enforcement.

In the same vein, from the mass atrocities in Tigray and Darfur to the devastating wars in Ethiopia, Sudan, and the DRC, APSA has repeatedly faltered and, dare one say, failed to protect civilians from the worst crimes. This failure is striking, given the AU's bold legal framework and comprehensive preventive and interventionist mandates and institutional architecture.

Its preventive mandate and first-line institutions in peace and security were designed to provide effective early warning and response to potential atrocious conflicts. These include the Continental Early Warning System, the Panel of the Wise (composed of five highly respected African personalities), and provisions for deploying effective mediators with sustained institutional support and systematic follow-up mechanisms.

Complementing and reinforcing prevention, Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the AU grants the Union an intervention mandate with "the right to intervene in a Member State … in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity". Article 4(j) further empowers member states to request intervention in order to restore peace and security. Similarly, the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the AU (2002), especially Article 7(e), authorizes the Council to recommend intervention in situations of grave crimes, while Article 4 of the Protocol emphasizes the principles of collective security, prevention, and protection of civilians. Various operational documents contain detailed implementational mechanisms for intervention.

In practice, the AU's normative frameworks for prevention and intervention have remained largely aspirational, particularly during AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki's term of office (2017–2025). When war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing amounting to genocide unfolded in the Ethiopian region of Tigray, the AU's response was mostly performative. Except for the credible mediation efforts by then AU chairperson and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who in November 2020 appointed three high-level leaders[50] as AU special envoys to mediate the war in Tigray, no other serious mediation efforts came from the AU. Indicating his concern about atrocity crimes in Tigray, Ramaphosa stated in a tweet that his mediation "initiative should be viewed against the background of the African Union's objective of 'Silencing the Guns', which is intended to achieve a conflict-free Africa, prevent genocide, make peace a reality for all and rid the continent of wars, violent conflicts, human rights violations and humanitarian disasters".[51]

49 Smith-Windsor, Brooke A. 2013. "AU-NATO Collaboration: Implications and Prospects." (NATO Defense College). https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/159844/fp_22.pdf

50 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (former President of Liberia), Joaquim Chissano (former President of Mozambique), and Kgalema Motlanthe (former President of South Africa).

51 Addis Standard. 2020. "News Alert: Ethiopia says PM Abiy will receive AU Chair envoy "one on one"; news circulating on media quoting Ramaphosa's statement on mediation "fake"." https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-ethiopia-says-pm-abiy-will-receive-au-chair-envoy-one-on-one-news-circulating-on-media-quoting-ramaphosas-statement-on-mediation-fake/

The AU Commission, led by Faki, not only undermined Ramaphosa's efforts but also ignored alarming early warnings. Faki later officially endorsed[52] the war on Tigray, stating in his main and only substantive statement[53] on the conflict: "In Ethiopia, the federal government took bold steps to preserve the unity, stability and respect for the constitutional order of the country." Not only did Faki remained silent on war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possible genocide but he also said nothing about the presence of large contingents of the Eritrean army that committed atrocity crimes, and how this related to the "constitutional order of the country". The challenges faced by the AU in preventing and robustly reacting to the Tigray conflict stemmed from more than just a failure in leadership at the AU Commission's apex; they were also a product of fundamental structural shortcomings within the organization's setup and its ingrained organizational culture, which collectively impeded quick preventive and intervention efforts.

In Darfur, despite international and regional awareness, decades of atrocities have continued, with the AU struggling to mount effective interventions even when early warning systems identified an escalating risk of the removal of the civilian Sudanese government of Abdella Hamdok by SAF and RSF leaders. Elsewhere, the AU's peace and security architecture has too often been paralyzed by political divisions, resource constraints, and excessive deference to state sovereignty, undermining both preventive diplomacy and timely intervention.

Despite its comprehensive preventive and interventionist mandates, the AU has been unable or unwilling[54] to act decisively when confronted with mass atrocities. The Panel of the Wise, established to provide counsel and facilitate dialogue in potential conflict situations, has often been deployed[55] too late or with insufficient political backing to influence outcomes. Similarly, mediation efforts have frequently suffered from a lack of political will from states and their leaders, contradictory positions within the AU leadership, inadequate resources, limited follow-up mechanisms, and insufficient coordination between continental and regional bodies.

The gap between the AU's normative ambition and its practical performance mirrors the UN's own paralysis on the global stage. Just as the UN Security Council remains deadlocked by great power rivalry, the AU has been constrained by internal politics, limited enforcement capacity, competing national interests, and insufficient financial resources to effectively operationalize its preventive mandates. The result is a troubling pattern: both institutions, though armed with strong legal frameworks and preventive mechanisms on paper, have consistently fallen short in protecting vulnerable populations from the gravest crimes.

The root cause lies in their foundation and structure, which depend heavily on states, especially the most powerful ones. R2P and APSA depend on UN Security Council and AU PSC authorization respectively for enforcement action. Without consensus among the major powers, their most forceful tools – prevention and intervention – cannot be used. This has left both APSA and R2P largely powerless when they are most needed.

The global peace and security framework of the UN Security Council, long impeded by great power rivalry and now virtually moribund, has little to offer Africa. More worrying is that the African peace and security architecture, a major investment by African leaders and development partners over the past two decades, and which at times has shown great promise, is faltering, unable to prevent or end wars in Ethiopia, Sudan, and the DRC. In West Africa, six military coups (in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, and Gabon) have shaken the region since 2020, with the AU and ECOWAS unable to mount a convincing response aligned to the AU normative frameworks. Consequently, extra-African actors such as Türkiye, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Russia step into that void, each pur-

52 Berhe, Mulugeta. 2021. "Why the African Union's mediation effort in Tigray is a non-starter." The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/why-the-african-unions-mediation-effort-in-tigray-is-a-non-starter-169293#:~:text=AU's%20relationship%20with%20Ethiopia,is%20legitimate%20for%20all%20states

53 Mahamat, Moussa Faki. 2020. "Tweet." X.COM. https://x.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/1340738632144072711

54 Maru, Makda. 2016. "Conflict Early Warning and the Response Nexus: The Case of the African Union-Continental Early Warning System." Doctor of International Conflict Management Dissertations (Kennesaw University). https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/incmdoc_etd/3/

55 Woldemichael, Shewit. 2021. "The reality of the AU's response to crises." ISS Today. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-reality-of-the-aus-response-to-crises

suing their own interests. Many of these external actors are deeply entangled in domestic politics, often providing substantial support to warring parties in countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Libya. Their influence has become so wide-ranging that it not only undermines state integrity but also constrains and overshadows the agency of domestic political and military forces.

External actors are increasingly taking over regional mediation efforts, relegating the AU and RECs to secondary roles, despite their primary mandate in peace and security. This is evidenced by Türkiye's mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia, US–Qatar involvement in the DRC–Rwanda tensions, the leading roles of Saudi Arabia and the US in Sudan, and Saudi Arabia's engagement in discussions on Ethiopia–Eritrea. Together, these cases reflect a troubling trend in which bilateral mediation initiatives are increasingly replacing and displacing the established multilateral frameworks of the AU. In today's world of intense geopolitical competition, these interventions have only compounded the AU's structural weaknesses.

In this regard, the GPI 2024 Report notes: "Much of the devastation came about because of the activity of foreign powers seeking to support a multitude of actors in the civil war."[56] The GPI 2024 Report links the rise in conflicts and fatalities to the decline of US dominance in conflict management over the past two decades. It elaborates this point, stating that while the US is still a leading global power, its long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drained resources and attention, while power struggles in Syria and the wider Middle East further weakened its role. More fundamentally, this observation poses an important question about the US government's willingness, more than its ability, to restrain other powers, especially the Gulf States, which have significant influence in US lobbying circles and have played destructive roles in wars across Africa. This raises broader concerns about US policy, particularly its readiness (or not) to invest diplomatic capital and prioritize peace over its economic interests worldwide.

Once again, this presents the existential question of whether the AU is still fit for purpose at a time when a unipolar world under the US umbrella is no more.

Rethinking the African Union in a multipolar world

The history of Africa's continental institutions is deeply intertwined with the broader evolution of global geopolitics; the legacy of slavery and colonialism; and the enduring struggle for Pan-African unity, anti-colonialism, independence, sovereignty, peace, development, and agency. Since the era of decolonization, Africa's strategic position has repeatedly been reshaped by external interference, internal fragility, and shifting configurations of global power. The creation and transformation of continental institutions, from the OAU in 1963 to the AU in 2002, reflect ongoing attempts to balance state sovereignty with collective Pan-African solidarity, peace, security, and development against the realities of a fragmented, underdeveloped, and conflict-prone continent.[57]

From decolonization to Cold War rivalries

The post-independence period of the 1960s was a moment of profound optimism and aspiration. Newly independent states sought to consolidate political sovereignty, achieve rapid economic transformation, and promote continental unity. The formation of the OAU in 1963 was a historic expression of Pan-African solidarity. Its primary objectives were to complete decolonization, eradicate apartheid, and promote unity among the newly independent states. Yet its founding principles – non-interference in internal affairs, respect for territorial integrity, and peaceful settlement of disputes – reflected both the artificiality and fragility of postcolonial states and the determination of leaders to shield their sovereignty from external manipulation and internal secessionist pressures along colonial borders. [58]

56 Institute for Economics & Peace. 2024. "Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World." https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf, Page 55.

57 Adebajo, Adekeye. 2010. "The Curse of Berlin: Africa After the Cold War." The Journal of African History 1 (53);https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254357384_The_Curse_of_Berlin_Africa_After_the_Cold_War ; Murithi, Tim. 2008. "The African Union's evolving role in peace operations: the African Union Mission in Burundi, the African Union Mission in Sudan and the African Union Mission in Somalia: essays." African Security Review 17 (1): 70-82. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10246029.2008.9627460

58 Easterly, William. 2009. "Can the west save Africa?" Journal of economic literature 47 (2): 373-447. https://www.aeaweb.

During the Cold War, Africa quickly became an arena of superpower rivalry. The US and the Soviet Union competed for influence through ideological alliances, military aid, and proxy conflicts.[59] African leaders used this bipolar competition to extract resources, critical minerals, and diplomatic support from both sides – a strategy that brought short-term benefits but entrenched patterns of conflict, inter-state wars, border disputes, aid dependency and militarization.[60] Liberation struggles and coups in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, DRC, Libya, the Sahel, Ghana, Nigeria, and Somalia were deeply shaped by this global confrontation, with external actors providing ideology, arms, funding, and political cover. While the OAU offered moral and diplomatic backing to liberation movements, it lacked the capacity to mediate conflicts within and between member states, many of which were sustained or intensified by Cold War dynamics.[61]

The OAU's normative commitment to non-interference thus became its (and its member states') shield from external actors, but also its terminal weakness with regard to continental peace, governance, and development matters. It protected the sovereignty of African states against external interference while preventing collective action in response to intrastate wars, atrocities, coups, and displacement. The persistence of colonial borders, combined with the adoption of imported governance models and a dependence on former colonial powers, created states that were often internally divided and externally dependent. By the late 1980s, as the Cold War was ending, the limitations of this system had become apparent. Many states faced civil wars, genocide and atrocities, economic crises, and authoritarian stagnation, while the OAU struggled to maintain relevance in the changing international landscape – very similar to the position of the AU in Africa today.

The end of the Cold War and the crisis of sovereignty

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989 marked a turning point for Africa, as for the world. The withdrawal of superpower patronage exposed the fragility of regimes that had relied on external support for survival.[62] The emergence of a unipolar order dominated by the US reduced Africa's strategic significance in global geopolitics. Western engagement shifted from ideological competition to economic conditionality, as international financial institutions imposed structural adjustment programmes that reshaped African economies and governance structures.[63]

Strategic disengagement from Africa reached its peak in the early 1990s. The US's withdrawal from Somalia following the Black Hawk Down incident in 1993 symbolized a broader reluctance among major powers to intervene in African crises.[64] Without the stabilizing, or destabilizing, influence of superpower rivalry, many African

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org/articles?id=10.1257/jel.47.2.373

59 Young, Crawford, and Howard Brown. 1995. "The African colonial state in comparative perspective." History: Reviews of New Books 39-40. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03612759.1995.9949208

60 Schraeder, P J. 1993. "Reviewing the study of US policy towards Africa." Africa, Third world quarterly 775-86. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3992951

61 Mkandawire, Thandika. 2001. "Thinking about Developmental States in Africa." Cambridge Journal of Economics (Oxford University Press) 25 (3): 289-313. https://www.rrojasdatabank.info/mkandawirestates.pdf

62 Clapham, Christopher. 1996. Africa and the international system: The politics of state survival. Vol. 50. Cambridge University Press. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/72071/sample/9780521572071ws.pdf ; Hirsch, John L, and Robert B Oakley. 1995. "Somalia and operation Restore Hope. Reflections on peacemaking and peacekeeping." (United States Institute of Peace Press). https://archive.org/details/somaliaoperation0000hirs

63 Mkandawire, Thandika P, and Charles Chukwuma Soludo. 2003. African voices on structural adjustment: A companion to our continent, our future. IDRC. https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a61212cf-edc1-4066-8967-1f50e04b29a5/content

64 Bowden, Mark. 2023. "Black Hawk down: A story of modern war." (Grove/Atlantic, Inc). https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/259029 ; Clarke, Walter S, and Jeffrey Herbst. 1997. Learning from Somalia: the lessons of armed humanitarian intervention. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Learning-From-Somalia-The-Lessons-Of-Armed-Humanitarian-Intervention/Clarke-Herbst/p/book/9780813327945 ; Western, Jon. 2005. Selling intervention and war: The presidency, the media, and the American public. JHU Press. https://press.jhu.edu/books/title/8608/selling-intervention-and-war?srsltid=AfmBOor2pAD1dhNiDydiIn1TFIq50oVVWjcySWrMF04L-_LRn1FFSJpL ; Durch, William J. 1996. "Introduction to

conflicts became, in the words of former UN secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "orphan wars",[65] sustained by local grievances, illicit war economies, and regional rivalries. Just as many of Africa's devastating wars today remain largely unnoticed, then UN secretary general Kofi Annan remarked back in 2000 that "[y]et these conflicts go almost unreported".[66] While wars in Europe and the Middle East dominate global headlines, African conflicts continue to inflict untold suffering on millions with little international awareness.

