

[Final Draft] Concept Note |
12th Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa
23 – 25 October 2026

Section I: Background

1. Introduction: concept and origin

To support sustainable peace and advance implementation of the African Union's Tripoli Declaration of August 2009, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University convenes the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa (commonly known as the Tana Forum) annually. The Forum responds to the Declaration's call for African-led solutions and frames peace and security as a shared intellectual challenge. Over the past decade, it has become a flagship annual platform that brings together eminent personalities, including policymakers, intellectuals, continental stakeholders, and representatives of regional and global organisations.

Since its inception, the Tana Forum has provided an informal, open, and candid space for political leaders and other stakeholders to examine Africa's most pressing peace and security challenges. This tradition has continued across eleven editions. As the continent faces increasingly complex challenges, the Forum remains an important venue for frank, substantive dialogue on global issues in which Africa has a direct, strategic stake.

The 12th Edition of the Tana Forum, scheduled for **23–25 October 2026** in **Bahir Dar, Ethiopia**, under the theme **"Pathways to Peace in Africa: Economic Sovereignty and Geopolitical Transformation"**, aims to continue the tradition of candid discussions. High-level policy decision-makers, heads of regional, continental, and global organisations, and thought leaders from across the spectrum are expected to attend the event.

2. Overarching theme – Pathways to Peace in Africa: Economic Sovereignty and Geopolitical Transformation

There are multiple routes to the market.¹

The above quote serves as a normative and epistemological frame for bringing African knowledge systems into closer dialogue with African-led approaches to peace and security. In this context, *market* functions as a metaphor for peace: a condition that encompasses spatial, temporal, physical, and psychological dimensions. The organisation and spatial logic of traditional African markets show that access rarely follows a single route. If peace is the destination, this metaphor suggests the continent offers multiple pathways to sustainable peace. Beyond their physical locations, traditional African markets are open markets of ideas, where insights, methods, experience, and solutions meet. Accordingly, the 12th Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, as an open market for fruitful exchanges and intersections, foregrounds two interrelated pathways it deems timely and urgent: economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation.

The interdependence of these two pathways positions them as central analytical entry points for examining the structural drivers of conflict. At the macro- and meso-levels, such drivers include, but are not limited to, power competition, contestation over strategic resources, structural inequalities, exclusion, and marginalisation. It also includes the micro-level, where most violent conflicts brew and where they have their most devastating long-term impact.

¹ A saying from West Africa that resonates with other parts of the continent, albeit in various versions.

The underlying proposition is therefore to examine economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation as mutually reinforcing pathways to peace, with a view to enhancing Africa's agency within contemporary power configurations, optimising the use of its resources, and ensuring that Africa and Africans define, shape, and realise sustainable peace on their own terms.

Debates on economic sovereignty expose enduring constraints on Africa's ability to extract, process, trade, and leverage its resources for development. External control over value chains, limited policy autonomy, debt dependence, and structural dependence in global trade and finance reproduce historical patterns of exploitation. These dynamics are not only economic concerns; they also shape the structural drivers of conflict by affecting employment, state legitimacy, social welfare, resource competition, and governments' capacity to deliver public goods. The Forum therefore treats economic and peace policies as mutually reinforcing fields rather than separate agendas.

Geopolitical transformation further complicates this landscape. As global power rivalries intensify, Africa faces opportunities for investment and security partnerships but also risks of fragmentation and new forms of dependency. Resource politics (historically central to conflict) now extend into the digital domain. Africa's digital transformation, while promising integration and innovation, is undermined by a persistent digital divide that reinforces inequalities and heightens the risk of conflict. At the same time, digital technologies reshape conflict dynamics through disinformation, cyber threats, and emerging forms of digital imperialism, even as they offer tools for peacebuilding and resilience.

To a significant degree, this calls into question the liberal stance that has dominated the global political economy for over two decades, as Africa's reality is farther away from the key tenets of equality and cooperation and seems closer to Thucydides' treatise that *the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must*. Ergo, what Africa makes of its reality, and how it should proceed, requires deeper reflection, while prioritising cooperation over confrontation in the quest for sustainable peace within the context of Agenda 2063.

