



**TANA  
FORUM**

# **STATE OF PEACE AND SECURITY REPORT**

**2025 / 2026**

**Pathways to Peace in Africa: Economic  
Sovereignty and Geopolitical Transformation**



**IPSS**

| TANA FORUM  
SECRETARIAT

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# STATE OF PEACE AND SECURITY REPORT

January 2025 – June 2026

THEME: PATHWAYS TO PEACE IN AFRICA: ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY AND GEOPOLITICAL  
TRANSFORMATION

October 2026



**IPSS**

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                 |                                                                         |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AfCFTA</b>   | African Continental Free Trade Area                                     |
| <b>AES</b>      | Alliance of Sahel States                                                |
| <b>AfDB</b>     | African Development Bank                                                |
| <b>AFAWA</b>    | Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa                          |
| <b>AFREXIM</b>  | African Export-Import Bank                                              |
| <b>AGOA</b>     | African Growth and Opportunity Act                                      |
| <b>AGA-APSA</b> | African Governance Architecture-African Peace and Security Architecture |
| <b>APSA</b>     | African Peace and Security Architecture                                 |
| <b>ATMIS</b>    | African Union Transition Mission in Somalia                             |
| <b>AU</b>       | African Union                                                           |
| <b>AUC</b>      | African Union Commission                                                |
| <b>AUSSOM</b>   | African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia              |
| <b>AY4TJ</b>    | African Youth for Transitional Justice                                  |
| <b>AYAPs</b>    | African Youth Ambassadors for Peace                                     |
| <b>CFYPS</b>    | Continental Framework on Youth, Peace, and Security                     |
| <b>CSOs</b>     | Civil Society Organisations                                             |
| <b>DRC</b>      | Democratic Republic of Congo                                            |
| <b>EAC</b>      | East African Community                                                  |
| <b>ECOWAS</b>   | Economic Community of West African States                               |
| <b>EU</b>       | European Union                                                          |
| <b>FTYIP</b>    | First Ten-Year Implementation Plan                                      |
| <b>GDP</b>      | Gross Domestic Product                                                  |
| <b>GSI</b>      | Global Security Initiative                                              |
| <b>ICSID</b>    | International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes              |
| <b>IEDs</b>     | Improvised Explosive Devices                                            |
| <b>ISM</b>      | Islamic State Mozambique                                                |
| <b>ISWAP</b>    | Islamic State West Africa Province                                      |
| <b>JNIM</b>     | Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin                                    |
| <b>LNG</b>      | Liquefied Natural Gas                                                   |
| <b>MISAHEL</b>  | African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel                            |
| <b>MSMEs</b>    | Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises                               |
| <b>PAPS</b>     | Political Affairs, Peace and Security                                   |
| <b>PAPSS</b>    | Pan-African Payment and Settlement System                               |
| <b>PCRD</b>     | Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development                            |

|              |                                          |
|--------------|------------------------------------------|
| <b>RDF</b>   | Rwanda Defence Force                     |
| <b>REC</b>   | Regional Economic Community              |
| <b>RECs</b>  | Regional Economic Communities            |
| <b>RM</b>    | Regional Mechanism                       |
| <b>RMs</b>   | Regional Mechanisms                      |
| <b>RSF</b>   | Rapid Support Forces                     |
| <b>SADC</b>  | Southern African Development Community   |
| <b>SAF</b>   | Sudanese Armed Forces                    |
| <b>STG</b>   | Silencing the Guns                       |
| <b>UAE</b>   | United Arab Emirates                     |
| <b>UCG</b>   | Unconstitutional Change of Government    |
| <b>UCGs</b>  | Unconstitutional Changes of Government   |
| <b>UK</b>    | United Kingdom                           |
| <b>UN</b>    | United Nations                           |
| <b>UNSOS</b> | United Nations Support Office in Somalia |
| <b>US</b>    | United States                            |
| <b>WPS</b>   | Women, Peace and Security                |
| <b>YPS</b>   | Youth, Peace and Security                |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This edition of the State of Peace and Security Report, January 2025 to June 2026, examines how Africa can pursue durable pathways to peace while strengthening economic sovereignty amid a rapidly shifting geopolitical order. Its central argument is that conflict on the continent cannot be reduced to the presence of armed groups or the weakness of formal security institutions. These are symptoms of deeper tensions in political authority, economic distribution, and social legitimacy.

Accordingly, the report situates peace and security within a political economy framework, examining who controls resources, who benefits from growth, and whose interests are served by the persistence of instability. This framing carries a practical implication that runs through the entire report: interventions that address only the symptoms of conflict, such as ceasefires, peacekeeping deployments, and humanitarian access, cannot deliver durable peace unless they are accompanied by a parallel reordering of who controls resources, markets, and institutions.

Drawing on conflict trends from January 2025 to June 2026, the report traces the regionalisation and fragmentation of violence and the consolidation of conflict economies in theatres including Sudan, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cabo Delgado, the Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin. Analysed across two phases, Phase I covers January to December 2025 and Phase II covers January to June 2026, the evidence shows that these cases, despite their distinct histories, share a common structure: control over resources and corridors, contested by state and non-state actors alike, is amplified by the involvement of external patrons navigating a multipolar order. The report finds that contemporary African conflicts are increasingly shaped not only by local grievances and weak governance, but also by the interaction among strategic resource competition, digital transformation (including the growing use of drones and online propaganda by armed groups), institutional capacity, regional integration, and external geopolitical competition. Regional ruptures, most notably the split between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the breakaway Alliance of Sahel States, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, further illustrate how fragmentation at one level of governance cascades into vulnerabilities at another, disrupting trade corridors and mediation efforts alike.

The report further examines the evolving role of women and youth in Africa's peace and security architecture, arguing for a shift from formal representation toward substantive legitimacy, and for treating inclusion as a governance and economic strategy rather than a normative add-on. The report assesses how African institutions, regional economic communities, and private sector and financial actors can either strengthen African agency or reproduce the dependencies that undermine peace, with particular attention to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a platform for regional stability, peace dividends, and geopolitical positioning. Case evidence from the eastern DRC's mineral economy, the DRC-Zambia battery value chain, the Sahel's tri-border trade corridors, and the Lake Chad Basin illustrates both the promise of formal trade integration in crowding out conflict financing and the limits of trade alone where active insecurity or fragmented regional politics persist.

A significant portion of the analysis is devoted to the persistent gap between Africa's strong normative and policy architecture and the uneven implementation of its commitments in practice. Despite the ambition of Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the Silencing the Guns (STG) initiative, progress across all three frameworks remains slow, constrained by financing gaps and external dependency, fragmented bargaining, uneven national domestication of treaties and protocols, the recurring interaction between active conflict and implementation failure, and an underlying tension between sovereignty and enforcement. The report argues that 'political will', often cited as the main hindrance to policy implementation, is a vague term incapable of measurement. Contrary to its treatment as an abstract or immeasurable quality, the report demonstrates that it can be defined, tracked, and strengthened through observable indicators, including formal commitments, budget allocations, institutional follow-through, implementation milestones, and

meaningful inclusion of affected communities. The analysis extends to attention to politics at the margins and the deliberate construction of sovereignty from below, recognising borderland communities, informal traders, pastoralists, and displaced populations as a foundation for domestic legitimacy and, in turn, for the political will needed to implement continental commitments.

The report concludes with targeted recommendations addressed to six actors, including the African Union, regional economic communities, African governments, the private sector and financial institutions, and civil society organisations. Collectively, these recommendations call for greater coherence across peace, security, trade, and development agendas; predictable and increasingly African-owned financing; stronger accountability mechanisms at continental, regional, national, and community level; and the meaningful inclusion of women, youth, and marginalised communities and constituencies as the basis for a durable social contract between African states and their citizens.

The report's overarching conclusion is that Africa's economic sovereignty and its prospects for durable peace are two sides of the same project rather than separate policy tracks: trade integration without security is fragile, security without economic opportunity is unsustainable, and both are hollow without institutions trusted by the communities they are meant to serve. It is within this understanding that the domestication of regional and continental frameworks for economic growth, peace, and security can be embraced rather than resisted.

# 01

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The report's guiding questions are: how do economic dependencies shape conflict risks; how can African institutions convert global change into continental agency; and how can peacebuilding become more inclusive, legitimate, and economically transformative? This chapter introduces the report's central concern: how can African countries - individually and as a collective - pursue durable peace while strengthening economic sovereignty, navigating a fast-changing and challenging geopolitical order? It explains why peace and security debates must move beyond narrow, *ad hoc* crisis responses to address the political economy of conflict with its multi-dimensional ramifications. By interrogating the political economy of conflict, this report brings into focus a range of issues, including resource governance, digital inclusion, regional markets and integration, African institutional and fiscal capabilities, and the distribution of economic opportunity, among others.

Despite many related developments occurring outside the modern state, responses to them have been characterised by the persistence of a state-centric approach to peacebuilding, which often impedes the long-term effectiveness of interventions. For the most part, the reactive nature of extant peacekeeping models adopted after violent conflicts have erupted has failed to address root causes of instability. This failure has contributed to a renewed quest for - and interest in - a more sustainable paradigm of conflict prevention and human security as a suitable pathway to address Africa's underlying conflict drivers.<sup>1</sup>

Human security, in this regard, not only prioritises shifting the focus from state-centric models of border defence to people-centred strategies that integrate communities and civil society into an evolving security architecture, thereby strengthening resilience. It also adopts a more robust whole-of-society approach that integrates the governance–security–development nexus as a more effective approach to sustainable peacebuilding.<sup>2</sup> The human security approach aligns with the adaptive peacebuilding process, which recognises the role of society in peacebuilding<sup>3</sup> whilst noting that peace is nonlinear and dynamic, capable of flourishing even amid profound structural devastation.<sup>4</sup>

Africa's experience indicates that peacebuilding often requires navigating power imbalances among multiple overlapping networks of authorities, including major intergovernmental and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the African Union, regional institutions, and external powers. These external powers are not limited to countries outside Africa; they also include those within the continent that pursue hegemonic or economic interests. It is within this context of multipolar competition, dynamic global order and dire conflict situations that peace must be built and sustained.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1 Analytical Framing: Peace as Political Economy

The central thesis of this paper is that an understanding of the etymology of African conflicts should not be reduced to the presence, proliferation and pursuits of armed groups, or the weakness of formal security institutions. While these factors matter, they are symptoms of deeper tensions in political authority, economic distribution, and social legitimacy. In this regard, relevant questions to ask from a political economy perspective include: who controls and benefits from resources that shape the fortune of African

States and institutions? Who is included or excluded from decision-making that determines the nature and trajectory of African conflicts, and of peacebuilding options available? How do formal and informal power arrangements and the institutions that project such powers shape access to security, justice, land, markets, and public goods? Together, these questions – and their answers – indicate how state-society relations contribute to the state of peace, or its absence.