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda laid bare the catastrophic consequences of the post-Cold War interregnum and the fundamental inadequacy of OAU and UN peace and security frameworks.[67] Despite clear warnings and evidence of atrocities, both the OAU and the UN failed to act decisively.[68] The OAU's adherence to non-interference prevented collective intervention, while the UN's mission was constrained by political hesitation among UN Security Council members due to a lack of national interest imperatives. Nearly 1 million people were killed in just 100 days. This failure not only was a moral catastrophe but also represented a profound institutional crisis. It discredited the OAU's sovereignty-centred doctrine and revealed the limits of the international community's commitment to humanitarian protection in Africa.

This led to the conclusion that the OAU was unfit for the new mission of preventing intrastate wars, atrocities, and displacement. A successor organization with a new purpose was needed for an era of unipolarity under US hegemony.

From the OAU to the AU: Rethinking sovereignty and responsibility

The Rwandan genocide triggered deep introspection within Africa. The OAU's International Panel of Eminent Personalities (1998) and the UN's Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations During the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda (1999) concluded that the vastly inadequate reaction to the genocide was not merely a failure of logistics but also structural in nature, manifesting in a lack of political will and flawed normative and institutional design. These findings called for a fundamental rethink of sovereignty, arguing that African institutions had the responsibility and needed the authority to intervene when states failed to protect their populations.[69] The Sirte Libya Declaration of the OAU in 1999 resolved the need to transform the OAU into an effective, inward-looking organization with robust conflict prevention and intervention mandates, but one that also engaged with partnerships and external actors.[70]

In this context, the transformation from the OAU into the AU in 2002 represented a paradigm shift. The AU's Constitutive Act redefined sovereignty as responsibility, explicitly recognizing the right of the Union to intervene in cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.[71] The establishment of the PSC and APSA institution-

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Anarchy: Humanitarian intervention and 'State-building'in Somalia." In UN Peacekeeping, American Politics and the Uncivil Wars of the 1990s, by William Durch, 311-366. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/un-peacekeeping-in-civil-wars/bibliography/FB61DF366B2EE0C10D9CF0BA8A1895C6

65 Boutros-Ghali, Boutros. 1996. "Global Leadership after the Cold War." Foreign Affairs 75 (2): 86–98. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20047490

66 Annan, Kofi. 2000. Speech of the Secretary General. Accessed October 2025. https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/press-rels/2000/sg2519.html. Weiss, Thomas G. 2016. Humanitarian intervention: Ideas in Action. 3rd. https://archive.org/details/isbn_2901509507329

67 Des Forges, Alison. 1999. "Leave none to tell the story." New York: Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/1999/03/01/leave-none-tell-story/genocide-rwanda

68 Carlsson, Ingvar, Han Sung-Joo, and Kupolati M Rufus . 1999. "Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda." United Nations, 5-121. https://search.gesis.org/publication/bszbw-wao-389812161

69 Annan, Kofi. 2000. *Speech of the Secretary General.* Accessed October 2025. https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/press-rels/2000/sg2519.html.

70 Gelot, Linnea, and Mikael Eriksson. 2013. *The African Union in Light of the Arab Revolts: An appraisal of the foreign policy and security objectives of South Africa, Ethiopia and Algeria. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.* The Swedish Defence Research Agency. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:622198/fulltext01.pdf

71 African Union. 2000. "Constitutive Act of the African Union." *Constitutive Act of the African Union.* Accessed

alized a new preventive and interventionist agenda.[72] The AU's guiding principle of "African solutions to African problems" symbolized both normative ambition and pragmatic necessity, a response to the selective interventions and indifference of external powers.

The post-9/11 global order and the AU's expanding role

The post-9/11 era brought global security to the top of international agendas, integrating Africa into the "global war on terror". Islamist insurgencies in the Horn of Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, North Africa, and the Sahel elicited renewed international attention and resources. The AU undertook major peace operations, including in Darfur and Somalia, that tested its new institutional frameworks to prevent atrocities and stabilize its member states. AMISOM (later ATMIS and now AUSSOM) became the AU's flagship mission, deploying tens of thousands of African troops in complex counterinsurgency operations.[73] These missions demonstrated African willingness to lead in crises where global powers hesitated, but also exposed heavy dependence on external funding, particularly from the EU's African Peace Facility and the UN's assessed contributions. [74]

This dependence blurred the distinction between African ownership and external control, raising fundamental questions about the sustainability of "African solutions". The AU could authorize interventions but not independently sustain them, leaving its security architecture vulnerable to the shifting priorities of donors and global politics, a situation that has become even more acute today. [75] More critically, a lack of determination, political will, and resources by member states to follow through on the decisions of AU organs, particularly the PSC, rendered AU mandates merely aspirational and often ineffectual.

The multipolar turn and the erosion of multilateralism

The past decade has witnessed another transformation in global power relations. The unipolar order that shaped the AU's founding has eroded and been replaced by an increasingly multipolar world, characterized by renewed great-power rivalry. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the assertive involvement of Gulf states have reintroduced external competition reminiscent of the Cold War, though now more pragmatic and less ideological, driven by commercial interests and powerful leaders with authoritarian inclinations.[76] Africa's strategic resources, growing markets, and geography (e.g., access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden) have become focal points in this contest. [77]

October 2025. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf.

72 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'race to the bottom' : Africa on the global chessboard and the call for renewed Pan-African agency." (UNU-CRIS). https://cris.unu.edu/beyond-%E2%80%98race-bottom%E2%80%99-africa-global-chessboard-and-call-renewed-pan-african-agency

73 Williams, P D. 2021. "Learning Lessons from Peace Operations in Africa." In *The State of Peacebuilding in Africa.*, by T McNamee and M Muyangwa. Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7_2

74 De Waal, Alex. 2015. *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power.* John Wiley & Sons. https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Real+Politics+of+the+Horn+of+Africa%3A+Money%2C+War+and+the+Business+of+Power-p-9780745695587

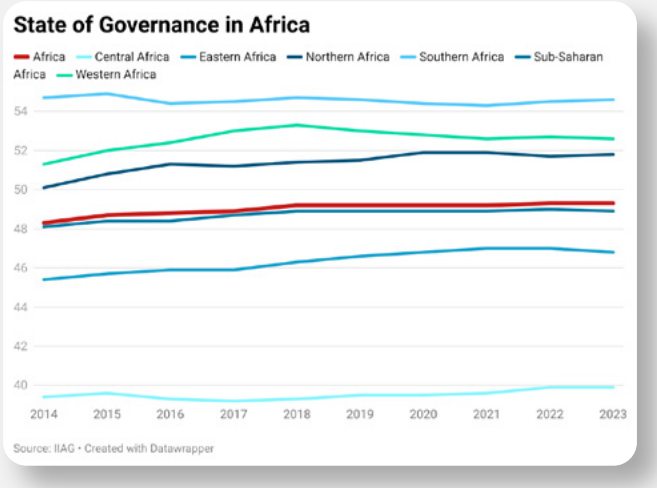
75 Tieku, Thomas Kwasi. 2019. "Ruling from the shadows: The nature and functions of informal international rules in world politics." *International Studies Review* 21 (2): 225-243. https://academic.oup.com/isr/article-abstract/21/2/225/5359443

76 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'race to the bottom' : Africa on the global chessboard and the call for renewed Pan-African agency." (UNU-CRIS). https://cris.unu.edu/beyond-%E2%80%98race-bottom%E2%80%99-africa-global-chessboard-and-call-renewed-pan-african-agency

77 Maru, Mehari Taddele, and Fabrizio Tassinari. 2021. "Global rivalry in the Red Sea: A 'Geopolitical' European Union should encourage cooperation in the Red Sea region." *DIIS Policy Brief* (Danish Institute for International Studies). https://research.diis.dk/en/publications/global-rivalry-in-the-red-sea-a-geopolitical-european-union-shoul/

Meanwhile, the paralysis of the UN Security Council, driven by polarization among its permanent members, has limited collective capacity to respond to wars. [78] State integrity in Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, the DRC, and across the Sahel is in grave danger.[79] Wars, atrocities, and mass displacement are once again escalating, testing the AU's capacity to uphold its prevention and protection mandates.

Figure 21: Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2014 vs 2023



Source: Compiled by the Mehari Taddele Maru 2024, IIAG

As shown in Figure 21, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance reveals a troubling pattern of stagnation and decline across the continent since 2018. As the data illustrates, Africa's overall governance score plateaued around 49 points after modest gains in the early part of the decade, with virtually no improvement in the five years leading to 2023. Regional trajectories tell a similarly concerning story: Western Africa, which had been a bright spot with scores climbing to approximately 53 by 2018, has since experienced a notable reversal. Northern Africa peaked around 2020 before trending downward, while Southern Africa—historically the highest-performing region—has shown persistent stagnation hovering near 54.5 with a slight downward drift. Eastern Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa have similarly flatlined after modest earlier progress. Central Africa, despite marginal improvement, remains the lowest-performing region at approximately 40 points. This continent-wide pattern of arrested progress underscores the urgent need for renewed commitment to strengthening institutions, enhancing security, and expanding democratic participation if African nations are to break free from this prolonged governance stagnation and deliver meaningful improvements for their citizens.

Strategic autonomy in an era of transition

International systems are today witnessing a paradigm shift from the liberal institutionalist and constructivist foundations upon which the AU and its architecture were built toward a resurgence of realist approaches in international relations. Realism, which emphasizes might, power politics, and state-centric behaviour[80], has gained renewed prominence as states increasingly pursue transactional diplomacy rather than solidarity-based cooperation. In this emerging order, financial aid and material support are tied less to international solidarity and more

78 African Union. 2000. "Constitutive Act of the African Union." *Constitutive Act of the African Union.* Accessed October 2025. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf.

79 African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes. 2020. *25 Years of African Peace Operations.* Accessed October 2025. https://www.accord.org.za/video/25-years-of-african-peace-operations/.

80 Morgenthau, Hans J. . 1949. "Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace." *Political Science Quarterly* (Oxford University Press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2144235 ; Waltz, Kenneth N. . 2014. *Theory of International Politics.* Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/balance-of-power-in-international-relations/kenneth-n-waltzs-theory-of-international-politics/FF5801DA8EA48B2C84E9EC84BB59AB19 ; Mearsheimer, John J. 2003. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition).* W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated. https://librarysearch.kcl.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?vid=44KCL_INST:44KCL_INST&tab=LibraryCatalog&docid=alma9961744733570688l&lang=en&context=L&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine

to strategic calculations, where states use assistance to gain influence, secure alliances, and counter rival powers.[81] This contrasts sharply with liberalism and constructivism, which focus on cooperation, interdependence, and institutional frameworks premised on shared norms, values, and financial solidarity in order to promote peace, stability, democracy, and development through multilateral cooperation based on international law.[82]

The growing ascendance of nationalist realism threatens to establish arrangements based on hegemonic stability, a theory according to which dominant powers establish and (ab)use or disregard multilateral institutions and international law to maintain their leadership.[83] This also supports variants of global political economy theories, including core–periphery dynamics, as explained by dependency theorists and world-systems analysts.[84] Resource dependence theory (RDT)[85] is weaponized by the power imbalances and resource control that shape influence and strategic decision-making in organizational behaviour, in this case affecting the AU and its decisions.

This current global interregnum, defined by power rivalries, nationalist retrenchment, and diminishing commitment to multilateralism, has thus ushered in a post-unipolar world order with increased realism, where states vie to secure self-interest, security, and power without the restraint placed on them by the normative and institutional mechanisms of the post-Cold War era. Today, structural shifts in the global economy, demography, technology, and military affairs, coupled with intensified geopolitical competition among great powers and nearby middle powers, have fundamentally altered the geopolitical systems the AU once relied on for the effective discharge of its core mandates.

In practice, realism means that African states, like others, prioritize influence, alliances, and security calculations over collective norms. The state-centric view of power jealously guards against ceding sovereignty, particularly during times of uncertainty, unpredictability, and arms races. There is a high probability that African states will be increasingly inclined to adopt similar self-interested, security and power-focused positions, even on Pan-African agendas and at the expense of Pan-African norms and institutions.

This fundamentally undermines the AU, as it discourages states from ceding parts of their sovereignty for institutional effectiveness, thereby preventing the preventive and intervention measures provided under the AU Constitutive Act. This explains why the AU's preventive and intervention efforts often are and will continue to be blocked, delayed, or watered down – sovereignty concerns and narrow national interest imperatives outweigh humanitarian imperatives. External actors exploit Africa as an arena for rivalry, much as they did during the Cold War, using aid, arms, and alliances as tools of competition. The AU's effectiveness will further be undermined by inconsistent application, selective enforcement, and manipulation by powerful states, both African and external. Added to this are

81 Mearsheimer, John J. 2003. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition).* W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated. https://librarysearch.kcl.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?vid=44KCL_INST:44KCL_INST&tab=LibraryCatalog&docid=alma9961744733570688l&lang=en&context=L&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine

82 Keohane, Robert O. , and Joseph S. Nye. 1978. "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition." *Political Science Quarterly* (Oxford University Press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2149069; Finnemore , Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization.* https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361 ; Wendt, Alexander. 1999. "Social Theory of International Politics." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* . https://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Wendt-Social-Theory-of-International-Politics.pdf

83 Kindleberger, Charles Poor. 1973. *The world in depression, 1929-1939.* London: Allen Lane. https://discovered.ed.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?vid=44UOE_INST:44UOE_VU2&tab=Everything&docid=alma99237873502466&lang=en&context=L&query=sub,exact,Financial%20crises%20--%20East%20Asia ; Gilpin, Robert. 2010. *War and Change in World Politics.* Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/war-and-change-in-world-politics/3A41732AFF3F08687A9FEDA2AF1E6A5D

84 Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974. "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Cambridge University press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/178015?origin=JSTOR-pdf ; Ravenhill, John. 2016. "The political economy of the Trans-Pacific Partnership: a '21st Century' trade agreement?" *Taylor and Francis.* https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13563467.2017.1270925 ; Oatley, Thomas. 2019. "Toward a political economy of complex interdependence." *European Journal of International Relations.* https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354066119846553

85 Pfeffer, Jeffrey, and Gerald R. Salancik. 1978. "The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence." *American Journal of Sociology* (University of Chicago Press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778955

assaults on multilateral systems and a sharp decline in international financial aid.[86]

Rethinking the African Union's mandate and reimagining African agency

The AU, conceived and designed during the optimism of a liberal and constructivist unipolar era, now operates in a realist multipolar geopolitical environment. Its ambitious mandates for prevention, intervention, integration, and representation have not matched the magnitude of Africa's grave crises and the pace of geopolitical change. The institution faces a serious capability gap: it aspires to provide continental leadership to prevent conflicts, intervene to stop wars and atrocities, integrate Africa, and represent Africa globally, but remains constrained by the realities of limited political will, resources, fragmentation of voices, and dependency on external partners.