Given the above context, overall discussions at the Tana Forum seek to:

- 1) Interrogate the links between economic sovereignty, geopolitical transformation, and sustainable peace in Africa.
- 2) Examine how Africa can translate its natural wealth and digital advantage into inclusive industrial wealth for sustainable peace.
- 3) Assess the readiness, coherence, and resilience of African institutions and regional mechanisms to meet the demands of Africa's economic sovereignty, and to anticipate, prevent, and respond to evolving peace and security challenges in a contested geopolitical environment.
- 4) Identify practical policy pathways to deepen regional integration, harness the developmental potential of informality, and counter illicit economies that undermine governance, sovereignty, and peace across the continent.

3. Sub-themes

i. Resource Wealth and Monetary Sovereignty for Industrial Development

Africa's strategic resources are central to both global economic transformation and the continent's

aspirations for industrialisation, peace, and sovereignty. Yet, extractive structures, unfair international financial architecture, illicit financial flows, opaque resource-backed financing, external control over pricing and settlement systems, and limited value addition have often turned resource wealth into dependency, fiscal vulnerability, instability, and conflict. Resource and monetary sovereignty must therefore go beyond ownership to include African control over the full financial and industrial circuit through which resources are priced, financed, processed, traded, settled, and reinvested, ensuring that revenues support domestic credit creation, value chains, employment, public goods, and peacebuilding. Africa's resource wealth can drive industrial development only if paired with monetary sovereignty. This requires moving beyond extraction toward domestic value addition, transparent resource financing, and stronger control over pricing, invoicing, banking, settlement systems, credit creation, and revenue management. It is also worth considering what this means for Africa's young population, particularly through the peace and security lens.

By retaining more value within African economies, reducing reliance on external currencies and opaque resource-backed loans, and reinvesting resource revenues into productive sectors, states can build industrial capacity, create jobs, strengthen fiscal resilience, and reduce conflict risks. Young people also play a role. Resource sovereignty must therefore include control over both natural assets and the financial systems that convert them into broad-based transformation, while also ensuring that the role and aspirations of young people are not neglected.

Building on this premise, this sub-theme examines how Africa can secure sovereignty over its strategic resources and the monetary and financial architecture through which resource wealth translates into industrial development, and what this implies for Africa's peace and security agenda.

ii. Leveraging African Institutions and Capabilities at the Intersection of Peace and Macroeconomic Governance

Africa's peace and security landscape is being reshaped by global geopolitical transformation, demands for economic sovereignty, and renewed concerns about the autonomy, legitimacy, and effectiveness of African institutions. While the African Union, Regional Economic Communities, and related bodies have advanced conflict prevention, mediation, peace support operations, and normative governance frameworks, persistent crises in the Sahel, Sudan, eastern DRC, and the Horn of Africa continue to expose deeper institutional constraints that go beyond capacity gaps to include financial dependence, donor-driven priorities, limited policy space, operational weaknesses, and reduced state sovereignty. As global power competition expands opportunities for investment, infrastructure, and security cooperation while also creating risks of fragmentation, rivalry, and new dependencies, African institutions must strengthen collective agency, epistemic sovereignty, state capabilities, and continental coordination. This requires linking peace to macroeconomic governance, reducing reliance on external financing, and building robust capabilities in mediation, crisis response, cybersecurity, border management, and security funding to achieve a more sovereign and self-reliant continent.

Notably, the linkage between peace and macroeconomic governance in the modern world will be incomplete and proverbially *half-baked* if digital transformation is understood only as a matter of access or technological modernisation. In this context, digital transformation requires an approach that holistically intersects questions of sovereignty and agency with inclusion and peace. Africa must move beyond tokenistic participation towards meaningful influence over strategic digital resources, including data, infrastructure, platforms, cloud systems, algorithms, payment technologies and artificial intelligence. This requires stronger local and continental authorship and ownership of technologies; capabilities in data governance, regulation, computing infrastructure,

research and development, Artificial Intelligence (AI), skills, and innovation; and more effective participation in global digital rulemaking. Externally controlled technologies can deepen strategic dependency, reproduce (digital) imperialism, limit African policy space and restrict fair value capture, despite the continent's role in supplying critical minerals. Inclusion is also incomplete unless women, youth, platform workers, informal workers, and disadvantaged groups can shape and benefit from the digital economy, as weak macroeconomic governance may, in the long run, intensify threats, disinformation, algorithmic bias, and technology-mediated instability.