A political economy framing is especially important because many contemporary conflicts are triggered, maintained and sustained by economic logics and practices that make violence profitable, especially for a few. There is a range of *conflict-preneurs* – actors who profit from conflict situations, such as formal state armed forces, non-state armed groups, politicians, bureaucrats, private security actors, rogue business entities, and a whole range of informal intermediaries angling to tap into the benefits of instability. Peacebuilding therefore requires more than ceasefires and mediation; it requires changing the incentives that sustain conflict economies and expanding legitimate economic opportunities for communities affected by insecurity. How these opportunities are discovered, harnessed, and sustained without overbearing external influence, particularly in the context of the ongoing global geopolitical transformation, is central to making contemporary peacebuilding and sustainable peace processes fit for purpose in Africa.

## 1.2 Conceptual Clarity

The realisation that political independence does not necessarily equate to economic sovereignty became apparent as the number of newly independent African countries increased during the decade of independence in the 1960s. As Chitonge argued, weak economic sovereignty is manifested by a country's degree of dependence on other countries.<sup>6</sup> In an intricately interconnected world, it is not possible for any country to maintain autarky or be completely independent of external influence, given its membership in a wide range of governmental and non-governmental institutions at the global, continental, and regional levels. These networks are exemplified by global interdependence involving a dense network of cross-border supply chain activities, amongst others.

Thus, defining economic sovereignty in the African context must take cognisance of the continent's history, current realities, and prospects. Here, the aim is to refuse the conflation of formal recognition with operational autonomy. In this regard, this report describes economic sovereignty as the substantive - not merely juridical - capacity of African states, societies, businesses, and regional institutions to:

- a. govern the strategic assets on which development depends - minerals, energy, ports, corridors, monetary instruments, and digital infrastructure including submarine cables and the standards-setting forums that govern them - extending the conventional resource frame to encompass data, processing capacity, and the rent streams attached to each;
- b. mobilise domestic and regional resources - fiscal capacity, monetary autonomy, regional markets, and productive linkages - on terms set by African actors rather than by external creditors, donors, or security partners;
- c. set and renegotiate the terms and conditions of external partnerships - in mineral supply chains, security cooperation, infrastructure financing, debt restructuring, and digitalisation; all as constitutive acts of sovereignty rather than as residual compliance with imposed conditionalities; and
- d. distribute the benefits, costs, and accountability of these arrangements inclusively, with operational standing for women, youth, customary authorities, and host communities, who are not peripheral constituents but constitutive of the legitimacy without which capacity (a)–(c) cannot be exercised durably.<sup>7</sup>

The all-encompassing nature of this definition and its various elements is a deliberate, operational choice. Substantive findings in the subsequent sections underscore, for instance, that the lack of institutional capacity to regulate these diverse variables is, directly or indirectly, a core determinant and driver of African conflict dynamics. Under current geopolitical realities, therefore, governance failures can only diminish policy autonomy while reinforcing a perverse reliance on the agency of external actors and institutions

to manage them. To ensure analytical utility, this operational framework looks beyond state-centric actors to identify and evaluate the underlying factors and circumstances that shape conflict trajectories in Africa, past, present, and future, more holistically and robustly.

**Geopolitical transformation** in an African context requires insightful reflections that go beyond the classic definitions. Here, robust analysis underpins a suggestive definition suited to the African context: understanding geopolitical transformation as the reconfiguration of power relations within and between states and regions, shaping the structural positions of different components within the global systems of value extraction, norms-building, and rulemaking.

This definition recognises five critical elements of geopolitical transformation, as follows. First, the redistribution of power among states as evident, notably, in the transition from a unipolar world order dominated by the United States (US) immediately after the Cold War toward greater multipolarity today. Under the emergent multipolar world order, countries such as China, India, Russia, the Gulf states, and a plethora of regional blocs are becoming key epicentres of power and authority whose actions, or otherwise, have far-reaching implications for the international system. Second, it takes into cognisance the breakdown or renegotiation of 'old' institutional arrangements, formal and informal, that once shaped and stabilised the world order, such as the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

Third, it recognises the imperative to elevate a wide range of new assets, such as critical and rare minerals, beyond the 'regular' natural resources, and to consider how those minerals shape the leverage that countries that own or have access to them can exercise. Fourth, it identifies the shifting landscape occasioned by norms-building and rulemaking; one in which states are now better able to exercise considerable leverage in determining what multilateral or bilateral arrangements are best suited to meet their needs. For example, the three-country Alliance of Sahel States (AES) members are increasingly exercising policy autonomy by gravitating towards Russia following a prolonged period of disenchantment with France, their colonial masters. Finally, the transformation affects states differently depending on their ability to reinvent, diversify and re-negotiate.

In the specific African context, therefore, geopolitical transformation refers to the shift from a world where African economies related primarily to one or more dominant external actors and order (e.g. predominantly US/Western-led trade and finance) toward one where multiple competing external powers (US, China, Gulf states, Russia, Türkiye) are locked in the scramble for access to resources and markets that they are now forced to create new leverage; and also new instability.<sup>8</sup>

The interaction of Africa - particularly as a bloc but also as individual Member States - with the evolving world order will likely shape the continent's economic, governance, peace and security stability in the next century and beyond. The question, however, is whether African institutions can exercise agency in the evolving geopolitical landscape or simply react to developments as and when they arise around them. Further, to what extent are they adequately resourced, in different ramifications, to understand, adapt and define their role in the context of geopolitical transformation while advancing and protecting their economic sovereignty? The analysis of the recent conflict trends in this report highlights the nexus between economic sovereignty and instability. This provides the background to appreciate the opportunities and challenges that current geopolitical transformations bring to the continent.

## 1.3 Methodology

This State of Peace and Security Report will utilise a qualitative research methodology based on:

- i. Drawing perspectives from African Union documents;
- ii. Analytical documents from a wide range of institutions;
- iii. Extensive desk research and review of documentation;
- iv. Media reports.

The analysis utilises selected regional, country, and thematic examples to identify recurring patterns across Africa's conflict theatres. Broadly, the Sahel region illustrates the fusion of governance failure, livelihood insecurity, insurgency, and a complex foreign military presence. The Horn of Africa, on the other hand, highlights the relationship between state fragmentation, strategic corridors and humanitarian challenges along the Red Sea corridor. Finally, the Great Lakes region demonstrates how resource governance, armed mobilisation, cross-border networks, and regional diplomacy are interwoven and entrenched. These examples are used analytically, but they are by no means exhaustive case studies.

The report is organised into nine chapters that build cumulatively from framing to evidence to prescription. Chapter 1 introduces the report's political-economy lens and methodology. Chapter 2 traces conflict trends across Africa in two phases (January–December 2025 and January–June 2026), covering Sudan, eastern DRC, Somalia, Cabo Delgado, and the Sahel. Chapter 3 reads these conflicts through a geopolitical lens organised around the Tana Forum's four sub-themes: resource sovereignty, digital transformation, African institutions, and regional integration. Chapter 4 examines the inclusion of women and youth as a matter of legitimacy rather than mere representation, while Chapter 5 focuses on how partnerships, institutions, and businesses—particularly through the AfCFTA—can either strengthen African agency or entrench dependency. Chapter 6 assesses the persistent gap between Africa's normative commitments (Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and Silencing the Guns) and their uneven implementation. Chapter 7 unpacks political will as a measurable, trackable variable and introduces the concept of sovereignty from below. Chapter 8 makes targeted recommendations to five sets of actors—the African Union, RECs/RMs, governments, the private sector, and civil society while Chapter 9 concludes by tying economic sovereignty and durable peace together as a single, interdependent project.

# 02

## CHAPTER 2: CONFLICT TRENDS

This chapter examines conflict trends across different African regions during two distinct periods: Phase I, from January to December 2025; and Phase II, from January to June 2026. Utilising the report's established methodology, the report applies regional and thematic lenses to analyse a variety of patterns of violence. Specifically, the chapter explores the critical intersection between these regionalised conflicts and their underlying economic imperatives. This analysis establishes the necessary context to evaluate how ongoing geopolitical transformations are creating new opportunities- and possible constraints- for the continent.

### 2.1 Phase One: Regionalisation, Fragmentation, and the Consolidation of Conflict Economies

The major theatre of violent conflict in Africa did not change significantly from 2024 to 2025, as identified in the conflict situations in this section. In all the cases, however, they reasserted the regional and international dimensions and dynamics of resource-induced conflicts.

In Sudan, for example, the Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) capture of El Fasher in October 2025 resulted in the country's complete fragmentation, with the RSF effectively controlling the west, whilst the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) controlled the capital, Khartoum, and the east up to the Red Sea.<sup>9</sup> The internal consequences of the war, primarily driven by the desire to control gold mining assets, include mass displacement and killings, arbitrary detentions of those accused of being army affiliates, as well as rape and sexual violence against women.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the Sudanese war has also generated regional and international ramifications, not the least of which is the involvement of external patrons, and has reshaped the geopolitics of the wider Red Sea region.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the interventions and expanding influence of middle powers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), represent direct outcomes of a disrupted multipolar global order. Ultimately, the crisis illustrates how overlapping economic, security, geopolitical, and ideological imperatives as well as networks function to sustain conflicts and hinder their resolution.