As the global order transitions toward a new configuration, marked by the decline of Western hegemony, the rise of new great and middle powers, and the weakening of multilateralism and undermining of international law, the need to rethink the AU's role has become urgent. This rethinking must go beyond institutional reform to encompass a reimagination of the African state and sovereignty itself. The fragmentation of Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, DRC, and several Sahelian states reflects deeper crises of legitimacy and governance that transcend borders.

The AU must move beyond reactive crisis management to proactive strategic engagement that links peace, governance, and development with geopolitical partnerships. This necessitates a conception of sovereignty rooted not in territorial control but in responsibility to populations and respect for human dignity.[87] Repositioning Africa in global geopolitics therefore requires institutional renewal and a reassertion of Africa's agency. In this reimagined framework, Pan-Africanism regains its relevance – not as a nostalgic ideal, but as a practical philosophy for collective action and resilience in a fractured and competitive world.[88]

A case for strategic focus

Rethinking the AU's level of ambition towards a narrower, more focused core mandate would enable the concentration of force, finance, and leadership energy, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness and impact. While acknowledging that not all mandates and normative frameworks can be implemented precisely as outlined in founding documents, this strategic recalibration would salvage what remains salvageable of the AU's relevance while simultaneously providing the organization with substantive teeth and genuine autonomy of action. This proposal, though appearing radical, finds substantial support in contemporary scholarship on African regional governance, organizational effectiveness, and the AU's institutional reform process.

The norm-implementation gap

Ambitious mandates and limited capabilities

The AU's expanding and sprawling mandate encompasses peace and security, governance, development, economic integration, human rights, health, migration, continental infrastructure, and more. These mandates reflect Pan-African aspirations for comprehensive continental transformation. However, scholarly assessments consistently document a widening gap between the AU's normative ambitions and both the political will of its member states and their operational capacity to deliver on those commitments. This gap is attributable to fundamental structural and financial weaknesses manifest in systemic dysfunction across three dimensions: ordinary African citizens perceive neither relevance nor impact from AU activities, resulting in profound institutional distrust; member states

86 OECD. 2025. *Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term.* Policy Brief, OECD, Paris: OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/8c530629-en.pdf

87 Deng, Francis M, Kimaro Sadikiel , Terrence Lyons, and Donald Rothchild. 1996. *Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa.* Brookings Institution Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctv80cc8b

88 Mbeki, Thabo . 2013. "Africa must unite : an imperative of our time." *The Thinker* (University of Johannesburg) 51. https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/journalArticle/Africa-must-unite--an-imperative/9910660207691

regard the organization's utility as predominantly performative and demonstrate insufficient commitment to their statutory obligations; and international partners engage the AU instrumentally, prioritizing their strategic interests over the continent's articulated needs.

Norm-setting versus implementation gap

Mehari Taddele Maru examines the relationship between norm-setting and implementation in the AU by highlighting what he identifies as a structural imbalance between the production of legal and policy frameworks and their realization in practice.[89] Writing in the African Union Herald (Vol. 2, 2012)[90], Maru argues that the AU has become a highly effective norm entrepreneur, generating a dense body of treaties, conventions, and policy instruments, but remains comparatively weak in ensuring that these norms are translated into binding obligations and concrete outcomes. For Maru, this gap undermines the transformative potential of AU norms and exposes a fundamental weakness in continental governance.

Maru argues that the value of norms ultimately depends on their implementation. Without closing the gap between what the AU says and what member states do, normative frameworks are symbolic rather than transformative. Expounding on this analysis, Maru identifies the norm-implementation gap as a fundamental problem plaguing the AU.[91] He argues that "ambitious plans that proffer minimal consideration to the existing implementation capacity and disregard the above-mentioned internal constraints contribute to the gloomy utilization of resources at the AU". He adds that the AU has developed more than 200 legislative and policy instruments, but many have limited practical effect because member states or institutions do not implement them effectively.

Maru contends that there is a significant and persistent gap within the AU between the creation of norms (treaties, protocols, statutes, policy frameworks, guidelines, etc.) and their actual implementation on the ground. While the AU has been effective in norm-setting –producing a large body of treaties, conventions, and policy frameworks on issues like democracy, governance, refugees, and human rights – this proliferation of norms has not been matched by mechanisms that ensure they are implemented and enforced.

Engel and Porto similarly identify this "theory–practice gap" as a fundamental challenge, noting that "the gap between the APSA's lofty ideas and actual performance on the ground has not received sufficient scholarly attention" (p. 552).[92] Their analysis, informed by organizational theory and institutional analysis, shows how expansive institutional architectures require either substantial trimming or strategic re-prioritization to align with implementable capacities.[93]

Okeke's evaluation of AU institutional reform prospects reinforces this challenge as a tension between "ambition versus realism", arguing that the organization risks overreach when its institutional ambitions exceed realistic capacity constraints.[94] In this evaluation, the AU is seeking to implement an impossible mandate by attempting to take on responsibilities that surpass available resources, political will, and operational capacity. This assessment draws on princi-

89 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2012. "Rethinking the North African Uprisings." (AU Herald). https://meharitaddele.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AU_Herald_Design_Volume_02_09.pdf

90 Ibid

91 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2013. "The Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union at 50." *Pambazuka News.* https://www.pambazuka.org/organization-african-unity-oauafrican-union-50

92 Obi, Cyril, Edward Akuffo, Jean-Bosco Butera, Abu-Bakarr Bah, and Thomas Tieku. 2013. "African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA): The Theory - The Practice Gap." *SSRN.* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2266593#:~:text=gap%20between%20the%20APSA's%20lofty%20ideas%20and,ground%20has%20not%20received%20sufficient%20scholarly%20attention.

93 March , James G., and Johan P. Olsen. 1984. "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life." *American Political Science Review.* https://www.rochelleterman.com/ComparativeExam/sites/default/files/Bibliography%20and%20Summaries/March%20and%20Olson%201984.pdf ; Scott, W. Richard . 2008. "Approaching Adulthood: The Maturing of Institutional Theory." (Springer Nature). https://www.jstor.org/stable/40345595

94 Okeke, Jide. 2019. "Repositioning the AU's role in counter-terrorism operations." (Institute for Security Studies). https://africaportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Repositioning_the_AUs_role_in_counter_terrorism.pdf

pal-agent theory[95] and organizational capacity literature[96] to explain the disconnect between delegated mandates and agent performance.

Empty signalling: declaration vs determination

A central component of Maru's argument concerns the adoption and ratification of normative instruments.[97] He contends that these processes are easier and less costly for member states because they carry no serious legal consequences, and because the budget for developing norms typically comes from donor-supported programmes. However, when implementation requires consequential member state commitment and resource allocation that may lead to political, performance, and legal accountability, these same states either act contrary to their decisions or drag their feet. He observes that many key AU treaties fail to enter into force because they do not attract the minimum number of ratifications required. This, he argues, reveals a "disconnect between collective political agreement and legal commitment", where states endorse norms rhetorically but hesitate to bind themselves legally.[98] In this sense, norm adoption becomes symbolic rather than operational, limiting the authority and credibility of AU legal instruments. Low ratification rates are the first indicator of the norm-implementation gap, revealing a lack of political will on the part of member states. A number of important AU treaties have not entered into force because not enough member states have ratified them – highlighting a structural barrier between agreed norms and actual legal obligations.

The AU continues to create grand visions without honestly assessing whether it has the capacity to deliver on them. The AU and its APSA, despite normative advances, face operational delivery constraints due to resource shortfalls that force reliance on external partners whose priorities may not align with African interests. Maru critiques the overwhelming focus on creating policies while systematically failing to implement them. He argues that "the era of delivery and democracy should be based on strict adherence to the AU Constitutive Act and a shift of mission from norm-setting to effective norm implementation". [99]This is the crux of the implementation deficit – the AU has become excellent at drafting frameworks but woefully inadequate at translating them into reality.

The scale of this problem is staggering. Maru says that "the AU has more than 200 well-advanced legislative and policy frameworks on several issues covering the four pillars, including 43 treaties and conventions".[100] He notes the enormous cost: "These policies cost at least 1 million USD from the first draft by a consultant to adoption by the heads of state." Yet, despite these massive investments, "currently the AU Commission, which is the engine of the AU, lacks the political will of member states and faces leadership deficit in the implementation of these policies". The implementation failure manifests most clearly in the AU's low budget execution rates, and extends to staffing as well. The combination of low staffing, poor execution, and weak accountability creates a vicious cycle.

Maru identifies a broader problem with African states: "African states are strong on the wrong functions, weak on the right areas."[101] He explains that many states "are vigorous and resourceful in deception, intimidation, and repression" while failing to deliver basic public goods. This creates a continental implementation crisis, where both the AU and its member states fail to translate normative commitments into tangible improvements in citizens' lives.

95 Kiewiet, D. Roderick, and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1991. "The Logic of Delegation." (University of Chicago Press). https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/L/bo3629025.html

96 Christensen, Tom, and Per Lægreid. 2007. "The Whole-of-Government Approach to Public Sector Reform." *Public Administration Review.* https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00797.x

97 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2013. "The Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union at 50." *Pambazuka News.* https://www.pambazuka.org/organization-african-unity-oauafrican-union-50

98 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2012. "Rethinking the North African Uprisings." (AU Herald). https://meharitaddele.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AU_Herald_Design_Volume_02_09.pdf

99 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2013. "The Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union at 50." *Pambazuka News.* https://www.pambazuka.org/organization-african-unity-oauafrican-union-50

100 Ibid

101 Ibid

Maru[102] and Engel[103] provide detailed evidence of chronic financial dependency and operational capacity deficits, including critically low budget absorption rates in many departments. The AU's institutional architecture compounds these challenges, as over 100 organizational structures, including AU organs, specialized technical agencies, directorates, departments, and high-level committees incur substantial operational and coordination costs. Year after year, the AU's dependence on international partners for funding is excessively high. International partners contribute over 70% of its overall estimated budget, a level too substantial to characterize as solidarity – it more accurately reflects dependency. For programme funding specifically, virtually over 90% comes from external partners, particularly the EU. Member state contributions remain problematic.[104] More than 30 member states consistently default on their assessed contributions, leaving the AU to collect only approximately 60% of what member states owe annually. The 2016 Kigali financing decision, intended to address this crisis, has been implemented by a mere 20% of member states, with major financial contributors notably absent from this group.[105]

Financial constraints and donor dependency

Maru further critiques the AU's allocation of institutional resources, noting that disproportionate attention is devoted to drafting new norms rather than implementing existing ones. He argues that "the emphasis on norm creation has far outpaced investment in implementation, monitoring and supervision mechanisms."[106]According to Maru, redirecting financial, technical, and political resources toward implementation capacity – particularly compliance monitoring and institutional follow-up – would yield far greater governance dividends than the continued proliferation of new frameworks.

The AU's capacity constraints are rooted in chronic financial limitations and dependence on external funding, which together severely compromise operational autonomy and the ability to concentrate effort on priority tasks. Vines[107] provides comprehensive documentation of this dependency, demonstrating that "AU-deployed missions have been fully dependent on external donors; harmonization is a major problem; serious questions remain over AU capacity" to sustain peace operations without European or UN financial backing (p. 3). This dependency can be understood through resource dependence theory[108] which posits that organizations become constrained by their reliance on external resource providers who may impose conditions or priorities that diverge from the organization's stated mission.

Majinge extends this analysis, arguing that "major challenges facing regional arrangements … have more to do with inadequate financial and logistical resources than the nature of those mandates" (p. 539).[109] This observation suggests that while mandate design matters, resource availability constitutes the binding constraint on AU effectiveness. The organization's limited financial autonomy creates a vicious cycle: broad mandates require substantial resources, resource shortfalls necessitate donor dependence, and donor influence shapes implementation priorities in ways that may diverge from member state preferences or continental needs.

Kahombo and other scholars emphasize the urgent need to operationalize alternative financing mechanisms

102 Ibid

103 Engel, Ulf. 2019. "The finances of the African Union (AU)." In *The Finances of Regional Organisations in the Global South*, 16. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429055874-2/finances-african-union-au-ulf-engel

104 Institute for Peace and Security Studies. 2018. "A Wind of Change? The Institutional Reform of the African Union and Africa's Security Provision." *Tana Papers: A Collection of Policy Briefs.* https://ipss-addis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2018_tana_papers_en.pdf

105 Ibid

106 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2012. "Rethinking the North African Uprisings." (AU Herald). https://meharitaddele.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AU_Herald_Design_Volume_02_09.pdf

107 Vines, Alex. 2013. "A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture." *International Affairs.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260162787_A_decade_of_African_Peace_and_Security_Architecture

108 Pfeffer, Jeffrey, and Gerald R. Salancik. 1978. "The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence." *American Journal of Sociology* (University of Chicago Press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778955

109 Majinge, Charles. 2010. "The concept of global governance in public international law: addressing democratic deficit and enhancing accountability in the decision-making process of the African Union." *Journal of African and international law.* https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=338452095

and scale up capacity for the PSC and APSA elements.[110] While the AU has adopted decisions on self-financing, including the 0.2% levy on eligible imports, the alternative financing decision, as in other areas of norm-setting, faces the same implementation problems, which are ultimately a lack of commitment by member states. Thus, the AU continues to rely heavily on external funding for operational budgets and peace missions. This financial dependence undermines the autonomy necessary for the AU to pursue continental priorities independently of donor preferences.