This sub-theme will examine practical pathways for building capable, resilient, self-reliant, and knowledge-producing institutions that can reduce dependence on external actors, strengthen African ownership of the peace and security agenda, and contribute to a more peaceful sovereign continent, while ensuring that the digital options and explorations do not generate new (forms of) dependency, exclusion, and insecurity. Reasonably, this discussion should include inter-generational solidarity, co-leadership of institutions, and co-exploration of mechanisms to maximise African capabilities.

iii. Untapped Leverage, Unnoticed Movements: Regional Integration and Illicit Economies

Regional integration is not only a trade agenda, but also a peace and resilience agenda. The African Union conceptualises it as a multidimensional process through which states deepen economic, political, and socio-cultural cooperation to enhance trade, mobility, stability, and collective influence in the international system. In a global economy defined by interdependence and competitive markets, integration is essential for Africa, where many national economies remain small and fragmented. By facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, regional integration can expand intra-African trade, stimulate growth, and strengthen resilience. This vision aligns with the mandates of Regional Economic Communities, the UN 2030 Agenda, and Agenda 2063, and is institutionally anchored in the African Continental Free Trade Area, a major milestone toward a unified continental market.

However, the effectiveness of regional integration cannot be understood without accounting for the scale of informality across African economies. The informal sector constitutes a major share of employment and GDP. It functions as a form of bottom-up integration, enabling cross-border trade, livelihoods, and social cohesion among border communities. Yet operating outside formal regulatory systems creates challenges for taxation, labour protection, state authority, and policy planning. This conflates informal economies with illicit economies in many spaces. Thus, while disciplinary and regulatory policy actions tend to target informal economies, large corporations have been central to illicit financial flows. These illicit flows undermine governance, security, and development, particularly in regions with weak state presence. They also harm the environment and often violate regulatory frameworks designed to protect it. These include smuggling, trafficking, and illegal resource extraction, among others. Additionally, young people's cross-border mobility can deepen regional integration through trade, skills exchange, and social networks. Yet, many unaddressed precipitating factors expose them to exploitation and draw their movements into illicit economies and sometimes encourage or reward their contribution to violence.

The success of regional integration thus depends not only on strengthening formal markets and mobility frameworks but also on designing policies that protect vulnerable livelihoods and disrupt illicit networks that fuel instability. A comprehensive approach to integration must therefore reconcile economic inclusion with security governance to advance sustainable development and continental cohesion.

On these premises, the 12th Edition of the Tana Forum for 2026 will continue its customary uncensored approach, under Chatham House Rule, to tackling crucial challenges with input from decision-makers. Additionally, frameworks will be in place to involve more stakeholders through side events and pre- and post-forum activities.

Section II: The Tana Forum in Context

1. Overall and specific objectives

The Tana Forum provides a platform to discuss African peace and security issues, enabling high-level decision-makers and other partners to develop innovative solutions to the myriad peace and security challenges confronting the continent. Specifically, the Forum will:

- Provide opportunities for decision-making leaders and institutions to exchange experiences and insights on peace and security issues, gaining new perspectives needed to resolve critical peace and security problems.
- Provide opportunities for political decision-makers to interact and consult with a critical mass of the African constituency and key global actors in the peace, security, and development sectors.
- Contribute to an open and substantive debate on peace and security issues of strategic importance to the continent vis-à-vis the rest of the world.
- Facilitate inclusive dialogue among governments and African security stakeholders, including diverse African voices on the ground, on various dimensions and components of peace and security concerns across the continent.
- Sensitise and mobilise a broad spectrum of actors and stakeholders to promote awareness of, and the imperative for, African ownership of peace and security solutions.