The conflicts in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have gained notoriety as one of Africa's most vicious humanitarian tragedies. During the period under consideration, it has escalated as the M-23 has expanded across North and South Kivu. The conflicts have negatively affected regional dynamics, particularly the relationship between Rwanda (which supports M-23) and Burundi (which backs the Congolese army).<sup>12</sup> Despite multiple tracks of mediation attempts, notably the signing of the Declaration of Principles by the Parties on April 25, 2025, and the Washington Accord in December of the same year, the conflict has lingered to date to the extent of frustrating parties interested in its resolution (particularly the US) from proceeding with deals to gain access to rare and critical minerals. In the interim, the regionalisation of the conflict and its nexus with resources are exemplified by allegations that a key regional actor is a primary destination for coltan from the conflict zones and by recognition of the country's role in regional logistics.<sup>13</sup>

In Somalia, the dominant threat remained Al-Shabaab, a militant youth movement that evolved two decades ago, around 2004. However, other factors, including a growing armed insurgency, political fragmentation,

a challenging security transition, and intergovernmental tensions, further complicate the situation.<sup>14</sup> Disagreements between Mogadishu and the federal member states over governance issues – federalism, constitutional reform, elections, resource distribution, and control of security forces – have undermined national cohesion, particularly in the design and implementation of a unified national security strategy. Put simply, intra-national issues contribute to the resurgence of Al-Shabaab and continued regional tensions in the Horn of Africa. The situation is compounded by the transition of the African Union mission from the African Union Transition Mission to Somalia (ATMIS) to the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), an initiative whose primary objective is the devolution of the country's security architecture to state authorities.<sup>15</sup> In the interim, regional geopolitical tensions are not abating, as the prolonged violent conflict and instability in Somalia continue to affect relations with immediate neighbours, especially Ethiopia and Kenya, and resonate across the wider Red Sea and Horn of Africa geopolitical space.<sup>16</sup>

It is almost a decade into the violent conflicts that began in Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, which borders Tanzania to the north and the Indian Ocean to the east. Between January and December 2025, the region saw increased military activities and violence that have significantly altered its original dynamics. In particular, the thwarting of the quest by insurgent groups to capture more territories has prompted them to shift tactics to rural insurgency, with mobile attacks and kidnappings targeting civilians and security forces. By the end of 2025, armed groups have also spread the conflict into neighbouring provinces of Nampula and Niassa, sparking fresh cycles of displacement and associated crisis.<sup>17</sup> In the interim, the Liquefied Natural Gas plant has resumed operations, potentially boosting national economic benefits. However, locally, it remains a potential source of communal disenchantment and conflict with claims and counterclaims of exclusion.<sup>18</sup> This is neither good for business nor security. Just as the situation highlights how access to resources and benefits is both a driver of conflicts and of their resolution, so too does it indicate the essence of regional interactions. While Rwanda's intervention has contributed to the reduced territorial expansion of the insurgents, Tanzania remains critical to preventing cross-border expansion.

For the fourth year running, the Sahel has remained the most heavily impacted by violent conflicts of varied types, accounting for about 55% of all related fatalities for the continent.<sup>19</sup> Resolving this crisis requires understanding and responding to underlying issues of political fragmentation and economic vulnerability, especially in border territories. The situation is compounded by how the Jihadists and other armed groups are adapting to and utilising new technologies to further their messaging, recruitment, financing and field operations. Relatedly, armed non-state actors active in nine African countries<sup>1</sup> acquired and used drones for reconnaissance, explosive attacks, as well as propaganda dissemination purposes.<sup>20</sup> The breakdown of regional coordination following Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has also been exploited by armed groups across the region. Reports indicate that jihadists and rebels targeting Chinese-linked infrastructure and personnel intensified in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso due to porous borders, especially in the aftermath of cutting ties with former regional and global security partners.<sup>21</sup> The intersection of economics, global politics, and diplomacy becomes apparent as China begins investing in the security of several countries in the Sahel region and across Africa through its Global Security Initiative (GSI). How China navigates the on-the-ground realities at a time when its non-interference doctrine is being hollowed out will have far-reaching repercussions for the Sahel. In the interim, developments in the Sahel may culminate in a shift away from China's 'economy first' model.

## 2.2 Phase II- Escalation, Drone Warfare, and Contested Peace Deals

Generally, the first half of 2026 witnessed a significant escalation of the representative conflicts identified above across the continent, just as mediation efforts to resolve them intensified.

The escalation of the conflicts in Eastern DRC, for instance, peaked during the first half of 2026, the worst since the M23 conflict erupted in late 2021.<sup>22</sup> While mediation efforts yielded mixed results, early 2026

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1 Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan

also brought tangible progress on ceasefire monitoring, humanitarian access, judicial safeguards, and prisoner releases. Despite these humanitarian gains, the core political stalemate persists, with the Angola-led peace process collapsing because it could not advance efforts to nudge both the warring parties and their supporters to shift positions. The multiplicity of other mediation initiatives during the period did not significantly alter the status quo. If anything, they merely became opportunities for forum shopping and avenues to delay final resolution.<sup>23</sup>

The worsening security and humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad region, on its own, underscores the critical link between marginalised border communities, porous frontiers, and jihadist insurgencies. This dynamic is illustrated by ISWAP's "Camp Holocaust" campaign, a strategy designed specifically to exploit these geographic vulnerabilities by launching targeted assaults on regional security outposts.<sup>24</sup> These outposts, mostly in borderland communities far from the capital and major cities and towns, easily become vulnerable because of their distance from the central army command. The situation for security forces stationed in the borderlands is made worse by the increased tactical dexterity shown by jihadists deploying new technology, including armed drones and night-vision-equipped assault teams, amongst others.<sup>25</sup> Borderlands, once regarded as escape routes, are increasingly becoming targets. They are also becoming viable locations for new recruitment by jihadist groups, exacerbated by widespread poverty and insecurity in the face of climate stress.

In Sudan, the largely fragmented hostilities continued unabated amidst failed – regional and international – attempts to reach a stable ceasefire agreement or long-term political settlement. With over 150 armed groups, militias, tribal formations, and local defence forces operating within and alongside SAF and RSF coalitions, it is difficult for the main warring parties to bind their affiliates, even with sanctions imposed by the US and United Kingdom (UK).<sup>26</sup> Two things that stand out in this period are the use of drones and the internationalisation of the resource-fuelled conflict. From May to June 2026, the two major protagonists significantly increased their use of foreign-supplied drones, principally from Türkiye and China, leaving severe casualties. One estimate indicates that drone strikes killed at least 880 civilians in the first four months of 2026, representing more than 80% of all recorded civilian deaths during that period.<sup>27</sup> The use of foreign fighters (military, private military contractors, and mercenaries alike), weapons, logistics and training networks and sites has further intensified the war in ways that negatively impact the country and its neighbours.<sup>28</sup> In the interim, the war, fuelled by resource revenues which hinder settlement, lingers.

In Mozambique, the insurgency landscape has become dispersed and mobile, with the Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) concentrating its activity in Macomia and neighbouring Mocímboa da Praia. The tactical capabilities of ISM have also evolved, as it increasingly relies on IEDs and other new technologies, including drones. In January 2026, relatively rare mortar attacks were launched against military positions, roads, and supply routes, while the movement also reportedly generated huge revenues from illicit resource extraction through artisanal and informal mining.<sup>29</sup> The Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) remained central to counter-insurgency efforts, supporting Mozambican forces in securing strategic areas, including the LNG complex in Afungi, despite earlier uncertainty about the continued financing of its deployment.<sup>30</sup>

In Somalia, the first half of 2026 witnessed renewed counter-offensives against al-Shabaab. The insurgent group, in turn, showed resilience as it continued to exploit weak governance and limited writ of the state to pillage resources in rural areas. Governance challenges have intensified, particularly over contested constitutional provisions that extend the mandates of the President and Parliament by one year beyond their scheduled mid-May expiry, raising concerns about political legitimacy and institutional stability.<sup>31</sup> This, amongst other politically related tensions, risks weakening the cohesion required to sustain efforts to counter al-Shabaab and support the operational effectiveness of the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM).

## 2.3 Analytical Discourse

What, then, are the key thematic shifts occasioned by the changing timeline of conflict during the two phases under review, and what are the implications for understanding the evolution and implications for the affected regions and Africa, in general?

In the first instance, those armed conflicts became increasingly regionalised. Sudan's war soon affected Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic as well as the proximate Gulf and Red Sea regions. The ramifications of the Sahel crisis also quickly spread downwards towards coastal West African countries, including Nigeria, while the conflict in Eastern DRC became intertwined with broader regional geopolitics involving Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. Finally, the Somalia conflict intersected with Ethiopia, Somaliland, Kenya, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. This regionalisation, by extension, means that peace agreements that focus only on national actors are structurally incomplete. They are also all proposed outcomes that led to multiple peace tracks involving the intervention of Africa's multilateral institutions, particularly the African Union and regional communities, in the quest for stability and peace.

Second, conflict economies became more central to the type - but also success or failure- of military options and strategies deployed to tackle each conflict. The competition between and among diverse armed actors, state and non-state alike, over resources and access to them was obvious in the competition over gold in Sudan, critical minerals in eastern DRC, fuel convoys and taxation routes in the Sahel, ports and corridors in the Horn, and coastal districts and infrastructure in Cabo Delgado. Not only do they represent the *raison d'être* for the conflicts, but they are also their key motivators and drivers. Access to resources and accruing revenues not only finance recruitment and training but also the purchase of arms, ammunition, and drones, which confer strategic advantages and determine the leverage and bargaining power of different actors. This reinforces the report's argument that economic sovereignty must be treated as a security question.