Another determinant of effectiveness in norm implementation, as highlighted by Maru, is that the AU spends more time, effort, and resources on drafting new policies and norms than on ensuring the implementation of existing ones.[111] He suggests that redirecting resources toward implementation capacities, including monitoring and supervision, would have a more tangible impact on African governance and societal outcomes.

While norm-setting can occur at a regional or continental level, real implementation happens locally, within member states and RECs. Though the AU has a comprehensive normative framework, its effectiveness depends on translating this into action at regional and national levels – a task the AU cannot accomplish alone. Therefore, effective implementation requires political will, resources, and institutional capacity at all levels.

Member states frequently fail to ratify key AU governance treaties – and even when ratification occurs, implementation is often undermined by inadequate resource allocation, weak institutional follow-through, or selective and uneven application of the same norms across different national contexts. This gap, and also the inconsistency in the application of norms, erodes both the credibility and effectiveness of continental governance frameworks.

Normative proliferation without implementation

The credibility crisis

A particularly damaging consequence of the AU's expansive mandate is the proliferation of normative instruments – treaties, protocols, frameworks, and declarations – that lack corresponding implementation capacity. This gap between promise and performance undermines the AU's legitimacy and contributes to conditions that spark popular discontent across the continent. Maru and El Fassi argue that norms derive their legitimacy and value not from their articulation but from their consistent and well-resourced implementation.[112] They highlight the potential comparative advantage of RECs such as IGAD in localizing and operationalizing AU norms, given their proximity to member states, regional legitimacy, and contextual knowledge. This argument draws on subsidiarity principles from federalism theory[113] and multi-level governance frameworks,[114] which suggest that governance functions should be performed at the most appropriate level – often the one closest to affected populations.

Freire, Lopes, and Nascimento (2016)[115] demonstrate this pattern in their assessment of the R2P principle, showing that "the formalization of principles does not necessarily mean their effective implementation", given institutional weaknesses and resource gaps (p. 230). Their research reveals how the AU's formal adoption of R2P

110 Kahombo, Balingene. 2018. "The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: Rise or Decline of Collective Security in Africa?" (Berlin Potsdam Research Group). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3291306

111 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2013. "The Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union at 50." *Pambazuka News.* https://www.pambazuka.org/organization-african-unity-oauafrican-union-50

112 Maru, Mehari Taddele, and Sahra El Fassi. 2015. "Can the regional economic communities support implementation of the African Governance Architecture (AGA)? The case of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)." (European Centre for Development Policy Management). https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Can-the-regional-economic-communities-support-of-of-Maru-Fassi/42ef0f6d6aa25fb6fe7f8b16f55a039c3dcfe207

113 Follesdal, Andreas. 1998. "Subsidiarity." *The Journal of Political Philosophy.* https://www.follesdal.net/ms/Follesdal-1998-Subsidiarity.pdf

114 Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2003. "Unraveling the Central State, but How? Types of Multi-level Governance." *American polictical Science Review.* https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13018/2016/09/hooghe.marks_.unravelingcentralstate.apsr_.2003.pdf

115 Freire, Maria Raquel, Paula Duarte Lopes, and Daniela Nascimento. 2016. "Responsibility to protect' and the African Union: Assessing the AU's capacity to respond to regional complex humanitarian and political emergencies." *African Security Review.* https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10246029.2016.1176936

and related humanitarian intervention norms has not translated into operational capacity to respond effectively to complex humanitarian and political emergencies. This finding resonates with norm diffusion theory[116] which distinguishes between norm adoption (acceptance of a standard) and norm internalization (embedding the standard in practice).

This dismal implementation level creates a legitimacy crisis for the AU. When the organization repeatedly adopts ambitious normative commitments without demonstrating the capacity to operationalize them, it risks being perceived as producing symbolic gestures rather than substantive solutions. Member states and continental publics may lose confidence in AU institutions when high-profile commitments, such as "Silencing the Guns" by 2020 (later extended to 2030) or achieving the Agenda 2063 aspirations, consistently fail to materialize within promised timelines.

Adeogun[117] documents this pattern in his comprehensive assessment of Agenda 2063 implementation, noting "limited advancement in flagship projects … highlights persistent challenges" in translating continental aspirations into concrete achievements (p. 87). His analysis reveals how resource constraints, coordination failures, and political obstacles have slowed progress on flagship initiatives, including continental free movement, infrastructure development, and conflict resolution. The disconnect between Agenda 2063's visionary goals and the pace of actual implementation exemplifies the broader challenge facing an organization with mandates that exceed operational capacity.

Recent AU reform initiatives, including the Kagame Report recommendations, have recognized the need for institutional restructuring to enhance effectiveness. However, Balogun and Mwaba[118] identify persistent barriers to reform implementation, noting that "slow implementation of prior reform recommendations and persistent donor influence where member financing is weak, undermining autonomy and legitimacy" continue to constrain institutional transformation (p. 287). The fundamental mismatch between mandate scope and available resources also stalled the reforms initiated under Rwandan President Paul Kagame during his tenure as AU chairperson (2018–2019).

Lyndrup[119] frames the reform imperative in terms of legitimacy, arguing that "legitimacy is the fulcrum upon which institutions rest, determining the utility and cost of its function" (p. 45). This perspective draws on legitimacy theory in international relations[120] which posits that international organizations derive authority from both input legitimacy (participatory processes) and output legitimacy (effective performance). Maru[121] argues that legitimacy fundamentally emanates either from popular legitimacy through participatory elections or from performance legitimacy through effective delivery – both of which the AU lacks, as it is neither elected nor a consistent performer.

When organizations consistently fail to deliver on stated commitments, they lose political support from member states and the public, creating a legitimacy crisis that undermines their authority and effectiveness. For the AU, restoring legitimacy requires demonstrating tangible results in priority domains, rather than maintaining expansive mandates that generate visible implementation failures.

116 Finnemore , Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization.* https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361

117 Adeogun, Tolulope. 2025. "African Union and Agenda 2063: The Past, Present and Future." (University of Johannesburg Press). https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/104314

118 Balogun, Emmanuel, and Anna Kapambwe Mwaba. 2023. "African Union Reform: Challenges and Opportunities." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Diplomatic Reform and Innovation*. Palgrave: Springer Nature eBook. https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_books/11/

119 Lyndrup, Jens. 2014. "Improving the Legitimacy of African Solutions." (School Of Advanced Air And Space Studies,Air University,Maxwell Air Force Base,AL). https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA622810.pdf

120 Hurd, Ian. 1999. "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics." *International Organization* (MIT Press). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601393 ; Buchanan, Allen, and Robert O. Keohane. 2006. "The Legitimacy of Global Governance Institutions." *Ethics & International Affairs.* https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2006.00043.x

121 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2017. "Shrinking Civil Society Space in the Horn of Africa." (Horn of Africa Civil Society forum and Pax for Peace). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329885363_Shrinking_Civil_Society_Space_in_the_Horn_of_Africa_The_Legal_Context

Instead of trying to ensure simultaneous progress across all Agenda 2063 aspirations, the AU should identify a limited set of flagship priorities for concentrated effort and resources, sequencing other objectives for later phases once core capacities are established. In this regard, accelerating the implementation of the 0.2% levy and other self-financing mechanisms would reduce donor dependency and enhance autonomy, enabling the AU to concentrate resources on member state priorities rather than donor preferences.

The organizational theory literature on international institutions supports this diagnosis. Research on principal-agent dynamics in regional organizations demonstrates that wider delegation of responsibilities increases informational demands, coordination costs, and resource requirements, often reducing the overall ability to implement (Hardt, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2006). When organizations attempt to address too many issues simultaneously with limited resources, they risk spreading capacity so thinly that effectiveness suffers across all domains. This creates a paradoxical situation wherein comprehensive mandates intended to demonstrate organizational relevance instead undermine credibility due to visible implementation failures.

Another key dimension of Maru's[122] analysis is the localization of implementation. While norms are negotiated and adopted at continental or regional levels, he stresses that "implementation ultimately takes place within member states and regional economic communities". Effective implementation therefore depends on domestic political will, administrative capacity, and institutional alignment. Without strengthening national and regional implementation structures, AU norms remain detached from the contexts in which member states and RECs are meant to operate.

Degila and Amegan[123] examine complementarities and frictions between the AU and RECs, arguing for a clearer division of labour within APSA that recognizes variable REC capacities and avoids duplication (p. 334). Their analysis reveals how unclear functional boundaries create coordination challenges and resource inefficiencies, as both the AU and RECs attempt to address the same issues without a clear delineation of responsibilities. This aligns with coordination theory[124] and network governance approaches[125] which emphasize the importance of role differentiation in complex multi-actor systems.

Sturman and Hayatou[126] document the PSC's evolving relationship with RECs, highlighting practical coordination challenges that emerge when the AU attempts to maintain centralized control over functions that RECs may be better positioned to implement. Their research reveals "uneven REC capacities, slow harmonization of standby arrangements, and problems operationalizing article-16 linkages between AU and subregional mechanisms" (p. 89). These findings suggest that, rather than attempting uniform continental implementation, the AU should develop differentiated partnerships that leverage stronger REC capacities while providing support to weaker regional institutions – a strategy consistent with the principle of variable geometry to regional integration (Warleigh, 2002).[127]

Implementing subsidiarity effectively would require the AU to acknowledge that certain functions, particularly those requiring sustained operational presence, substantial resources or context-specific adaptation, may be more effectively delivered by RECs or member states. The AU's comparative advantage lies in continental-level coordina-

122 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2012. "Rethinking the North African Uprisings." (AU Herald). https://meharitaddele.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AU_Herald_Design_Volume_02_09.pdf

123 Degila, Dêlidji Eric, and Charles K. Amegan. 2019. "The African peace and security architecture an African response to regional peace and security challenges." (Geneva Graduate Insititute). https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/library/publications-institute/african-peace-and-security-architecture-african-response-regional

124 Malone, Thomas W., and Kevin Crowston . 1993. "The Interdisciplinary Study of Coordination." *RePEc.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5176072_The_Interdisciplinary_Study_of_Coordination

125 Provan, Keith G, and Patrick Kenis. 2007. "Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory.* https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article-abstract/18/2/229/935895

126 Sturman, Kathryn, and Aïssatou Hayatou. 2010. "The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: From Design to Reality." In *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture*. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315566115-4/peace-security-council-african-union-design-reality-kathryn-sturman-a%C3%AFssatou-hayatou

127 Warleigh, Alex. 2002. In *Understanding European Union Institutions*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-European-Union-Institutions/Warleigh/p/book/9780415242141

tion and norm-setting, as well as addressing genuinely transnational challenges that exceed REC capacity. Strategic mandate rationalization would involve formally recognizing this division of labour and concentrating AU resources accordingly.

To address these challenges, strengthening AU–REC institutional cooperation through more effective and formalized mechanisms is essential. RECs represent crucial entry points for the AU, offering distinct advantages through their proximity to member states, local expertise, and regional legitimacy. The capacity and legitimacy of RECs provide a mechanism for contextualizing the AU's expanded mandate to their respective regions and populations, facilitating implementation both at the regional and national levels. By leveraging these strengths, RECs can help establish more responsive and accountable governance systems that are better attuned to local and national contexts, while avoiding duplication and contradiction in continental governance efforts.

This requires clearer protocols governing AU–REC relations, enhanced coordination mechanisms, and joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks. A formalized division of labour between the AU and RECs, supported by clear guiding principles and binding agreements delineating their respective responsibilities, would reduce duplication, enhance coordination, and enable both levels to concentrate resources on their comparative advantages. Such arrangements would enable RECs to function not merely as regional forums but as practical conduits for transforming continental norms into tangible institutional and policy outcomes.

To address these challenges, strengthening AU–REC institutional linkages – including clearer protocols governing AU–REC relations, enhanced coordination mechanisms, and joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks – is essential.[128] A formalized division of labour with RECs, supported by clear, binding agreements delineating AU and REC responsibilities, would reduce duplication, enhance coordination, and enable both levels to concentrate resources towards their respective comparative advantages. Such arrangements would enable RECs to function not merely as regional forums but also as practical conduits for transforming continental norms into tangible institutional and policy change.

A blueprint for such institutional arrangements already exists.[129] The AU scoping study commissioned by GIZ in 2016 to develop a draft Framework for AU-REC collaboration provides normative, institutional, and collaborative arrangements for effective, comprehensive, institutionalized, and sustainable cooperation between the African Union Commission (AUC) and RECs. The Framework articulates guiding principles that not only increase ownership, leverage proximity and local expertise, and enhance the legitimacy of interventions, but also prevent duplication and contradiction. Critically, it establishes sequential activities at various levels of intervention, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of high-level actors across both institutional tiers. Operationalizing this Framework would therefore constitute a critical step toward realizing an effective continental governance architecture that harmonizes supranational, regional, and national governance efforts.