2. Expected results.

In achieving its main and specific objectives, the Forum will result in:

- The continuous conceptualisation and projection of the peace and security issues affecting the continent from the perspective of African citizens and governments. In that regard, substantial attention will be given to the emerging body of “home-grown” African approaches to peace and security challenges and prospects.
- The building of a vibrant and broad-based constituency on peace and security issues through the establishment of non-threatening platforms for dialogue, networking, and exchange of information between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. To sustain such platforms, a cross-section of leaders from different sectors will be called upon to act as interlocutors and champions to mobilise “top-down” and “bottom-up” African voices on the peace and security priorities that the continent should pursue.
- Progressively engaging Africa in the strategic and pro-active management of peace and security in the continent. Key to that effort will be the development of foresight capacities throughout relevant national, regional, and continental organisations across the public,

private, and civil society sectors.

3. Forum strategy

Participation: The Forum will bring together high-level decision-makers on peace and security drawn from the governmental sphere (Heads of State and Government, AU organs, and RECs), non-African regional institutions (UN, EU), the African private sector and civil society networks, and scholars and practitioners of peace and security.

Discussion format: Discussions at the Forum aim to achieve three main goals: (i) encourage an open and informal exchange of views and experiences, (ii) focus on action-oriented and forward-looking outcomes, and (iii) remain a consultative forum rather than a decision-making one. To achieve this, the Forum will primarily use interactive panel discussions that actively involve all participants. After the Side events and official opening, two high-level panels will sandwich the main sessions. This will include heads of state and former heads of state to set the tone (at the beginning) and round off (at the end) with key practical policy takeaways. This approach aims to ensure that economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation.

Impact and effectiveness: The Forum is convened annually. In its short existence, it has become a flagship platform and institution – in its own right. This sustains continuous dialogue among top African leaders and various stakeholder groups. It enables leaders to explore options for innovative and joint action in peace and security. The Forum also builds trust among key players who often meet only in settings mediated and constrained by diplomatic protocol.

4. The Tana Forum Secretariat

IPSS at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia serves as the Forum's Secretariat. Alongside the Forum and its Secretariat, IPSS hosts the Africa Peace and Security Programme (APSP), a joint project with the African Union. The APSP's mission is to build African capacities to develop and implement African-led solutions in the peace and security sector. In this context, the Forum's outcomes will also inform the Institute's activities in education, research, and policy dialogues.

5. Forum status

The maiden Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa took place from 14 to 15 April 2012 in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, on the theme "Managing Diversity and State Fragility." It attracted sitting and former Heads of State and Government, distinguished leaders of regional and sub-regional bodies, representatives from the private sector, concerned civil society from Africa, eminent personalities from politics and media, representatives of African and non-African multi-lateral bodies, and other important partners, who attended the Forum.

2nd Tana Forum: 20 to 21 "Security and Organised Crime in Africa"

Paid tribute to the Forum's foremost champion, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi²

3rd Tana Forum: 26 to 27 April 2014 "Impact of Illicit Financial Flows on Peace and Security in Africa"

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Nelson Mandela.

4th Tana Forum: 18 to 19 April 2015 "Secularism and Politicised Faith"

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Kwame Nkrumah.

² The annual Meles Zenawi Lecture Series was also established this year.

5th Tana Forum: 16 to 17 April 2016 “Africa in the Global Security Agenda”

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Patrice Lumumba.

6th Tana Forum: 22 to 23 April 2017 “Natural Resource Governance in Africa”.

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: Dr Wangari Muta Maathai.

7th Tana Forum: 21 to 22 April 2018 “Ownership of Africa’s Peace and Security Provision: Financing and Reforming the African Union”.

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Gamal Abdel Nasser

8th Tana Forum: 4 to 5 May 2019 "Political Dynamics in the Horn of Africa: Nurturing the Emerging Peace Trends".

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the South African anti-apartheid activist and politician.

9th Tana Forum: 24 to 26 April 2020 "The AfCFTA: A Milestone for Pan-Africanism and Conflict Transformation."

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Julius Nyerere.

10th Tana Forum: 14 to 16 October 2022 "Managing Security Threats: Building Resilience for the Africa We Want"

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Kenneth Kaunda.

11th Edition: 24 to 26 October 2025 “Africa in an Evolving Global Order”

- Meles Zenawi Lecture Series: President Samora Machel.

6. Participation

According to the Secretariat’s policy, participation is by invitation only, and invitations are non-transferable.

7. Contact

For more information, please visit our website or forward enquiries to the organising team at tanaforum@ipss-addis.org.

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