Third, the technology of warfare in the contexts of current African conflicts has transformed significantly with the use of drones and air power. Conflict actors – state and non-state alike – have gained proficiency in the use of drones across the value-chain of multiple conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, the DRC, and Mozambique. The use and ease of adapting drones to a range of activities during conflicts have reduced, for instance, the need for expensive aircraft, costly personnel training, and the acquisition of munitions required to gain traditional aerial advantage and superiority. However, as the casualty figures revealed, especially in Sudan, drones have become the biggest risk to civilian populations, especially if used indiscriminately.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, the conflicts have left a considerable human toll and displacement in their wake, making responding to them as much a strategic imperative as a humanitarian concern. In Sudan, eastern DRC, Somalia, Lake Chad, and Cabo Delgado, displacement reshaped local power relations, disrupted labour markets and land tenure systems, and increased the risk of recruitment into militant groups. Armed actors increasingly used denial of aid workers and consignments, attacks on farmlands and food systems, control of major highways and roads, and constant pressure on refugee camps and displacement sites as tools of war. The implication of this, ultimately, is that the components and demands of peacebuilding have expanded over time to the point that they now must integrate humanitarian access, food security, civilian protection, and the return or resettlement of displaced persons into political negotiations and calculations.

Fifth, peace processes and agreements must now take cognisance of and better integrate economic considerations and incentives to make mediation more relevant and attractive to protagonists. The lessons from the wars in Sudan and DRC point to the importance of including both the conflicting parties and a host of external actors who are directly or indirectly interested in the outcomes. In this regard, external incentives must be mapped alongside internal considerations and grievances. A successful peace agreement needs to be pragmatic in paying attention to and addressing the nexus between economic and security imperatives that link conflict parties to regional patrons, supply chains, border economies, financial flows, and military cooperation.

Borderlands are important in understanding and addressing current conflict dynamics in Africa. Illustrative of this is how the Liptako-Gourma borderlands shared by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger alone account for over half of global terrorism-related deaths.<sup>33</sup> In the Lake Chad area, insurgents are rethinking the value of those spaces, from retreat zones to 'soft' target areas. Unfortunately, it seems that as insurgents are improving tactical exploitation of borderlands, regional and national security apparatuses meant to secure them are either weakening or entirely non-existent.

Finally, African intergovernmental institutions are acknowledging the need to (re)gain the political authority to actively participate in managing conflicts affecting Member States. The inability to sustainably finance costly diplomatic initiatives undermines countries' political authority to participate meaningfully and actively in conflict resolution. Sudan exemplifies how this creates conditions for crises to deepen and potentially evolve into broader proxy conflicts that are more complex and difficult to manage. At the same time, fragmented diplomatic approaches involving a range of global, continental and regional actors have resulted in overlapping and competing mediation tracks that conflict actors can exploit to delay meaningful engagement and resolution, further prolonging conflicts.

# 03

## CHAPTER 3: CONFLICT DYNAMICS THROUGH A GEOPOLITICAL LENS

This chapter is organised around the four Tana Forum sub-themes, namely: resource sovereignty, digital transformation, African institutions, and regional integration. It frames the highlighted conflicts through a geopolitical lens, showing that many conflicts are no longer driven entirely by local grievances, weak governance, or armed mobilisation. Instead, they are products of interactions among external powers seeking to leverage strategic resources, digital power, institutional capacity, and regional integration, among others. The analysis here further reveals how conflict dynamics are fundamentally shaped by who controls economic assets; who governs technological systems; which institutions can more effectively and efficiently mobilise and coordinate collective action; and whether regional markets and corridors reduce or exacerbate vulnerability in the short-, medium-, and long terms.

### 3.1 Resource sovereignty and the Political Economy of Conflict

Africa possesses vast mineral and natural resources that are critical to global food production, manufacturing, and energy systems. If effectively governed and managed, these resources have the potential to drive sustainable development across the continent while strengthening Africa's agency in global affairs. However, where governance systems fail to translate resource wealth into equitable public good and value, resource sovereignty can quickly deteriorate and become contested. Competing claims over ownership, access, extraction, control, and distribution of resources and the revenues that accrue from them can arise among host communities, regional and national governments, armed groups, and external powers.

These tensions can, with time, have far-reaching consequences. Poorly governed resource competition can trigger, prolong or introduce entirely new dimensions to violent conflict, disrupt or weaken African agency, contribute to environmental degradation, and become intertwined with political instability, including unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs).<sup>34</sup> The central challenge, therefore, is not simply the abundance of resources but whether existing governance arrangements can enable African states and communities to exercise meaningful sovereignty over them in a way that ensures that accruable benefits contribute to long-term peace, stability, and sustainable development.

The vast mineral and natural resource wealth of the DRC has paradoxically become a major driver of conflict, placing the country at the intersection of internal instability and external competition.<sup>35</sup> The country holds substantial reserves of strategic minerals, including coltan and cobalt, making control of their locations both economically lucrative and strategically important to armed groups and their external backers. The Rubaya mining area illustrates this dynamic. Currently controlled by M23, it reportedly generates significant revenue for the group through a parallel administration that taxes mineral production and trade, including illicit flows through Rwanda.

Rwanda's support for M23 has further linked competition over resources to wider regional security dynamics and tensions. The involvement of neighbouring states adds another layer of complexity. Uganda and Burundi have deployed forces in eastern DRC, officially to address threats from armed groups, yet both

countries have faced allegations of benefiting from illicit and informal cross-border resource flows.<sup>36</sup> The intersection of security interests, economic incentives, and regional rivalries therefore complicates efforts to resolve the conflict while also reinforcing the need for peace initiatives to address the much broader political economy of natural resources extraction alongside the conflict's political and security drivers.

External interests beyond Africa add yet another layer of complexity, further underscoring the importance of natural resources in the conflict's political economy. China has significant interests in the DRC's cobalt sector, with Chinese companies controlling much of the entire country's cobalt production.<sup>37</sup> China is reported to be supplying arms to both the DRC government and Rwanda that the UN alleges is backing M23.<sup>38</sup> Also, the United States has increasingly linked security cooperation with access to critical minerals. The DRC has offered greater U.S. access to strategic mineral resources, including the Rubaya coltan deposits currently under M23 control, as part of efforts to secure stronger U.S. support for regional stability and security.<sup>39</sup> For Kinshasa, this provides an opportunity and leverage to attract and retain international backing against M23. For Washington, this posture aligns with a broader objective of diversifying critical-mineral supply chains and reducing dependence on Chinese-controlled processing and supply networks.

The Sahel offers a different perspective on geopolitics, resource sovereignty and conflicts. Across the region, the three AES states are increasingly distancing themselves from former Western allies, particularly France, and gravitating towards new partners like Russia and China. For example, the military government in Niger nationalised the Somair mine in June 2025. The government accused Orano, the French nuclear company which is 90 per cent owned by the French government, of unfair practices and expired licenses.<sup>40</sup> Orano pursued international arbitration, and in September 2025, a World Bank tribunal – the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) – ruled in its favour, barring Niger from selling the nationalised mine's uranium stockpile. In exercising its sovereign right, however, Niger insists that it has the legitimate right to sell national resources on the open market, including to new partners in Russia, Romania, and Iran.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Mali and Burkina-Faso, the other two member states of AES, are implementing measures to control their mineral resources by exercising "economic sovereignty."<sup>42</sup>

These dynamics introduce a pivotal policy debate regarding whether current reconfigurations reflect an authentic structural reform of Africa's resource governance landscape and regime in line with national development priorities or merely replace one partner with whom they are dissatisfied. It remains too early to determine whether greater state control will translate into more sustainable and equitable benefits for citizens in the AES states. Nonetheless, the diversity of options that the multipolar era can bring about gives African states new bargaining power to redefine their economic, security, and even political priorities. To fully take advantage, though, they must strengthen their institutions and commit to concerted regional efforts and coordination.

In the interim, the experience of the AES states demonstrates that African governments can exercise greater agency in determining how their natural resources are governed and with whom they engage. While the governance context of the AES states must be acknowledged, the broader principle extends beyond them: African states should not consider the status quo in their resource governance relationships immutable. Economic sovereignty can include negotiating stronger terms and agreements and, where appropriate and legally permissible, renegotiating existing terms and conditions to ensure that resource wealth generates greater public good and value.

The implication for peacebuilding is that resource governance imperatives and priorities should be built into the value-chain of mediation, stabilisation, and reconstruction during conflict and upon the cessation of hostilities. Where agreements do not address issues central to resource governance, particularly those related to licensing, supply chains, revenue sharing, community benefits, etc., they leave intact the very economic systems that instigated and perpetuated violent conflicts.

## 3.2 Digital Transformation as a Domain of Conflict

Most discussions around digital transformation focus primarily on issues related to internet connectivity and penetration, e-commerce, FinTech, and e-governance, amongst others. However, there is more disconcerting conversation about how digital infrastructure and platforms have become active theatres of renewed geopolitical competition and asymmetric information warfare. Today, misinformation and disinformation have become tools of subterfuge, feeding into conflict cycles through diverse new media sources managed by foreign interests importing damaging disinformation tactics into Africa.<sup>43</sup>

Western actors have been guilty in the past. More recently, however, countries like Russia, Türkiye and China have become new beneficiaries of this digital realignment, as it plays out in the Sahel.<sup>44</sup> This development is occurring against the backdrop of the danger for the continent where the political economy of a multipolar world is pitting countries scrambling for Africa against one another. For example, the reported manipulation of information in the Sahel has strengthened Russia's footprint in the region by creating a narrative that justifies France's increasing exclusion.<sup>45</sup> The repercussions of the battles of disinformation and fake news are telling on conflicts in the region, as data indicates that conflict-related fatalities in the Sahel rose by roughly 65% in the years following France's 2022 troop withdrawal.<sup>46</sup>

Digital transformation also intersects with conflict through infrastructure dependency and battlefield technology, especially since most conflict actors obtain supplies from suppliers they can also persuade to become sympathetic to their cause. Access to digital and semi-digital military technology is increasingly facilitated by a wide range of state and non-state actors from countries such as Türkiye, China, Russia, and Gulf states, all interested in critical trade corridors, rare minerals, and land, amongst others. This consideration adds another axis of geopolitical alignment to conflicts once analysed primarily through ground-force dynamics. In the near and distant futures, digital transformation will function not just as a tool of information control but also to gain military advantage and leverage external influence-seeking interests.