The case for strategic focus

Concentrating resources on core functions

It is necessary to reconcile continental ambitions with pragmatic institutional capabilities through strategic mandate rationalization. Given the weaknesses discussed above, Maru[130] strongly advocates that the AU shift its emphasis from creating new norms towards strengthening implementation and supervision mechanisms – effectively moving from norm-production to norm-realization. He argues that the success of the Union should be assessed less by the quantity of norms it adopts and more by the extent to which those norms are implemented

128 The Framework for Cooperation Between the African Union Commission and Regional Economic Communities on the Implementation of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Dr. Mehari Taddele Maru - March 2017

129 Experts Meeting of the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities in Preparation for the Meeting between the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Chief Executives of the Regional Economic Communities Scheduled For 25-26 April 2019 Small Conference Hall 2 15-16 April 2019

130 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2012. "Rethinking the North African Uprisings." (AU Herald). https://meharitaddele.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AU_Herald_Design_Volume_02_09.pdf

and enforced. His central thesis is succinct: "Norms derive their value not from their adoption, but from their implementation." If the gap between what the AU declares, and what member states actually do, is not closed, AU norms risk remaining aspirational instruments rather than engines of meaningful political and social transformation.[131]

Maru's prescription[132] is clear and urgent – "end norm-setting, focus on norm implementation". He argues that "the AU should go to the member states to facilitate the diffusion and implementation of these norms" through national and regional consultative conferences. Additionally, he emphasises that "radical reform of the AU Commission is in order", as the implementation deficit will persist if leadership deficiencies and management weaknesses are not addressed.

Instead of maintaining small, under-resourced units across numerous issue areas, the AU should concentrate technical capacity in core functional domains, particularly governance and peace and security, where it can achieve critical mass for effectiveness. Organizational effectiveness theory[133] suggests that institutions facing resource constraints should concentrate efforts on a narrower set of core functions where they possess comparative advantage and can demonstrate measurable impact. This principle of strategic focus appears particularly relevant for the AU, which could enhance both effectiveness and legitimacy by prioritizing specific domains rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of all continental challenges.

Hardt's[134] principal-agent analysis reveals how resource limitations already force informal prioritization: "faced with resource limitations, African Union states surrender some decision-making autonomy" to the Commission and Secretariat in specific domains where delegation improves informational quality and operational feasibility (p. 252). This finding suggests that member states pragmatically recognize the impossibility of the current mandate scope and informally narrow the AU's operational focus through selective delegation. Formalizing this reality through explicit mandate rationalization could enhance transparency, accountability, and strategic coherence.

Similarly, Makda Maru's research demonstrates how the organizational culture of filtering and employing double standards when it comes to early warning and response decision-making renders the AU ineffective in turning its normative frameworks and early warning systems into implementation.[135] This analysis draws on organizational culture theory[136] and bureaucratic politics models[137] which explain how internal organizational dynamics can undermine stated objectives.

The ineffectiveness of the AU, its design and its financial dependency can also be explained through the theoretical lenses discussed above. However, the AU still plays an irreplaceable role in articulating continental norms, facilitating member state dialogue, and providing frameworks for collective peace and security, governance, and human development.

Salvaging relevance through strategic realism

The proposal for mandate rationalization is not a sign of defeatism but rather a strategy for salvaging and enhancing AU relevance through strategic realism. By acknowledging the impossibility of implementing all current mandates with the available resources and political will, the AU can make strategic choices about where to concentrate efforts for maximum impact.

131 Ibid

132 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2013. "The Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union at 50." *Pambazuka News.* https://www.pambazuka.org/organization-african-unity-oauafrican-union-50

133 Cameron, Kim, and David Whetten. 1983. *Organizational effectiveness: A comparison of multiple models.* Wiley. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.4050030351 ; Quinn, Robert E., and John Rohrbaugh. 1981. "A Competing Values Approach to Organizational Effectiveness." *Public Productivity Review* (Taylor & Francis). https://www.jstor.org/stable/3380029

134 Hardt, Moritz, Eric Price, and Nathan Srebro. 2016. "Equality of Opportunity in Supervised Learning." (Cornell University). https://arxiv.org/abs/1610.02413

135 Maru, Makda. 2016. "Conflict Early Warning and the Response Nexus: The Case of the African Union-Continental Early Warning System." *Doctor of International Conflict Management Dissertations* (Kennesaw University). https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/incmdoc_etd/3/

136 Schein, Edgar. 2010. *Organizational Culture and Leadership.* Jossey-Bass. https://ia800805.us.archive.org/9/items/EdgarH-ScheinOrganizationalCultureAndLeadership/Edgar_H_Schein_Organizational_culture_and_leadership.pdf

137 Allison, Graham, and Philip D. Zelikow. 1999. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis 2nd Edition.* Longman. https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/essence-decision-explaining-cuban-missile-crisis-2nd-ed

This approach would require openly acknowledging resource limitations and implementation gaps, rather than maintaining aspirational commitments that consistently fail to materialize, with full appreciation of geopolitical realism and the sharp decline in financial solidarity.

To this effect, the formal delegation of certain functions to RECs, member states, or other actors better positioned to implement them, will be a crucial first step in the transformation, rather than maintaining nominal AU responsibility without corresponding capacity. This aligns with delegation theory[138] and subsidiarity principles from federal systems.[139]

Another, and more critical, measure is directing financial, human and political resources toward a narrower set of functions where the AU possesses genuine comparative advantage and can demonstrate measurable impact. This strategy reflects resource-based view theory from organizational studies[140] which emphasizes building competitive advantage by concentrating on distinctive competencies.

Ultimately, the AU needs to build popular credibility and political support through demonstrable results in core domains, which in turn will strengthen its autonomy and capacity to resist donor influence in priority areas, helping to build self-sufficiency and strategic autonomy. This approach draws on output legitimacy concepts[141] which emphasize performance as a source of institutional authority.

Whether such credibility will turn into an actual reduction in donor dependence relies not only on mobilizing additional resources but also on fundamentally rethinking what the AU needs to accomplish with available means. Strategic mandate rationalization offers a pathway toward enhanced autonomy by concentrating efforts on achievable objectives rather than dissipating resources across an impossibly broad agenda.

The rethinking of the AU's level of ambition towards a narrower core mandate does not represent an institutional retreat, but rather a strategic repositioning for enhanced effectiveness and genuine autonomy. Contemporary scholarship on AU institutional performance converges on a diagnosis of mandate overreach relative to available capacity, producing implementation gaps that undermine legitimacy and perpetuate donor dependency. By concentrating force, finance, and leadership energy on a focused set of core functions where the AU possesses comparative advantage, the organization can enhance the effectiveness of results while building the credibility necessary for expanded autonomy of action.

This strategic recalibration acknowledges the reality that not all mandates and normative frameworks can be implemented as outlined in founding documents, while salvaging what remains salvageable of the AU's relevance through demonstrable performance in priority domains. Rather than maintaining expansive commitments that consistently fail to materialize, the AU would benefit from honest prioritization, formalized division of labour with RECs, accelerated financial reform, and the concentration of resources towards achievable objectives. Such mandate rationalization would provide the organization with substantive clout – the operational capacity to deliver results and genuine autonomy – reducing dependence on external actors whose priorities may diverge from continental interests.

The path to a more effective and autonomous AU lies not in adding additional normative commitments but in strategic focus, honest assessment of capacity constraints, and the concentration of resources towards core functions where the organization can demonstrate tangible impact. This is the most viable strategy for salvaging and enhancing AU relevance in an era of constrained resources and heightened expectations for institutional performance.

138 Epstein, David, and Sharyn O'Halloran. 2009. *Delegating Powers: A Transaction Cost Politics Approach to Policy Making under Separate Powers.* New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/delegating-powers/CF4375C2C5B30D016861457947C40752

139 Follesdal, Andreas. 1998. "Subsidiarity." *The Journal of Political Philosophy.* https://www.follesdal.net/ms/Follesdal-1998-Subsidiarity.pdf

140 Barney, Jay. 1991. "Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage." *Journal of Management.* https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/014920639101700108

141 Scharpf, Fritz. 1999. *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* Oxford University Press. https://academic.oup.com/book/11939

Conclusions: Findings and Proposals

Drawing on the aforementioned data and analysis, the evidence demonstrates the following conclusions and observations.

Observation 1: The world is in a dangerous interregnum

The world is experiencing a dangerous interregnum between the dying post-World War II order and the emerging new global order.[142] Global interregnums reveal an inherent tension between commitments to multilateral cooperation, on the one hand, and the security dilemmas and national interest imperatives of states, on the other.

After the end of the Cold War, and later during the "war on terror", the unipolar global order centred on alliances with the United States (US) superpower. China and Russia, the two other great powers, have generally cooperated with the US on African issues, particularly on peace and development. This cooperation even included voting in support of, or abstaining from, vetoing United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions that authorized "all necessary measures" to protect civilians and referred situations to the International Criminal Court.

However, since around 2013, the US has gradually come to view the rise of China and Russia as the most significant threat it faces in Africa and beyond, more so than terrorism.[143] President Barack Obama's 2011 "American Pivot to Asia" strategy acknowledged the growing strategic significance of China and the Asia-Pacific region, signalling the beginnings of a shift away from a unipolar order dominated by the US. One can argue that the advent of multipolarity became evident once the balance of power, particularly in economics, shifted sufficiently to see Beijing, not Moscow, emerge as Washington's main challenger, although all three remain great powers.[144] This strategic turn was further institutionalized in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which stated explicitly that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security".[145] James Mattis, then Secretary of Defense, reinforced this message in a January 2018 speech:

Great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of US national security. We face growing threats from revisionist powers as different as China and Russia are from each other… To those who threaten America's experiment in democracy, they must know: if you challenge us, it will be your longest and worst day.[146]

Since the "Pivot to Asia", Washington has increasingly sought to forge alliances with African states and actors as part of its broader strategy to counterbalance the influence of Beijing and Moscow on the continent.[147] This has led to proxy rivalries and the deeper entanglement of external actors in African affairs, similar (though not the same) to those of the Cold War era.

142 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'race to the bottom' : Africa on the global chessboard and the call for renewed Pan-African agency." (UNU-CRIS). https://cris.unu.edu/beyond-%E2%80%98race-bottom%E2%80%99-africa-global-chessboard-and-call-renewed-pan-african-agency

143 Beckley, Michael, and Brands Hal . 2022. "Danger zone: The coming conflict with China." (WW Norton & Company). https://wwnorton.com/books/9781324021308

144 Obama, Barack. 2011. "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian parliament." Accessed October 2025. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament

145 Mattis, Jim. 2018. "Summary of the 2018 national defense strategy of the United States of America." Accessed October 2025. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/tr/AD1045785/.

146 Mattis, James N. 2018. *Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the national defense strategy.* US Department of Defense. https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1702965/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-national-defense-strategy/

147 Shinn, David, and Joshua Eisenman. 2012. "China and Africa: A century of engagement." (University of Pennsylvania press). Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities.* Yale University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhwkz

In recent years, the resurgence of nationalist realism, characterized by the prioritization of national interest and sovereignty, power, resource and identity politics, and state security, has catalysed a renewed distrust and competition, a global arms race, heightened defence expenditures, and expanded investments in military modernization. These developments, accompanied by a decline in multilateral financing and cooperative international frameworks, signify a structural transformation rather than a transient fluctuation in global affairs. From a realist perspective, this reassertion of national interest and power politics underscores the reconfiguration of the international system towards a more fragmented and multipolar order. Extra-regional powers vying for influence are prioritizing their interests, including over Africa's human security, governance, peace, accountability, and legitimacy. This competition, lacking even minimal standards, exacerbates local conflicts, undermines governance, and impedes sustainable development across the continent.

For Africa, these shifts are not temporary disruptions but enduring trends that will shape its external relations and strategic environment for decades to come. Accordingly, African states must adopt adaptive, long-term strategies grounded in pragmatic realism to safeguard their interests and enhance agency within the evolving global order.

Observation 2: The AU has failed in its core preventive and interventionist mandates

More worrying still, APSA, a major investment by African leaders and development partners over the past two decades that at times has shown great promise, is faltering, unable to prevent or end wars in Ethiopia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), or manage the Ethiopia–Somalia, Ethiopia–Eritrea, and DRC–Rwanda tensions.

The AU was designed for a unipolar world order and is unfit for the current multipolar environment, marked by intense geopolitical competition. Since the emergence of multipolarity, the AU's effectiveness has diminished significantly, with the organization failing to deploy any new effective preventive or interventionist peace support operations, marking a significant declining trend. The last serious attempt at invoking Article 4(h) of the AU Constitutive Act occurred in 2015, when the Peace and Security Council (PSC) authorized the 5,000-strong African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi (MAPROBU) on 17 December 2015 to protect civilians without host government consent. However, this authorization remained purely theoretical. When the AU issued a 96-hour ultimatum to Burundi, the government rejected the mission as a sovereignty violation. AU member states, reluctant to establish a precedent of forcible intervention, even to protect civilians, abandoned the operation rather than risk undermining the principle of sovereignty.

The failure of MAPROBU exposed the AU's fundamental dependence on external support in the new multipolar environment. Unlike during the unipolar era, when the US provided clear backing for AU operations, external partners, including Washington, failed to offer sufficient support for this mission. Without this backing, the AU lacked the financial and logistical capacity to deploy an effective peace support operation of thousands. Consequently, the organization resorted to coercive diplomacy, using the legal threat of intervention to pressure Burundi, and ultimately reverted to traditional diplomatic tools, sanctions, and observer missions when the threat failed to materialize.

This operational paralysis contrasts sharply with the AU's relative success during the "war on terror" period, when missions such as the 2007–2022 AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the 2004–2007 AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) benefited from robust support from the US, the European Union (EU), and China. The difference in external backing between these eras is stark. Even current operations such as the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), declared operational on 1 January 2025, struggle with financial viability, a clear reflection of the AU's diminished capacity to secure international backing.

On the prevention front, the AU's peace and security framework has not fared better in deploying diplomacy to avert conflicts. Despite numerous warnings from credible sources and authorities, the AU engaged in performative and inadequate pre-war preventive diplomatic efforts before the wars in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia and Sudan erupted. Both the AU and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) engagements were too limited and lacked sufficient leverage to influence the political forces responsible for instigating these conflicts. During the Tigray war, despite mounting evidence of atrocities committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean coalition forces, the AU – headquartered in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa – failed for a long time to even place the conflict on its agenda for deliberation.

The absence of any new effective preventive or interventionist peace support deployments since 2015,

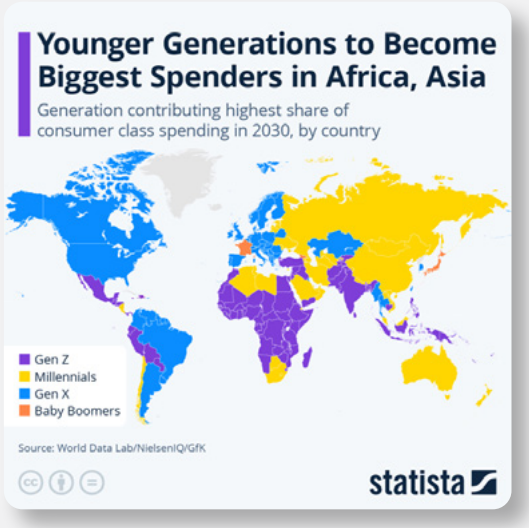
despite atrocity crimes in Sudan, Ethiopia, and the DRC, underscores how the failure in leadership, the rise of authoritarian leaders, and the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity have fundamentally weakened the AU's peace and security architecture. In an era of competing global powers with divergent, often contradictory national interests in Africa, the AU finds itself unable to secure the unified external support that once enabled its peace and security objectives, rendering its most ambitious mandates effectively inoperative.

Observation 3: The integrity of many states is gravely fractured

At a time when domestic politics should be at the forefront of resolving differences, and effective governance of transitions is critically needed to address the root causes of conflicts, state integrity in key African regions has become gravely fractured. This is evident in the Horn of Africa (Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia), North Africa (Libya), the Great Lakes region (DRC), and the Sahel countries (Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali).[148] Given the fragmentation of state legitimacy and integrity, the consequent diminished capacity to manage power, identity, and resource politics will remain the most significant threat to peace, security, and human development.[149] These state fragilities may be exacerbated by upcoming elections in several large African countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, in 2026–2029, affecting more than half a billion people.[150] Depending on the perceptions of the electorate, particularly Gen Z, these elections carry enormous risks, potentially leading to either democratic transitions or increased violence. The widening gap between political establishments and the Gen-Z population, unless addressed timeously and adequately, could trigger unrest and violence during the pre-election, election, and post-election periods.

And as states disintegrate, the risk of further mass atrocities increases.

Figure 22: Africa – Gen Z Continent



148 The Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance assesses and ranks the general governance of 54 African countries based on their performance in the areas of security and the rule of law, participation, rights & inclusion, public perception of overall governance, foundations for economic opportunity and human development. Mo Ibrahim Foundation. 2023. "2022 Ibrahim Index of African Governance." Accessed February 2023. https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2023-01/2022-index-report.pdf. ; HDI ranking compares 191 countries under four human development categories: very high, high, medium and low. See more, https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks ; On the SDG Index 2022, countries are ranked out of all 193 UN member states on the SDGs and by their overall score, which measures total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs.. See more: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2022/2022-sustainable-development-report.pdf ; The Global Peace Index (GPI) 2022 ranks 163 states and territories according to their level of peacefulness.. See more: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-2022-web.pdf ; The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) database. See more: https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data ; The UNHCR Data Finder tool displays refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, IDPs, and host communities. In this case only the total number of refugees and asylum seekers originating from the listed countries in 2022 was utilised. See more: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=23jhML ; Early Warning Project. 2022. "2022-23 Statistical Risk Assessment for Mass Killing." (US Holocaust Museum. Accessed January 2023. https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/ranking-of-all-countries. Global ranking among 162 countries facing the highest percentage risk of mass killings. This table shows all countries, in descending order, by estimated risk for onset of mass killing in 2022-23.

149 Oette, Lutz. 2018. "Power, conflict and human rights in Sudan." In *Constitution-making and Human Rights in the Sudans*, 15-40. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315624075-2/power-conflict-human-rights-sudan-lutz-oette

150 The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. 2026. "Election Calendar." https://www.eisa.org/election-calendar/

The states facing conflict are thus frequently also the primary sources of the problem – the perpetrators of wars, atrocities, displacement, and destruction. At the same time, AU mechanisms for conflict and atrocity prevention, diplomatic mediation, and multilateralism are excessively state-centric, relying on the political will and capabilities of AU member states to help and hold other states accountable in dealing with wars and fragilities. Furthermore, existing mediation, preventive diplomacy, and governance efforts predominantly employ state-led and state-centric approaches that marginalize civil society (particularly groups representing women and ethnic minorities) and exclude meaningful private sector engagement in transnational peace and security efforts. This occurs despite a pressing need for more inclusive approaches that better address the contextual realities and needs of societies at risk. State fragility and the state-centric approach have contributed to consistent failures to prevent wars and mass atrocities at national and multilateral level.

In this context, the involvement of external powers in ongoing conflicts is particularly problematic, as they constrain and overshadow domestic political and military forces while backing warring parties along lines of power, resources, and identity, rather than facilitating domestic conflict resolution processes. The consequences of this dynamic are evident across multiple conflict theatres. In Sudan – where, among others, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Ethiopia support the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Eritrea back the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) – competing international actors have prolonged the conflict and complicated mediation efforts,[151] as have Middle Eastern and international powers in Ethiopia. In particular, the UAE's support for the Ethiopian government in the Tigray war and ongoing conflicts in Amhara and Oromia regions has deepened military adventurism and created divisions rather than fostering reconciliation. Similarly, in the DRC, external actors' pursuit of mineral resources and geopolitical influence has perpetuated cycles of violence and prevented meaningful state-building. In Libya, competing international backers of rival governments have transformed what began as a domestic uprising into state failure, and have now turned Libya into a perfect protracted proxy battleground, fragmenting state institutions and preventing national reconciliation. The Sahel states too are another battleground for great power competition. In these contexts, local politics and military forces are increasingly subordinated to alliances forged between external powers and their proxies in domestic politico-economic-military networks. These cases illustrate how external interference, rather than supporting African-led solutions, often entrenches conflict dynamics and undermines the very state capacity necessary for sustainable peace, effective governance, and human development. The same external interferences exacerbate state fragility and undermine domestic agency.

Observation 4: The AU's primacy in peace and security is undermined

The AU and many of the regional economic communities (RECs), despite their principal mandate as the main Pan-African organizations for preventive diplomacy and mediation, are increasingly relegated to secondary status in conflict resolution processes.

The increase in devastating wars, displacement, and atrocities in Africa, along with the roles played by external actors, has cast doubt on and eroded the primacy and effectiveness of APSA in conflict prevention and resolution. In recent years, the AU has been relegated to little more than a public relations role in mediation efforts in Ethiopia, Sudan, the DRC–Rwanda disputes, the Ethiopia–Somalia tensions, and the ongoing war of words between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This erosion is both a cause and a consequence of the growing vacuum in regional preventive diplomacy. External actors such as Türkiye, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the US have stepped into that void, effectively assuming control of regional mediation initiatives and relegating the AU and RECs to secondary roles. Pursuing varied interests, these actors may continue to undermine the AU's role in peace, security, and mediation. This raises vital questions about the AU's leverage and effectiveness with regard to conflicting African parties.

African organizational frameworks, which were relatively well upheld in previous decades, are now severely challenged, as exemplified by the surge in the number and internationalized nature of intrastate

151 Maru, Mehari Taddele. 2023. "Beyond the 'race to the bottom' : Africa on the global chessboard and the call for renewed Pan-African agency." (UNU-CRIS); Maunganidze, Ottilia Anna. 2025. *Unity at any cost? AES states jointly leave the ICC.* Accessed October 2025. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/unity-at-any-cost-aes-states-jointly-leave-the-icc.

conflicts, as well as the staggering levels of fatalities, displacement, and economic destruction. Normatively, the wave of military coups in the Sahel and West Africa have violated one of the AU's most noted achievements: its robust stance against unconstitutional changes of government. The coup perpetrators remain in, and have consolidated, power without facing serious consequences, exposing the limitations of the AU's enforcement mechanisms. When the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took a firm stance in 2024, rejecting coups as prescribed in both the AU and ECOWAS normative frameworks, which include the threat of sanctions and potential military intervention, the coup perpetrators in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS. Signalling their collective rejection of ECOWAS, they formed the Confederation of Sahel States (also known as the Alliance of Sahel States). This withdrawal not only undermines regional integration efforts but also represents a fundamental challenge to the authority of African multilateral institutions. These developments mark a significant departure from post-Cold War AU treaties[152] and norms[153] on legitimately attaining and maintaining state power. The same erosion of the normative frameworks reflects how external actors' competing interests have emboldened challenges to established Pan-African frameworks. This erosion can partially be attributed to the decline of the unipolar world order, and the subsequent re-engagement and interference of external actors who demonstrate little regard for Pan-African normative and institutional frameworks. Certain external powers have provided political, economic, and military support to coup regimes, effectively shielding them from the consequences traditionally imposed by regional organizations, and thereby undermining the enforcement capacity of the AU and RECs.[154]

Observation 5: Multilateral mediation has been taken by uni-mini(bi)lateral initiatives

Another discernible and consequential trend is emerging in African conflict resolution: bilateral and unilateral initiatives are now the dominant mode, increasingly displacing multilateral frameworks and relegating the AU to secondary status, despite its core mandate of conflict prevention.

Earlier, the AU and RECs mediated key processes, such as the Nairobi and Luanda initiatives and IGAD's engagement in South Sudan. But other high-profile crises now increasingly default to bilateral or extra-regional conveners (e.g., the US/Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and the UAE).[155] This pattern reflects growing evidence of a transition from multilateral to bilateral or unilateral mediation in African conflicts, with profound implications for Pan-African institutions such as APSA and the RECs.

Multiple examples demonstrate this trend. Türkiye has assumed a prominent mediation role in the conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia, leveraging its expanding influence in the Horn of Africa. Qatar and the US have taken the lead in mediating between the DRC and Rwanda. Saudi Arabia and the US dominate the Sudan peace process, effectively sidelining AU mechanisms, while the UAE and Israel have inserted themselves into the Somali and Somaliland dispute, despite their controversial role in regional proxy conflicts. Collectively, these cases demonstrate how established multilateral frameworks are being displaced.

This trend extends beyond Africa. In the Middle East, Qatar has long positioned itself as a mediator, brokering the 2008 Doha Agreement in Lebanon and hosting US–Taliban negotiations in Afghanistan.

152 African Union. 2007. "African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance." Accessed 2025. https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance.

153 Maru, Mehari. 2012. "The first ten years of AU and its performance in peace and security." *ISPI Policy Brief.* https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/pb_218_2012_0.pdf

154 Bassou, Abdelhak. 2024. "From the Alliance of Sahel States to the Confederation of Sahel States: The road is clear, but full of traps." *Policy Brief* 19, no. 24. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/alliance-sahel-states-confederation-sahel-states-road-clear-full-traps

155 Boswell, Alan. 2025. "In Breakthrough, U.S. and Three Arab Powers Agree on Sudan Peace Roadmap." (International Crisis Group). https://www.crisisgroup.org/alr/africa/sudan/breakthrough-us-and-three-arab-powers-agree-sudan-peace-roadmap#:~:text=In%20what%20could%20prove%20a,of%20the%20Sudanese%20Armed%20Forces. ; Onditi, Bravin. 2024. "The Ankara Initiative: Turkey's Diplomatic Triumph in the Ethiopia-Somalia Conflict." (Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies). https://horninstitute.org/the-ankara-initiative-turkeys-diplomatic-triumph-in-the-ethiopia-somalia-conflict/ ; Burke, Kieran. 2026. "Ethiopia dam: Egypt, Sudan welcome Trump mediation." *DW.* https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-dam-egypt-sudan-welcome-trump-mediation/a-75547719 ; BBC. 2025. "Leaders of Rwanda and DR Congo sign peace deal alongside Donald Trump." https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c93nlk2gky3t

However, critics contend that these efforts frequently serve Doha's foreign policy ambitions, expanding its influence while occasionally undermining humanitarian norms. The 2017–2021 diplomatic crisis in the Gulf, during which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, underscored how bilateral mediation can be instrumentalized, with mediators themselves becoming parties to conflicts. Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar have since achieved rapprochement, both increasingly compete with the UAE in projecting influence across Africa and beyond.[156]

Türkiye's role in the Middle East and North Africa offers comparable insights. Its interventions in Libya, Syria, and the eastern Mediterranean tend to advance Ankara's strategic interests rather than pursuing neutral conflict resolution, raising concerns that its African mediation efforts may follow similar patterns.

Thus, Middle Eastern states in particular have intensified their diplomatic, financial, and soft-power engagement, thereby acquiring leverage in mediation processes. The result is a fundamental transformation of Africa's peace and security architecture, where external powers increasingly shape outcomes in pursuit of their own strategic interests.

The displacement of multilateral frameworks carries significant risks for the AU and its institutional architecture. Unlike AU and REC processes, which are anchored in shared norms of sovereignty, non-interference, and collective decision-making, bilateral mediation is primarily accountable to the mediator's national interests. This dynamic encourages "forum shopping", whereby belligerent parties select mediators they anticipate will be sympathetic to their positions, thereby undermining the legitimacy of African institutions. While bilateral actors are often perceived as more expeditious and less bureaucratic, they typically lack the contextual depth, historical knowledge, and local legitimacy characteristic of AU-led efforts.

The principal danger is that mediation becomes transactional rather than transformative, prioritizing short-term agreements over sustainable peace. This risk is evident in Türkiye's mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia, Qatar's diplomatic engagement in the DRC, US–Saudi dominance in Sudan, and the UAE's controversial intervention in Somalia. Unless this trajectory is reversed, it threatens to erode Africa's multilateral peace architecture, weakening the AU's authority in one of its core mandates: conflict prevention and resolution.