## 3.3 African Institutions

African multilateral institutions – particularly the African Union (AU) and the RECs – have become the expected first responders to issues of governance, peace and security on the continent. Two normative principles that underpin this expectation are “African solutions to African Problems” and the view that RECs are the “building blocks” of the AU. Further distilled, the latter is regulated by the three principles of subsidiarity, complementarity, and comparative advantage. A common understanding and effective implementation of these will enhance continental integration, a prerequisite for Africa's sustainable development, peace, and security. This call is not new, as ISS (2008) noted almost two decades ago that: “There is also a growing consensus amongst analysts, policymakers, academics and civil society representatives on the continent that continental integration is a remedy for African problems.”<sup>47</sup>

### 3.3.1 Moving Beyond Rhetorics

Continental integration requires much more than the implementation of normative frameworks. The oft-used nebulous term “political will” is required just as much as intentional attempts to unpack the intentions, implications, and pragmatic implementation of the frameworks. For instance, how should the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) define and implement the principles of subsidiarity, complementarity, and comparative advantage with requisite pragmatism? A review of some of the AU's management of violent conflicts reveals a gap between the theoretical underpinnings of these principles and a pragmatic interpretation that enables expeditious responses to real-life situations, particularly those related to peace and security.

In Sudan, for example, the AU invoked the principle of subsidiarity as a rationale for its own inaction earlier on.<sup>48</sup> In the African context, the principle of subsidiarity implies deferring to RECs/ Regional Mechanisms (RMs) as first responders in conflicts, but it should not be considered in isolation. Rather, the principle is

only one of three principles (the others being complementarity and comparative advantage) that should be considered together. The risk of ignoring the nexus connecting the three principles is that crisis situations can degenerate into full-blown, uncontrollable violent conflicts.

Ideally, rather than leave the Sudan issue for the REC, two questions that implicate the other two principles ought to have been raised. First, in recognising the REC's role as the first responder, how could the AU have supported (and complemented) the REC? Given the situation at hand and the assigned responsibilities, who realistically has the capacity (comparative advantage) to do what? Underlying these two questions should be a constant: realistically, does any REC have the capacity to effectively and efficiently tackle any situation that could slide into conflict?

If the answer to the underlying question is negative, surely, solely applying the subsidiarity principle regardless, as was the case with Sudan, is a mere exercise in futility. Rather, consideration should be given to how best to “complement” the REC/RM closest to the theatre of conflict. Alongside this should be a needs assessment to determine who is best suited to perform specific responsibilities at any given time, bearing in mind that capability can vary over the course of any conflict.

### 3.3.2 Institutional Capacity

The authority of African intergovernmental institutions – the AU and RECs, in particular – appears to be waning. This is especially evident in the slow way they respond to emerging conflicts, an antithesis to the oft-cited mantra, “African solution to African problems”. The fundamental challenge is the gap between policy design – which African institutions are well known for – and implementation, a recurrent challenge that most of them face. Some underlying challenges include financing limitations, institutional fragmentation, coordination issues, and pressure from external actors.<sup>49</sup> These interwoven challenges, in turn, hinder the capacity of Africa's intergovernmental institutions to respond promptly and effectively to peace and security issues. The conflict situations discussed highlight how the interplay of these challenges can reduce or subvert Africa's agency and sovereignty.

The financing of the AU and RECs has remained topical over the years.<sup>50</sup> Limited funding affects day-to-day operations and, perhaps worse still, peace and security obligations, ultimately eroding the authority of African institutions in conflict situations.<sup>51</sup> For example, the situation in Somalia remains fragile due to uncertainty in its financing as the AU mission transitions from ATMIS to AUSSOM. The mission's financing has experienced a major shortfall due to the withdrawal of US funding for the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) and Washington's insistence on blocking any additional support for UNSOS beyond December 2026.<sup>52</sup> To put the situation in clearer perspective, out of AUSSOM's annual budget of about \$190 million, the AU can commit only a paltry \$20 million, drawn from the Peace Fund, while the EU is providing a €75 million package to support troop allowances and non-lethal equipment.<sup>53</sup> Here, dwindling mission financing may, in the medium and long term, cause a relapse into insecurity and further fragmentation of Somalia, with broader ramifications for the Horn of Africa.

The fragmentation of African intergovernmental institutions in the Sahel highlights how coordination challenges are adversely affecting the conflict-development dynamics in the region. Following the AES split from ECOWAS, for instance, Jihadist groups have exploited the lax regional security arrangements now in place to consolidate and expand their activities, with immediate negative impacts on livelihoods and trade corridors. It also weakens established diplomatic channels for mediation.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, the AU has reiterated the essence of a regional security approach, calling on the AES states to improve relations with ECOWAS while also maintaining active cooperation with the AU. Ideally, the AU, through its Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), ought to prioritise closing this gap. However, it is doubtful that the Mission has the requisite human, financial, and operational capacities to meet the emerging political responsibilities expected of it without ECOWAS.<sup>55</sup>

The pressure that external actors can impose on the trajectory and outcomes of conflict is most evident in the DRC. Here, different external actors initiate, support and lead multiple mediation processes that prioritise their individual primary interests. For this reason, each process was conducted with rather limited

participation of all the key actors, whilst sequencing and coordination with other such processes running in parallel was also inadequate. The multiplicity of external actors also contributed to overlapping mediation initiatives, creating bargaining asymmetries and enabling armed actors to forum-shop across different negotiation venues, thereby undermining enforcement credibility and prolonging conflict dynamics.<sup>56</sup> Notably, recent events indicate that the AU is keen to regain its strategic position as a central stakeholder in resolving conflicts in one of its member states. Through the AU-EAC-SADC Panel of Facilitators, the AU is promoting continental responsibility by advancing the harmonisation of mediation efforts in the DRC, an issue that was also top on the agenda of the recently concluded 39<sup>th</sup> AU Summit. Such AU-REC coordination will build and reboot confidence in African intergovernmental institutions.

Overall, it is important to note a caveat: this section does not assume that the totality of the challenges listed above constitutes a comprehensive account of the myriad issues that hinder African multilateral systems. It also does not presume that resolving any one challenge, without paying equal attention to the others, will yield sustainable results capable of boosting the authority of existing institutions. Something to think about is whether the perceived underperformance of the AU is due to a capacity problem, solvable through better financing and reformed bureaucracy? Or perhaps it reflects something wrong with its institutional architecture, built on norms of non-interference and consensus-based sovereignty, designed to manage crises whose roots are geopolitical and whose reach extends far beyond the continent? In other words, to what extent might the AU's effectiveness be shaped by broader geopolitics in a complex, multipolar world in constant flux? More pertinent, therefore, is how the AU addresses these questions so it can evolve into an organisation responsive to the realities of the changing world order.

### 3.4 Regional Integration in the Context of the AfCFTA

This section considers regional integration, especially in the context of the evolving African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) initiative, and its impact on conflict dynamics in Africa. The starting point in this section is the assumption that deeper economic and institutional interdependence will, in the medium and long terms, reduce the likelihood of conflict. It therefore sees the AfCFTA not just as a pan-African integration scheme but also as a conflict-prevention tool capable of directly addressing one of the fundamental root causes of conflict in Africa: economic inequalities within and between countries and across regions.

Beyond creating the continent's largest integrated trade market, a fully functioning AfCFTA has the potential to deepen regional integration, economic interdependence, and cooperation across Africa. By facilitating the cross-border movement of goods, services, people, and capital, it can expand opportunities for businesses, stimulate job creation, and enable citizens and member states to benefit more fully from Africa's collective economic potential, significantly reducing economic inequalities.

Despite this rosy picture of AfCFTA, its integration agenda must contend with the intersecting pressures of geopolitics, conflict, and the complex dynamics of Africa's borderlands, particularly at a time of growing regional fragmentation. In this context, fragmentation takes two forms: the weakening or breakup of regional institutions themselves, and the deterioration of relations among member states within existing regional blocs.

The ECOWAS-AES split experienced in West Africa highlights the former situation. The split, which occurred with the official withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria from ECOWAS on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2025, has introduced new challenges for both regional security and economic integration, with implications for the advancement of intra-regional trade. Agreements and cooperation frameworks previously negotiated through ECOWAS must now account for the AES as a separate bloc—one established primarily around shared security concerns that its member states continue to confront.

This fragmentation is occurring alongside a broader reconfiguration of regional security partnerships, including changes in bilateral and multilateral relationships between France and several West African states.<sup>57</sup> Together, these shifts risk weakening established mechanisms for regional coordination and creating new vulnerabilities that could exacerbate cross-border insecurity and organised crime. In turn,

greater insecurity and reduced institutional cooperation could undermine the movement of goods, people, and capital on which deeper regional trade and the AfCFTA depend.

The fragmentation at the regional level has also affected relationships with external actors, potentially impacting the AfCFTA's integration agenda. Erstwhile traditional partners of ECOWAS, whilst it existed as a single bloc, are having to re-strategise how to relate to two different blocs with divergent ideological orientations on politics, governance, security, development and international relations.<sup>58</sup>

A different but potentially consequential dynamic is emerging within the East African Community (EAC). With the accession of the DRC as a full-fledged member of the Community in 2022, the lingering conflict in eastern Congo is now a matter for the regional bloc; a development that is placing additional pressure and burden on EAC.<sup>59</sup> The involvement of fellow EAC members, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, in the regional security complex of the Great Lakes has intensified, further exposing tensions within the bloc and complicating collective decision-making, potentially undermining the EAC's broader integration agenda.

These two instances highlight the importance of considering whether deeper economic integration and political fragmentation – both in terms of splitting institutions and relationships within them - can advance simultaneously; and, if so, what this could mean for Africa's stability, sovereignty, and collective agency. This presents a direct challenge to the AfCFTA's integration agenda, whose success is central to achieving the "Africa we want." A fully functioning AfCFTA has the potential to ensure that trade becomes a driver, not only of economic cooperation and development, but also of peace, security, stability, and stronger cross-border relations across the continent.