Four bold proposals

Addressing critical shortcomings in African peace and security frameworks during a precarious transition in the global order requires bold and rapid adjustments. Employing an "opportunity lens",[157] this paper advances four bold proposals for transforming ongoing challenges into opportunities.

Transformation of the AU
Revisit the level of ambition to ensure effective delivery on specific and concrete mandates

In addressing the AU's faltering peace and security framework in the face of the international interregnum, PAAI proposes that the transformation of the AU must begin with a revision of its level of ambition.

The AU and APSA were conceived at the end of the Cold War, designed and built for the unipolar liberal constructivist international order. However, the current interregnum has ushered in a post-unipolar world order with increased realism, where states vie to secure self-interest, security, and power without the restraint placed on them by the normative and institutional mechanisms of the post-Cold War era. Today, structural shifts in the global economy, demography, technology, and military affairs, coupled with intensified geopolitical competition among great powers and nearby middle powers, have fundamentally altered the geopolitical system the AU once relied on for effective discharge of its core mandates.

In practice, realism means that African states, like others, prioritize influence, alliances, and security calculations over collective norms. The state-centric view of power jealously guards against ceding sovereignty, particularly during times of uncertainty, unpredictability, and arms races. There is a high probability that African states will increasingly be inclined to adopt similar self-interest-, security-, and power-focused

156 Sons, Sebastian. 2025. "The Gulf states Pivot to Africa: Enhancing geoeconomic engagement amid times of geopolitical shifts." (Brussels International Centre). https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/gulf-states-pivot-africa-enhancing-geoeconomic-engagement-amid-times-geopolitical-shifts-0

157 UNDP Africa. 2020. "UNDP's Renewed Strategic Offer in Africa: Africa's Promise." Accessed October 19, 2025. https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/publications/undps-renewed-strategic-offer-africa-africas-promise.

positions, even on Pan-African agendas and at the expense of Pan-African norms and institutions.

This fundamentally undermines the AU, as it discourages states from ceding parts of their sovereignty for institutional effectiveness, thus blocking the preventive and intervention measures provided under the AU Constitutive Act. This explains why the AU's preventive and intervention efforts often are and will be blocked, delayed, or watered down, as sovereignty concerns and narrow national interest imperatives outweigh humanitarian imperatives. External actors exploit Africa as an arena for rivalry, much as they did during the Cold War, using aid, arms, and alliances as tools of competition. The AU's effectiveness will further be undermined by inconsistent application, selective enforcement, and manipulation by powerful states, both African and external. Added to this are assaults on multilateral systems and a sharp decline in international financial aid.[158]

Crucially, the AU must also consider the chronic shortage of political will among member states, as well as the decline in the quality of Pan-African leadership, the limitations of its financial capacity, and the military capabilities available for the Pan-African agenda at a time when many states are more inward-looking in their pursuit of national interests.

Against this backdrop, the AU must revisit its baseline assumptions and reconsider how comprehensive, realistically, its mandate can be in order to be effective. This requires reassessing the original mandates of APSA, formulated in the very different context of the post-Cold War unipolar era.

A recalibration may mean scaling down ambitions and refocusing on critical core mandates that can be delivered within the available will of the states and their determination to provide funding and human resources. This would give the AU more credibility and, in the long term, enable it to expand and avoid excessive reliance on external funding for its operations. It would also require leaving other responsibilities to RECs, member states, and subnational entities, focusing instead on core mandates that are transnational in nature.

Such a revision of ambition would require negotiation and communication, so that all stakeholders clearly understand the updated goals and align their expectations accordingly. Concrete goals, milestones, and resourcing must be defined, with monitoring frameworks updated to measure progress against the new level of ambition.

Transforming the nature of states
Towards states with multiple systems

With rising state fragility, especially in countries emerging from or trapped in wars, PAAI calls for reimagining the African state through a governance model of "states with multiple systems". Central to this proposal, the concept of states with multiple systems is about transforming endless struggles between competing regional, ethnic, and religious forces with divergent understandings of history and visions for the future, particularly regarding the governance of identity, power, and resources, into frameworks of shared vision for coexistence. It addresses the long-standing challenge of governing diversity in Africa by maintaining overall state integrity while allowing distinct governance, legal, and economic systems to coexist within state boundaries. It offers a way to manage diversity without disintegration, recognizing that sustainable peace arises not from predatory statehood, artificial borders, and imposed national identity but from shared sovereignty and self-governance that reflects Africa's plural realities.[159]

A triple whammy for Africa

Today, the African state faces a triple whammy of mutually reinforcing challenges: dealing with colonial and Cold War legacies; governing diversity and domestic politics of power and resources; and managing intensifying geopolitical interference by external forces. Most African states still cling to centralized governance models that suppress subnational autonomy, leaving them brittle and distrusted. This mismatch between rigid state structures and plural social realities drives recurring crises of legitimacy, weak institutions, and persistent contestation, exposing states to exploitation by external actors.

158 OECD. 2025. *Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term.* Policy Brief, OECD, Paris: OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/8c530629-en.pdf

159 Kalu, Kenneth, Yacob-Haliso Olajumoke, and Toyin Falola. 2018. *Africa's big men: predatory state-society relations in Africa.* Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203712870/africa-big-men-kenneth-kalu-olajumoke-yacob-haliso-toyin-falola

The proposal of "states with multiple systems" tackles one of the perennial questions about the nature of the African state – its relationship with the population it is supposed to serve and its relations with external actors, which remain as pressing today as at independence. The legacy of arbitrarily drawn colonial borders entrenched fragmented polities in which national identity competes with subnational affiliations. Overlapping ethnic, religious, and regional identities complicate governance, as central governments seek uniformity while local communities demand recognition of diverse forms of belonging and authority.

At the same time, traditional concepts such as the nation-state, sovereignty, and territorial integrity have proven insufficient for managing Africa's diversity and addressing the root causes of instability. Such conventional frameworks have often proven inadequate in addressing state failures, atrocities, and poverty, particularly in societies marked by deep diversity. Rather than securing stability, these frameworks have frequently reinforced exclusion and what Achille Mbembe terms "necropolitics",[160] leading to death (evidenced by state-based conflict fatalities), displacement (manifesting in increasing numbers of IDPs and refugees), and destruction (particularly visible in economic devastation and arms proliferation at state and local community levels).

The new paradigm of "states with multiple systems" acknowledges the path of dependency created by colonial borders, while embracing Africa's continuing quest for integration. What is needed is a fundamental reimagining of the African state, one that recognizes multiple centres of power and legitimacy. Instead of a single, unitary system of authority, states might embrace layered governance, where formal institutions, laws, bureaucracies, and elected officials are hybridized with non-state actors such as chiefs, elders, religious leaders, militias, traditional and modern civil society, and community councils. Traditional authorities and religious leaders remain deeply influential; integrating them rather than delegitimizing them could strengthen fragile social contracts. Recognizing customary land rights, community dispute resolution, and indigenous knowledge would help anchor governance where formal state law is weak or contested. Such capable and viable states play a critical role.

By accommodating varied identities under a common national framework, this model provides a mechanism for integrative (con)federalism, reducing the risk of fragmentation and protracted conflict. This requires reconceptualizing sovereignty, not merely as territorial control but as responsibility to populations, while embracing governance models that allow multiple systems to coexist within states and foster cooperation across borders.

Beyond these internal dynamics lies an even more urgent challenge: addressing the African state's vulnerability to unilateral interference by external powers. Internal state legitimacy and capability will largely determine not only the durability of African sovereignty but also the continent's ability to navigate an era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. The "states with multiple systems" framework helps to address these vulnerabilities and offers a pathway that emphasizes the value of indigenous, customary, hybrid, and poly-governance models, particularly where centralized states have failed to serve their populations.[161] This approach can prevent continuous wars over competing visions among distinct identity forces (regional, ethnic, and religious) and avert potential state collapse by enabling shared sovereignty and allowing different regions to operate under distinct political, legal, or economic frameworks.

In this sense, "states with multiple systems" responds to growing decentralization pressures, including demands for federalism, confederative arrangements and, in some cases, outright independence pursued through armed struggle. This model reflects an adaptive, layered conception of sovereignty that could better accommodate Africa's plural identities while reducing the structural violence produced by rigid nation-state frameworks. More essentially, it offers alternatives to separatism by embedding autonomy within an overarching national framework.

Over the past three decades, states such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan have experimented with varying degrees of devolution. In Somalia, the federal states of Puntland, Jubaland, and others are increasingly exercising their regional powers, amid stiff resistance from the federal government. A key issue in South Sudan's mediation has been the quest to introduce federal governance in the three regions of Greater Bahir El Gazal,

160 Mbembe, Achille. 2006. "Necropolitics." *Raisons politiques* 29-60. https://shs.cairn.info/journal-raisons-politiques-2006-1-page-29?lang=en

161 Wunsch, James S. 1990. *The Failure of the centralized state: institutions and self-governance in Africa.* Westview Press. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780429310799/failure-centralized-state-dele-olowu-james-wunsch-vincent-ostrom-john-harbeson

Great Equatorial, and Greater Upper Nile. The "states with multiple systems" consolidates and expands these experiments, which may strengthen inclusion and improve governance across the continent. This model aligns particularly well with normative frameworks such as AU treaties on decentralization and democratic governance.

Based on the principle of subsidiarity outlined in the AU Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation and AU Border Governance Strategy,[162] this trend, if consolidated, would bring power closer to the people. Decentralization will not only address longstanding challenges related to peace and development but may also engender a fundamental change in the role of district- and county-level administrations by bringing powers and responsibilities closer to the citizenry. Devolved state structures and the empowerment of citizens at a local level are also expected to help Joint Bilateral Commissions[163] of member states govern and develop border areas. Central governments have already delegated some regulatory powers related to cross-border issues, including peace and security, to regional states or provinces.

Such a framework is especially relevant to rural and transnational borderland communities, where state presence is often weak or absent, and to marginalized or oppressed groups that continue to seek forms of self-determination, self-rule, and shared rule within central governments.

This is, admittedly, a difficult undertaking, as it intersects with sensitive questions of state power, borders, resources, identity, and international law – matters that naturally affect state interests and security imperatives. Above all, it requires a viable state that musters both the legitimacy and capability to realize the aspirations and will of the population.

The PAAI Quadruple Framework

Building state capacity

Two decades after its establishment, the AU continues to grapple with internal divisions and limited institutional effectiveness. Its capacity to mediate conflicts and manage external interference remains weak, reflecting the broader fragmentation of the continent's political agency. Consequently, Africa now faces intensified external pressures to align with competing blocs, narrowing the space for strategic neutrality or autonomous decision-making.

To manage external rivalries constructively, Africa requires strong, legitimate, and constitutionally grounded leadership that articulates the aspirations of its people, safeguards their interests, and asserts continental priorities in international engagements. Without coherent leadership and institutional strength, Africa's fragmented position, reflected in the divergent policies of its 55 states, will continue to limit its collective agency. While diversity is a source of legitimacy and representation, it also shatters power projection, leaving the continent vulnerable to manipulation by external actors.

The implementation of the above proposals requires an African state that is more capable, transformed in its nature and purpose. Transforming African states requires a deep recalibration of state legitimacy and capability, rethinking not only how they relate to their populations but also how they engage one another and the wider world. Transforming state behaviour alone is insufficient; state capability must be built to ensure delivery of legitimately expected public services, which in turn provides performance legitimacy to the state and helps cultivate popular legitimacy. This framework rests on four interrelated capabilities.

162 (African Union. 2020. "African Union Border Governance Strategy." Accessed October 2025. https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/2020-english-au-border-governance-strategy-final.pdf.
African Union. 2014. "African Union Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation." Accessed October 2025. https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/au-niamey-convention-eng.pdf.
Weber, Annette. 2012. "Boundaries with issues: Soft border management as a solution?" (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Africa Department). https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08869.pdf

163 Kenya Embassy Addis Ababa Newsletter. 2015. "Agreed Minutes of the 29th Kenya-Ethiopia Joint Border Administrators'/ Commissioners' Meeting." Accessed October 2025. https://www.kenyaembassyaddis.org/wp-content/uploads/newsletter/KenyaNewsletterV7.4.pdf.

Predictive capacity

The ability to anticipate and interpret crises through early warning and foresight systems that mobilize timely political action. Although Africa has sophisticated early warning systems such as the AU Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), and national Conflict Early Warning and Response Units (CEWERUs), if these systems are not used effectively to prevent or intervene in crises, their impact is limited and will remain so until creative means of sharing these predictive capabilities are used by the public.

Preventive capacity

The means to act proactively through inclusive governance, reconciliation, accountability and development policies that address root causes before they escalate into violence. The AU needs to generate the will of its member states, and decentralization, subsidiarity, and preventive diplomacy are key instruments in this domain.

Responsive capacity

The competence to react effectively to crises through peacebuilding, stabilization, humanitarian response, and timely political, diplomatic, or military intervention, while maintaining legitimacy and public confidence.

Adaptive capacity

The resilience to recover from shocks by drawing on cultural, social, and informal systems such as traditional institutions, community networks, and cross-border solidarities. It recognizes that survival and recovery depend as much on society's adaptive strengths as on formal state institutions.

Cumulatively, these four dimensions form a holistic framework for strengthening African states, linking governance, resilience and legitimacy in pursuit of sustainable peace and development.

The centrality of domestic constituencies

Neither overhauling the AU nor transforming the nature of the state can succeed without the mobilization of proactive, broad-based domestic constituencies. Given current geopolitical and global developments, it is clear that Africa cannot solely rely on global multilateral systems. The UN too faces its own paralysis and financial challenges, partly due to reduced US contributions and scepticism about multilateralism. The EU is inward-looking and embroiled in the Ukraine war on its doorstep, and its member states are focused on national defence. The decline in global commitment to multilateral frameworks has weakened institutional norms and reduced funding for organizations like the AU and APSA, threatening peacebuilding efforts across the continent. This has particularly impacted on support for AU-led peace operations, such as those in Somalia.

However, Africans should not depend exclusively on the AU and the RECs, for reasons discussed in the preceding section of this paper, nor on national governments, many of which face severe internal and external constraints and oftentimes are the cause of peace and security problems.

While the retreat of traditional donors and the ineffectiveness of the AU are deepening crises in the short term, they also open up unprecedented space for rethinking the continent's long-standing dependence on external actors. These developments pose existential questions for the AU, questions that must be answered by Africans themselves. With diminishing external financial aid and shrinking multilateral support for peace operations, Africa faces both a challenge and an opportunity: to pursue self-reliance and strategic autonomy through local action, resource mobilization, and strengthened political legitimacy.

The primacy of domestic politics

This proposal emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen domestic political processes and local governance mechanisms as the primary means of addressing political differences and ongoing wars, and preventing violent conflict. Rather than relying on external actors for its peace and security, Africa must invest in and employ domestic and local political processes to resolve political differences peacefully.

The primacy of domestic politics as a foundation for legitimate governance, conflict prevention, and sustained peace is well established. Sustainable peace and legitimate governance must be grounded in the participation, ownership, and accountability of domestic constituencies, not imposed through external intervention or military confrontation. Responsive, legitimate, and effective governance must be a shared responsibility among local, subnational, and national actors.

Current threats to the primacy of domestic political solutions

Current global trends, marked by intensifying geopolitical competition, declining multilateralism, and the resurgence of state-centric realism, have eroded, and continue to undermine, efforts to bolster the primacy of political processes as a mechanism to solve domestic problems and build unified national and African positions to constrain external interference and moderate external interests.

Realism's focus on power and security comes at the expense of the elements that define African states, neglecting subnational entities, non-state actors, and citizen mobilization. This exacerbates problems associated with the nature of African states: centralizing, monopolizing, and often personalizing state power under nationalist, often militarist leaders serving individual or small-circle interests at the expense of the broader population. The growing militarization of politics, within and between African states, widens the gap between political processes and security realities.

With the intensification of geopolitical competition and the resurgence of realism in global politics, central governments may increasingly resort to militarized, state-centric solutions to political problems. This fuels arms races among states, further widening the gap between political and diplomatic processes, on the one hand, and military realities on the other.

A case for building local constituencies

Local constituencies offer hopeful anchors for constraining state power overreach and demanding accountability, both political and legal, by mobilizing power centres at local, subnational, and transnational levels. By mobilizing local constituencies, states would be better placed to constrain and tame external interference.

Key to such transformation is the relationship between states and their populations, centre–periphery relations, and the need to empower citizens. An empowered, healthy, and educated citizenry is the ultimate guarantor of responsive and legitimate governance, higher human development, and peaceful progress. An empowered citizenry also serves to hold those in power accountable and responsive to their needs, and bound by the rule of law. This was evidenced in Sudan,[164] where Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs),[165] the Resistance Committees and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), comprising citizenry and professional associations, had brought about significant change via pro-democracy movements, despite Sudan's current state. The Resistance Committees and ERRs are grassroots-oriented local groups that played a crucial role in organizing humanitarian aid to the needy. Their local and decentralized structures were instrumental in sustaining the pro-democracy movement, relying on local resource mobilization and delivery. The FFC, meanwhile, is a coalition of political groups and civil society organizations that played a pivotal role in the negotiations leading to the formation of a transitional government after the fall of Omar al-Bashir. The FFC represents a broader political spectrum, encompassing professional associations, rebel groups, and political parties.

With proximity to local contexts allowing for deeper understanding, local constituencies possess local expertise and legitimacy in representing the needs and aspirations of populations, offering context-specific solutions to local manifestations of global disorder. This also enables innovative African-led approaches that transcend traditional state-centric models of governance and security. Localization thus strengthens both the credibility of governance and the effectiveness of problem-solving.

Youth as a driver of local constituencies

In light of Africa's unique demographic advantage as the "youngest" continent, Gen Z is the most potent strategic asset for building strong constituencies and achieving sustainable progress on all the above proposals. As increasingly connected, vocal, and diverse generations enter the electorate, political contestation and protest over livelihoods, employment, and governance are becoming more pronounced.

Firstly, by reaching out and addressing the aspirations of Gen Z, ongoing and upcoming protests and resistance could be channelled constructively. If this does not happen, the gap between the political estab-

164 Nashed, Mat. 2023. *Sudan 'resistance' activists mobilise as crisis escalates.* 22 April. Accessed October 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/22/sudan-resistance-activists-mobilise-as-crisis-escalates.

165 Vick, Karl. 2025. *Locals in Sudan Are Saving Lives That International Aid Agencies Can't Reach.* 16 January. Accessed October 2025. https://time.com/7204654/sudan-humanitarianism-crisis-err-aid/.

lishment and youth could widen, and tensions could escalate into unrest or violence during electoral cycles. The active participation of individuals, especially youth and civil society, is vital to ensuring the legitimacy and accountability of governments, and to upholding the primacy of politics as the means to resolve complex problems. Mobilizing local constituencies is both possible and essential, as it lies within the immediate reach of communities themselves. Transformative change requires systematic constituency-building at all levels of governance, especially locally, where trust, participation, and ownership first take root.

Secondly, youth play a crucial role in enhancing Africa's geopolitical agency, including taming arms races and protectionism in favour of Pan-African integrative progress, and resisting Africa being drawn into others' strategic rivalries to secure peace and development for their future. These proposals go beyond addressing internal governance; they provide the substructure for Africa's readiness and influence on the international stage.

PAAI therefore emphasizes building coalitions of support among civil society, the private sector, traditional authorities, and citizen movements, particularly youth and Gen Z. These actors form the social base that connects state reform to everyday realities.

Without them, reforms risk remaining elite-driven and disconnected, unable to translate new institutional visions into lived legitimacy. Mobilizing these constituencies is not ancillary; it is the foundation of sustainable transformation. A state capable of accommodating multiple systems and delivering inclusive governance must be rooted in its citizens' agency, collective ownership, and participation.

These constituencies serve multiple purposes: they ground governance in local realities, provide accountability mechanisms to restrain both internal and external actors, and enable Africa to chart its own path in an era of intensifying global competition and declining multilateral support.

Triple geopolitical strategy

By reaffirming the primacy of domestic politics and empowering local voices, Africa can better shape its own future, anchored in accountability, inclusivity, and self-reliance. This moment calls for a Pan-African agenda of self-sufficiency and constituency-building, from local to continental levels. Rethinking sovereignty, not merely as territorial control but as responsibility to populations, means embracing governance models that allow multiple systems to coexist within states and encourage cooperation across borders.

In mitigating the adverse effects of the global interregnum and preparing to seize opportunities that come with the shifting global order, PAAI advances a forward-looking, three-pronged strategy built on pragmatism (in contrast to dogmatic or ideological positions), dynamism (in contrast to static policy stances), and unified Pan-African voices (in contrast to the fragmentation that external actors could exploit). This strategy enables Africa's geopolitical repositioning and its engagement with extra-regional actors.

The AU was designed for a post-Cold War, unipolar order dominated by liberal and constructivist ideals. In today's multipolar interregnum, however, realism is resurging as states inside and outside Africa prioritize power and self-interest, often at the expense of multilateral cooperation. Liberal-constructivist institutions and norms such as the AU, UN, and R2P still persist, ineffectually attempting to moderate power politics and promote collective security. Realism positions states as central actors seeking to secure national interests and maximize power to ensure survival and security.[166] From this perspective, AU decisions and interventions are supported only to the extent that they align with the geopolitical interests of member states or external powers. External actors will assist the AU's mandates and support the AU in implementation only insofar as it strategically advances their geopolitical interests, such as gaining influence or countering rival powers. This shift has left the AU caught between lofty liberal-constructivist mandates and the realist calculations of its members and partners. The result is paralysis in the face of atrocities, as seen in Sudan and Ethiopia, where sovereignty concerns, external rivalries, and state self-interest block decisive action.

The geostrategic importance of Africa has become increasingly evident as major and regional powers intensify their competition for influence across the continent. However, this growing contest is not without costs. The potential benefits of engagement are being overshadowed by the damaging consequences of ri-

166 Mearsheimer, John J. 2003. *The tragedy of great power politics.* WW Norton & Company. https://samuelbhfaure.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/s2-mearsheimer-2001.pdf

valries that prioritize external interests over Africa's peace, stability, and development. As nationalist realism resurfaces globally, a metaphorical race to the bottom is unfolding, one in which the interests of powerful states take precedence over the welfare and sovereignty of African societies. This evolving dynamic threatens to exacerbate internal conflicts, weaken governance, and impede sustainable development.

Under Trump, the US has redefined its relationship with Africa through what some describe as commercial diplomacy. This shift reflects a largely transactional approach, centred on securing access to critical minerals, expanding market presence, and safeguarding supply chains. At the same time, Western countries, led by the US, are prioritizing their national interests above the values traditionally enshrined in multilateralism and international law.

Concurrently, the growing presence of Russia and China has added a new layer of complexity to Africa's geopolitical environment, as these powers seek to extend their influence through investments, military cooperation, and strategic partnerships. China's engagement with African countries illustrates this challenge. Chinese companies frequently adapt to the political character of their host states, mirroring governance weaknesses where they exist. In contexts of corruption or weak regulation, such partnerships can reinforce rather than reform the structural vulnerabilities of African institutions. Russia's involvement has exhibited similar tendencies, emphasizing resource access and security arrangements that serve external objectives more than local needs.

Amid the declining commitment of the US to invest its diplomatic and military resources in African peace and security, new regional powers have assumed prominent roles. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have become pivotal actors in shaping the political and security landscape of the continent, particularly in the Horn of Africa and North Africa. Their competition, mirrored in the broader Saudi-led and UAE-led blocs, has reshaped regional dynamics through proxy engagements and political patronage. Türkiye's expanding involvement further compounds this intricate web of alignments and rivalries.

The risks of unrestrained competition

The unrestrained pursuit of national interests, detached from international law and multilateral norms, risks entrenching exploitative partnership models. Africa may increasingly become an arena in which global and regional powers compete to displace one another, often placing excessive demands on fragile states. Should influential states fail to secure their preferred partnerships, they may resort to coercive or unilateral measures that disregard African interests.

The continent risks being drawn into proxy confrontations that deepen mistrust among global actors and perpetuate cycles of conflict and instability. As history has shown, such rivalries often have devastating human and political consequences, forcing African governments into choices contrary to their long-term national and regional interests. Geopolitical competition of this nature undermines not only peace and governance, but also the effectiveness of continental and regional institutions such as the AU.

The imperative of multilateralism

In a multipolar world, multilateralism based on international law remains the most viable mechanism for preventing fragmentation and mitigating conflict. Yet global commitment to multilateralism is eroding, even among its traditional advocates. Ironically, as the world becomes more multipolar, the need for effective multilateral institutions becomes more urgent, not less.

Africa should therefore continue to champion an international law-based order as the foundation for equitable partnerships and collective security. The success of such frameworks, however, depends on solidarity, compromise, and political will, all of which are in short supply. The weakening of multilateral structures is particularly concerning for Africa: historically, multilateral frameworks have provided platforms for the continent to amplify its voice and protect its interests. Weakening such structures may leave Africa even more vulnerable to the actions of external actors.

Africa's strategic opportunity

To this effect, Africa must craft an innovative and principled approach to managing its relations with external powers, one that prioritizes effective and equal implementation of international law, strategic neutrality, continental interests, and sustainable development.

As the global order continues to evolve, Africa has a unique opportunity to play a significant role in shaping the future world order. This is due to several factors, including its demography, critical minerals, and importance in diplomatic and geopolitical alliances. The continent needs to strengthen its vision and coordination for geopolitical repositioning. This in-

cludes diversifying partnerships beyond the traditional Western world without alienating existing allies, actively advocating for more equitable representation in key international institutions such as the UN Security Council and the G20, and enhancing the AU's role in global affairs.

The AU already has a mandate to "develop and promote common policies on trade, defence, and foreign relations to ensure the defence of the Continent and the strengthening of its negotiating positions".[167] It can deploy a range of Common African Positions,[168] showing consensus on global issues. For instance, the Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration outline Africa's position on UN Security Council reform, demanding permanent representation with veto rights, increased non-permanent seats, and an AU-led selection of African representatives. Such documents illustrate Africa's commitment to multilateralism while aiming to address historical injustices and ensure better representation in global governance structures.

In light of new geopolitical and internal developments, the AU and its member states need to articulate a new Common African Position that sets out Africa's concerns and aspirations regarding developments in the international world order.

Guiding principles
Pragmatism, dynamism, and collective voice

To ensure that Africa's concerns are taken seriously, the continent's strategies must centre on three core principles:

Pragmatism

In response to pressures for alliances with specific powers, the AU and member states should adopt a pragmatic approach aimed at improving human conditions on the continent, rather than adhering to rigid ideological positions.

Dynamism

African states must be prepared to make swift policy changes when situations demand them, rather than maintaining static policy stances.

Collective voice

To augment their agency and insulate Pan-African decision-making from interference, AU member states must act as a collective entity when dealing with extra-continental actors.

The continent's future on the global stage will depend on its leadership's ability to act cohesively, adapt swiftly to changing dynamics, and persistently advocate for its interests and values. The continent must pursue strategic partnerships in addition to its long-standing traditional ties, while helping to transform global governance structures.

It is a truism that every problem presents an opportunity. By fostering Africa's agency through collective action, the continent can promote its own interests, forge beneficial partnerships with other states and alliances, and assume its proper role in the development of a more inclusive and stable international order.

167 African Union. 2000. "Constitutive Act of the African Union." *Constitutive Act of the African Union.* Accessed October 2025. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf.

168 Bankole, Adeoye. 2020. *Common African positions on global issues.* Institute for Security Studies. https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/common-african-positions-on-global-issues