Ultimately, the ability to transform border zones and communities from conflict theatres into areas of economic opportunity, cooperation, and growth will also benefit Africa's integration agenda.<sup>60</sup> Whilst neglected border areas and communities contribute to conflicts and insecurity, prioritising their role in the integration agenda also helps ensure safe trade corridors, which are important for boosting regional interdependence. While this is not to suggest that regional integration, particularly in the border areas, is tantamount to stability, implementing the AfCFTA in borderlands has the potential to go beyond achieving economic goals to also serving as a powerful tool for peacebuilding, addressing the distinct risks and opportunities found in these areas.

### 3.5 Policy implications

From this section, a few priority considerations for policy design are worth highlighting. These are not addressed to any single stakeholder but offered as cross-cutting considerations for actors engaged in conflict prevention, resource governance, digital policy, and institutional and regional reform on the continent.

**Resource sovereignty.** The analysis demonstrates that resource governance is not peripheral to conflict dynamics but central to them. Thus, resource governance frameworks should be treated as integral to the full conflict cycle — from early warning and mediation through to stabilisation and post-conflict recovery — rather than as a separate technical or economic track. This requires developing and institutionalising rules of engagement that span the entire value chain of resource exploitation; from exploration and extraction through beneficiation, supply-chain traceability, and environmental safeguards, with public ownership and accountability mechanisms embedded at each stage rather than appended after the fact.

**Digital transformation.** Policy frameworks should draw a clear distinction between digital tools that strengthen public trust and civic participation and those that enable coercion, manipulation, or undue external interference. On the latter, current policy attention remains disproportionately focused on platform-level content moderation and social media regulation. More attention needs to be given to the broader strategic reality of digital transformation: its interaction with external influence-seeking operations and military advantage, which are frequently linked to competition over access to strategic minerals. Closing this gap requires policy that addresses digital infrastructure, information integrity, and resource competition as an interconnected domain rather than as separate regulatory silos.

**African institutions.** The continent is not lacking in well-designed, forward-looking policy frameworks. The persistent gap lies in implementation, often underscored by a lack of shared clarity on interpretation and operationalisation. It is essential to build common understanding among member states and institutions of how agreed frameworks translate into operational practice. Thus, greater investment should be directed toward shared interpretive and implementation guidance. Also, sustainable financing models for the AU should be developed as a matter of priority. Sustained dependence on external partners for financing peacebuilding can only constrain the AU's operational autonomy while undermining the credibility of its authority, both within and beyond the continent.

**Regional integration.** Regional integration cannot be treated as a self-sustaining peace dividend as it requires continuous political maintenance. There must be a rethink of the current non-interventionist approach of the AU and RECs/RMs to glaring upheavals in democratic governance in member states as well as their predictable, yet increasingly ineffective responses to unconstitutional changes of government (UCG). Finally, policy actors should consider how to treat competing integration projects (economic-liberal models such as AfCFTA alongside security-driven blocs such as the AES) as a structural feature of the current landscape, both in the interim and in the long term.

# 04

## CHAPTER 4: INCLUSION: WOMEN, YOUTH, AND PEACEBUILDING

The role of women and youth in Africa's peace and security agenda has evolved positively over the past decade. Their positive contributions to peace and security have been recognised in policy spaces, contributing to the development of both the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas. While these have served as instruments to promote the identification and promotion of women and youth in the peace and security agenda, most actors still contribute outside of these formal settings. This chapter considers the role that women and youth can play as conflicts in Africa are reframed and shaped by geopolitical considerations; their inclusion can be treated as a governance and economic strategy for peace, particularly in the context of the Tana theme and the year's sub-themes.

### 4.1 Reframing Inclusion: From Representation to Legitimacy

The positive role that women and youth play in promoting and sustaining governance, peace and security in Africa is well documented in the literature.<sup>61</sup> Less so, however, is ensuring that they are engaged enough to meaningfully participate in conflict prevention and management processes. However, representation that involves making up the numbers through quota targets or tick-the-box exercises at negotiation tables and in policy-making rooms is not enough.

The geopolitical reframing in the preceding chapters shows that conflict is increasingly shaped by struggles over resource sovereignty, digital infrastructure, institutional authority, and regional order. In this context, the key policy question is not simply how many women and young people are present and represented at the table but whether the resulting peace processes, governance systems, and post-war settlements are seen as legitimate by the communities most affected by disruption, displacement, and insecurity. In essence, representation is a necessary baseline and pathway toward achieving legitimacy; and ultimately, peace, security and development.

Within governance, peace, and security frameworks, true legitimacy is determined by two critical factors: the extent to which women and young people can participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, and the long-term viability of agreements without their active, sustained buy-in. Meaningful participation, in this context, requires elevating women and youth beyond 'attendees' to enabling them to lead, decide, shape and implement peace processes at different institutional, economic, political, and peace levels.

Women and youth are also essential to economic viability and stability as they play frontline roles in the informal sector. Particularly during periods of conflict, they provide and sustain the only functioning economic infrastructure available in the communities most affected through informal markets, cross-border trade networks, and household livelihood strategies.<sup>62</sup> Youth populations are most able to engage with and navigate contemporary digital infrastructure and resources, including adapting them to suit their immediate environment.

However, relying on the independent and collective sacrifices of women and youth is necessary but not sufficient to achieve lasting peace. Governments and institutions must transition from passive

acknowledgement to deliberate, well-funded interventions that build the leadership and technical capacities of these demographic groups. Within the AUC (PAPS), established programs - AGA-APSA Secretariat, the Gender Peace and Security programme, and the Youth for Peace program - and initiatives including FemWise-Africa and Youth-Wise under the Panel of the Wise, the African Youth Ambassadors for Peace (AYAPs), and the African Youth for Transitional Justice (AY4TJ) – provide the necessary infrastructure to operationalise these objectives. The AfCFTA's Digital Trade Accelerator for Youth and Women-led MSMEs is intended to equip informal traders with digital literacy, e-commerce tools, and cross-border logistics training. The African Development Bank (AfDB) has programmes to support women and youth, including specialised funding mechanisms such as the YouthADAPT Solutions Program, the MicroGREEN Project, and the Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) initiative.<sup>63</sup> With adequate and sustainable funding, these initiatives serve as a solid foundation for empowering women and youth. Cultivating women and youth capabilities ensures their meaningful participation and substantive influence in decision-making forums, moving beyond mere tokenistic presence.

## 4.2 Inclusion Beyond Normative Frameworks

Normative frameworks on gender equality and participation lay a foundation for meaningful participation. However, the means required to achieve the objectives set out in the normative provisions remain, by and large, tokenistic. Evidence indicates that the inclusion of women and youth as a governance and economic strategy yields positive outcomes, including increased household income, improved local security, and greater institutional durability.<sup>64</sup>

However, statistical evidence indicates that their inclusion is still on the low side. While women's access to factors of production such as land and credit, as well as to markets, contributes to strengthening local economies and building resilience, such access remains relatively low compared to men's. Women's access to land, for example, remains low, as they have access to only 15-20% of agricultural land despite accounting for more than 60% of the continent's agricultural workforce and output. Further, nearly 80% of African land remains under customary law systems; a traditional tenure system that recognises men's rights to land over women, with inheritance rules frequently working against women's claims regardless of statutory law provisions.<sup>65</sup> Landholding among women of productive age is even lower, with the World Bank reporting that only about 13% of African women aged 20–49 can legitimately claim sole ownership of land, compared with 36% of men.<sup>66</sup>

The challenges to women's access to credit worsen the situation. Research on agricultural credit in Sub-Saharan Africa has found that male-headed households are systematically more likely to access credit than female-headed households.<sup>67</sup> However, digital solutions such as mobile money have closed the gender gap in financial inclusion, with more women having access to financing. Generally, mobile money solutions do not require land/property collateral that are required to access formal banking sector financing.

The exclusion of women from land ownership denies them secure agricultural access, collateral for credit in formal banking systems, and competitive market participation. Consequently, this dynamic undermines their individual well-being and erodes the broader socio-economic stability and resilience vital to community survival, especially during prolonged periods of instability and violent conflict.

Youth access to skills, employment, entrepreneurship, digital tools, and civic participation reduces the appeal of violent or other illicit alternatives.<sup>68</sup> Today, Africa faces a severe job crunch for young people, as the formal economy generates only 30% of the jobs needed to support a growing population, while the informal sector, primarily agriculture, accounts for 90% of youth employment.<sup>69</sup> This lopsided statistic, in turn, exacerbates instability, limits access to subsidised socio-economic opportunities, and undermines prospects for peacebuilding.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, unemployment was found to drive 25% of voluntary recruits to violent extremist groups in Africa, with organisations like Boko Haram and al-Shabaab exploiting cash payments and promises of belonging to target idle youth.<sup>71</sup> This pattern replicates in the Great Lakes region and Kenya, where scores of armed groups and political actors were found to have recruited or mobilised unemployed youth for violence and intimidation.<sup>72</sup>

Notably, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, and digital skills programming have been deployed as counter-recruitment tools. Empirical assessments indicate that such targeted programming mitigates vulnerability to extremist recruitment while restoring economic agency and social inclusion that extremist groups otherwise exploit.<sup>73</sup> With opportunities for remote work and online trading of goods and services on the rise in digital spaces, a growing number of youth are tapping into these opportunities when they are not hindered by poor internet access, digital resource constraints, skyrocketing data costs, and asphyxiating regulatory frameworks.

The inability of youth to access and fully tap into digital opportunities only further distances them from the public space and the state. Expanding youth inclusion in digital spaces contributes to their economic empowerment whilst broadening the social contract for peace and strengthening the operational credibility of governance structures engaged in conflict mitigation. Thus, youth inclusion initiatives ought to be considered, designed and delivered beyond seeing and treating them as distributive welfare packages or palliatives. They should be strategic interventions that cultivate civic ownership and align them with the preservation of stability.

### **4.3 Promoting inclusion in the context of Geopolitical Transition: Policy Issues in Reframing Tana Themes**

Situating women and youth in Africa's quest for economic sovereignty amidst ongoing geopolitical transition presents a complicated outlook for policymakers. Despite the fact that women and youth are mostly excluded from negotiations capable of reconfiguring ownership and control of resources and their proceeds, they remain the primary labour force in artisanal and informal extraction economies where they are vulnerable to a wide range of human rights abuses.<sup>74</sup> They are also the demographic category that bears the brunt of negative environmental impacts and human displacement occasioned by large-scale, unregulated mining. Still, women and youth are the lifeline of most local economies, as they navigate the informal sector amid instability, offering hope for resilience and survival.<sup>75</sup> These realities must be recognised and reflected both in peacemaking conversations and the policy decisions and outcomes that follow.

Digital transformation opens as many new opportunities for civic mobilisations as it does for information warfare, where young people are targeted, in equal measure. While terrorist groups deploy propaganda by investing in and exploiting a wide range of digital options to reach young people, it is less so for African intergovernmental institutions and their member-states. Currently, the sad reality is that the former are more adept at embracing and deploying digital tools and messages.

African intergovernmental institutions continually struggle to bridge the gap between developing progressive frameworks for youth and women and translating those norms and frameworks into concrete action. A clear example of this is the Continental Framework on Youth, Peace, and Security (CFYPS), which suffers from uneven implementation and coordination issues at both regional and national levels. At the time of this report, the AU has missed the deadline for the framework's mid-term review. This critical evaluation was designed to track progress, pinpoint operational obstacles, and establish strategies to advance the youth, peace, and security agenda across the continent. Ultimately, this oversight reinforces the long-standing criticism that Africa's excellent policy models are frequently undermined by a failure to invest in and execute them.

Similarly, the Master Roadmap for the Implementation of Silencing the Guns has measuring indicators for women- and youth-related matters, yet implementation feedback is lacking. For example, a practical step to combat youth unemployment is "Engaging youth through workshops and social media" by "creating a platform for youth engagement to harness youth ideas on Agenda 2063 and Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020."<sup>76</sup> While a review of this remains outstanding, it is questionable whether such a platform was created. Implementing this initiative would have benefitted the AU, especially in understanding the views of women and youth vis-à-vis the Silencing the Guns initiative.

With regard to regional integration fractures along the lines described in the ECOWAS-AES case, the impact

of multilateral decisions on women and youth is negative. While women and young people are the primary actors in informal cross-border trade and mobility networks, they suffer when assets are frozen, borders are closed, or movement is restricted due to the suspension of free-movement protocols or security concerns. They are typically the first casualties as they are also the most impacted. It is doubtful that this is taken into account in political decision-making. However, the situation it may place women and youth, especially if such hindrances are long-term, may contribute to the current vulnerabilities and consequent susceptibility to extremist threats.

The major point made in this section is that if economic sovereignty is to be pursued as a strategic continental priority, the terms and conditions on which that sovereignty is built cannot be settled without adequate attention to gender and intergenerational inclusion. Thus, questions such as who owns productive assets, who is included in agricultural and industrial value chains, and whose labour and market activity is formalised and protected must be on the front burner of policymaking and implementation. Ultimately, mainstreaming gender and inter-generational approaches are essential elements for as well as pre-conditions of the sovereignty and geopolitical transformation agenda. The next chapter examines how institutions, partnerships, and businesses can either reinforce exclusion or help build the inclusive economic foundations of peace.

# 05

## CHAPTER 5: PARTNERSHIPS, INSTITUTIONS, AND BUSINESSES

This chapter examines how partnerships, institutions, and businesses can either strengthen African agency or reproduce the dependencies that undermine peace. The central argument in this chapter is that economic sovereignty depends not only on state policy, but also on the quality of continental institutions, regional coordination, private investment, and public-private accountability. African institutions, including the African Union, RECs/RMs, continental financial institutions, and specialised agencies, provide platforms for norm-setting, coordination, mediation, and economic transformation. Their effectiveness, however, depends on political backing, predictable financing, implementation capacity, and coherence between continental, regional, national, and local priorities.

The chapter therefore focuses on two linked questions. First, how can African institutions and regional integration instruments become drivers of peace dividends by expanding markets, supporting industrialisation, creating jobs, and reducing vulnerability to external shocks? Second, how can businesses and financial institutions invest in ways that strengthen livelihoods, accountability, and social cohesion rather than exacerbate elite capture, corruption, labour exploitation, environmental harm, or conflict financing? These questions are especially important in borderlands and fragile regions away from major capitals, cities, and towns, where trade, mobility, resources, and livelihoods are largely shaped by informal networks and systems.

Partnerships can support peace only when they build and maintain the resilience of African institutions rather than bypass it. Responsible and targeted investment, local procurement, decent work, technology deployment, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises whilst taking the inclusion of women and youth into consideration can reduce conflict vulnerability by expanding legitimate livelihoods. By contrast, business activity that intensifies inequality, excludes women and youth, displaces communities, enables corruption, or extracts resources without local beneficiation can deepen grievances and trigger contestations and conflict.

### 5.1 AfCFTA as a platform for regional stability and peace dividends

The point was made earlier that the AfCFTA offers a viable tool to stem the tide of conflict and instability while promoting economic interdependence and stability, thereby securing Africa's economic sovereignty in a multipolar world order characterised by incessant competition for access to critical resources. Building bridges of cooperation between and among African countries, particularly in border areas and including women and young people, ultimately yields benefits that counter instability and promote sustainable peace in many conflict zones. In political economy terms, therefore, trade integration raises the opportunity cost of conflict by making neighbours more valuable as markets, suppliers, transit partners, investors, and sources of employment.<sup>77</sup>

When states depend on shared corridors, harmonised customs systems, regional value chains, and predictable cross-border flows, they gain practical collaborative incentives to resolve disputes through

legal and institutional processes, rather than through coercion. Also, threats hitherto deemed localised to one corridor will soon become common, with greater urgency to resolve them. In essence, the AfCFTA has the potential to contribute to regional stability by creating and significantly improving economic interdependence among African states and communities.

In this regard, it is important that the AfCFTA be considered in the fullness of its potential and that its delivery align to address real-world challenges. This explains why, by far, its long-term value proposition is more in its stabilising potential (where it addresses substantive economic grievances that often underpin insecurity). By expanding intra-African trade, supporting industrialisation, reducing commodity dependence, and strengthening regional value chains, AfCFTA can create jobs and productive opportunities for young people, women, small firms, producers, and borderland communities.

This matters for peace because unemployment, exclusion, and unequal access to markets can feed distrust in, and frustration against, the state as well as increase citizens' vulnerability to armed, criminal, or extremist mobilisations. Similarly, these also underpin structural conditions that fuel violence such as informal and criminalised cross-border trade, resource corridors captured by armed actors, weak state presence at borders, and competing external patrons. Notably, several variables intersect with both the issues the AfCFTA agenda was designed to address and those that have instigated or exacerbated conflicts in different trouble spots across Africa.

Ultimately, however, trade integration is not necessarily a substitute for political settlement, security sector reform, or accountable governance. These remain preconditions for the AfCFTA's impacts to be fully harnessed and optimised. The main argument advanced here is that the AfCFTA is a veritable tool – alongside more traditional responses – to reduce some of the structural drivers of conflict whilst increasing Africa's ability to gain control over its resource ecosystem in the face of global competition to access and exploit them. The following section analyses the role of the AfCFTA as an instrument of peacebuilding.

## 5.2 AfCFTA as a Peacebuilding Instrument

This section highlights the three mechanisms linking continental trade integration to conflict dynamics<sup>78</sup> and more closely illuminates how the negative impacts of trade integration can adversely affect structural drivers of conflict.

First, the **AfCFTA enhances RECs' ability to fulfil their integration agenda, which now includes peace and security**. Over the years, RECs have evolved to embrace the peace-security-development nexus to shape and drive their operations, recognising that insecurity hampers development. Since trade is pivotal to the stabilisation of conflict-prone areas, harnessing it can create economic opportunities that address the structural factors driving conflicts across different African regions. Robust cross-border commercial activity can only thrive where critical infrastructure is readily available, connecting people, goods and services across physical and digital spaces.<sup>79</sup> However, given that trade momentum alone cannot drive and sustain regional integration and stability, RECs must pair the economic momentum of the AfCFTA with dedicated investments in governance and peace and security.

Second, **formalising cross-border commerce as provided for in the AfCFTA framework will ultimately dismantle illicit trade networks that finance non-state armed groups in liminal border regions**. Across Africa today, borderlands have become active zones for a plethora of illegal activities generating and contributing to illicit financial flows that a whole range of non-state armed and unarmed actors rely upon to thrive. Cross-border smuggling and illegal commercial activities, notably in critical minerals, agro-allied products and fuel, already occur informally but are subjected to predatory checkpoints. While their activities cause significant economic losses to the state, they also increase the prospects for cross-border criminality, violence, and a perverse political economy of conflict. The AfCFTA can compete with, and eventually crowd out, informal businesses that armed groups threaten or tax by addressing formal trade issues such as tariff reductions, harmonisation of standards, and building vibrant and legitimate trade corridors.

Third, **regional value chains create a shared material stake in cross-border stability**. Conflicts that generate parallel and/or competing extraction and export systems, as is common in eastern DRC's mineral economy, tend to be harder to resolve than conflicts over territory alone. The reason is that armed groups and their external patrons exploit fragmentation and the state's weak writ to establish clandestine operations and multiple income streams, enabling them to thrive. Formal regional value chains, by contrast, require predictable borders, functioning customs administrations, and multi-country cooperation to move inputs and finished goods — thereby creating institutional and commercial constituencies with a direct interest in de-escalation, rather than merely humanitarian actors advocating for it from outside.

Fourth, **continental market access shifts the political economy of secession and armed autonomy**. A significant driver of some African conflicts is the calculation that local or regional control over resource-rich territory is more lucrative outside a functioning national trade and taxation system than within one; especially where the existing national economy model offers very few, if any, benefits to peripheral border regions far away from the capital and major cities. However, a functioning AfCFTA changes the situation. It integrates trade in such areas into its billion-person, \$3.4 trillion continental market, providing more opportunities to citizens and income to the state; a situation that is more valuable than autonomous control over a resource enclave dependent on smuggling routes and a single external buyer.<sup>80</sup>

### 5.3 Showcasing Potential Impact in Conflict Zones

Drawing from the core premise that trade integration ultimately mitigates regional instability, this section evaluates how the AfCFTA functions as an active policy instrument for peacebuilding in conflict-affected zones.

Lessons from the eastern DRC illustrate how informal and clandestine trade in and control over critical minerals have become the primary enablers of cross-border smuggling of cobalt, coltan, and tin into and through Rwanda. It is estimated that the generation of almost \$800,000 by M-23 happened because the armed group captured the Rubaya mining cadastral in 2025, and used that opportunity to establish parallel taxation and a market for critical minerals moving through informal, cross-border channels rather than transparent, continentally regulated ones.<sup>81</sup> However, applying AfCFTA rules, such as the Protocol on Trade in Goods' rules-of-origin requirements, and extending the current regulation to include trade in critical minerals would require documented, traceable value chains for any coltan or cobalt claiming preferential continental tariff treatment. This will directly weaken the commercial viability of smuggled and conflict-linked minerals competing for the same markets.<sup>82</sup>

The diversification of regional benefits also contributes to improved regional cooperation and stability, moderating the tendency of individual countries to pursue interests inimical to collective aspirations for peace, security and development. For example, the DRC-Zambia battery value chain partnership aimed to process cobalt domestically rather than export it in raw form. This would, however, require cooperation along cross-border transport corridors and among national customs.

However, this example also highlights the challenges of economic sovereignty amidst geopolitical transformation in a complex multipolar world order.<sup>83</sup> The multiplicity and visible presence of major external actors, state and non-state alike, involved in the DRC-Zambia partnership, seeking bilateral entry points into the project's host countries to access critical minerals, is itself challenging, as much as competing with the idea of regional integration. Other critical limitations of the trade agreement include its inability to compel Rwanda to end facilitation of the current parallel-export economy. Also, it reveals that trade alone cannot supplant an armed actor's captive supply chain. Political will - national, regional and continental - as well as external diplomatic pressure, can effectively challenge and stop informal channels in the medium and long term.

In the Sahel, the rupture between ECOWAS and the breakaway AES has occurred in parallel with the integration of continental trade. Since the three AES states remain nominal AfCFTA signatories even after

their withdrawal from ECOWAS, an unusual situation arises in which continental trade architecture and procedure must persist as one of the few functioning multilateral frameworks still connecting the AES bloc to the rest of the continent. This is noteworthy because the "three borders" straddling Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are historically also a major corridor for vibrant informal cross-border trade in livestock, grain, and fuel.<sup>84</sup> With the area now the epicentre of jihadist violence linked to JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province, cross-border trade is either hindered, disrupted or taxed by armed groups controlling rural areas.<sup>85</sup> An AfCFTA-linked trade corridor and logistics investment offer a template for lower-cost, formal alternatives to smuggling routes. However, this can only succeed in the long term with guaranteed security in the region. With the AES looking towards a common Sahelian currency and a common visa regime, the integration dynamics for West Africa remain unpredictable in both the short and long term. This is more so because the security of the breakaway AES states is not improving.<sup>86</sup>

Realistically, the prospect of Sudan trading under the AfCFTA can only be contemplated in a post-conflict dispensation, and even then, there are no assurances it can be achieved. The current situation characterised by state fragmentation, systematic violence against civilians, and the weaponisation of humanitarian architecture is quite dire. At the same time, the regional conflict dynamics in the wider Horn of Africa demonstrate how contested access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden trade corridors has become deeply entangled with broader geopolitical competition over a maritime chokepoint through which a significant share of global trade passes.<sup>87</sup> Connected to this are festering incidents in the region, such as insecurity in Ethiopia despite the 2022 Pretoria Agreement; Ethiopia-Eritrea tensions over maritime access; and Israel's unilateral recognition of Somaliland, which has reopened sovereignty disputes between Somalia and Somaliland.

Regarding Sudan, any credible post-conflict reconstruction plan will need to address the same structural question the DRC case raises: whether reconstruction financing and trade access are organised through African-led continental frameworks (AfCFTA, the African Development Bank, AFREXIM, AU-mediated arrangements, etc.) or primarily through bilateral deals with individual external powers.<sup>88</sup> Realistically, the latter is more likely, as US-brokered initiatives involving Gulf partners appear to be the more viable route to ending the war.<sup>89</sup> There are geopolitical considerations for Sudan, including which external powers to partner with when the task of PCRD begins. If the proposed PCRD is organised outside the AfCFTA framework, it is more likely to deepen Sudan's bilateral dependence on whichever external patron steps in to finance the country's recovery, thereby replicating the dependency dynamics that AfCFTA was partly designed to reduce.

Finally, the Lake Chad Basin has had a historically integrated and robust cross-border trade economy linking Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon; countries that, in varying degrees, are affected by insurgency activities of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Over the past decade or more, however, the insurgency has virtually decimated or destroyed the regional trade, with trade dropping by 70% since the conflict began in early 2002.<sup>90</sup> The consequences include massive unemployment, with a quarter of voluntary recruits citing lack of employment as their primary motivation.<sup>91</sup> The implementation of AfCFTA in the region is an opportunity to reclaim these historic trade routes, resume legitimate cross-border trade, and revitalise border communities. This will counter insurgents' recruitment, reduce financial inflows that strengthen insurgents and stabilise borderlands. However, the advantages of trade are achievable only if preceded or accompanied by security stabilisation. The aftermath of the ECOWAS-AES split now requires the establishment of new regional security arrangements.

## 5.4 Can AfCFTA be a Veritable Geopolitical Instrument in a Multipolar World Order?

In a highly complex and contested multipolar world order, one in which multiple new actors are interested in, and gaining access to, Africa's resources, the AfCFTA can be the key interlocutor and game-changer for the continent.

First, the AfCFTA can significantly boost the continent's leverage and capacity to function as a "bloc power" in bargaining with other regions of the world. This will, in turn, contribute to the actualisation of Africa's vision to translate political independence into real economic sovereignty vis-à-vis external powers.<sup>92</sup> Currently, fragmented negotiations, especially from conflict-affected states, present a weaker negotiating position than a single-market perspective. This is especially true when security dynamics in several countries can very quickly result in "minerals-for-security" arrangements.<sup>93</sup> Thus, conflict itself becomes a lever that powerful external actors may use to extract bilateral concessions that a stronger, more unified continental bargaining position might otherwise prevent.

Second, the development of financial infrastructure to support the growth and consolidation of intra-African trade will reduce external dependency. The rollout of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) in 2025, for example, is expected to reduce foreign exchange costs by 20% to 30% whilst enabling trade completion without routing transactions through external financial systems and currencies, thereby countering related structural dependencies.<sup>94</sup> The fiscal autonomy and independence that come with this, if successfully implemented, could place African institutions at the centre of PCRD initiatives, especially those capable of boosting trade while reducing burdensome reliance on external financing for rebuilding initiatives that come at high costs.

Third is the competition to build the necessary infrastructure to support trade. The DRC-Zambia copper belt is a classic example where multiple interests are seeking to develop the necessary infrastructure to support trade.<sup>95</sup> There is China's Belt and Road Initiative to link port and rail investments; and the US and EU-backed Lobito Corridor connecting Zambian and Congolese copper belt production to Angola's Atlantic coast, for example.<sup>96</sup> These interests have the common goal of providing physical infrastructure necessary for the AfCFTA to function optimally and effectively. This rivalry reveals that competition is not limited to mineral extraction but also extends to entire value chains, including logistics, processing and export infrastructure.<sup>97</sup> Thus, it is important to consider these infrastructure agreements beyond the delivery of physical structures. Operational control over trade corridors is a primary lever determining which nations' currencies and financial institutions govern international market transactions.

# 06

## CHAPTER 6: IMPLEMENTING FRAMEWORKS: GAPS, HURDLES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Chapter 8 examines the gap between Africa's strong normative and policy architecture and the uneven implementation of those commitments in practice. It posits that Agenda 2063 effectively underpins Africa's desire to assert its economic sovereignty in this period of significant geopolitical transformation. Both the overarching vision and its seven aspirations envision a prosperous and integrated Africa, underpinned by good governance, peace and security, people-centred development, and a stronger continental presence in global affairs.<sup>98</sup>

The Silencing the Gun (STG) and AfCFTA, launched in May 2013 and July 2019, respectively, are two spin-off flagship initiatives of Agenda 2063 conceived to be instrumental to developing Africa's agency over its resources and development whilst navigating the continent's myriad security issues in a complex multipolar world order. Briefly, AfCFTA offers the world's largest free trade area by membership, with protocols covering goods, services, investment, intellectual property, competition, digital trade, and women's and youth economic participation.<sup>99</sup> The STG, on the other hand, is a framework for addressing the root causes of conflict, built around five pillars — political, economic, social, legal, and environmental. The framework clearly defined roles for member states, regional economic communities, the AU Commission, civil society, and international partners.<sup>100</sup>

A reflection on the status of implementation of the STG and AfCFTA reveals starkly that progress has been slow. A mid-term strategic evaluation of the STG initiative, held in Djibouti in June 2025, concluded that progress remains far from the set objectives, with the peace and security situation across the continent no better in 2025 than it had been in 2020.<sup>101</sup> Regarding the AfCFTA, intra-African trade remained at 16–18% of total trade, with the ratification of the free-movement protocols still far-fetched and industrialisation and value addition minimal.<sup>102</sup> Overall, the first-decade scorecard (2014–2023) of Agenda 2063 reveals that only 10 member states had implemented 50% or more of their first-decade goals, representing under a quarter of Africa's population, and eleven countries submitted no progress report at all.<sup>103</sup>

This chapter examines the structural reasons behind this implementation gap(s) across all three frameworks, identifies where the hindrances overlap and where they diverge, and sets out concrete pathways from framework to action.

### 6.1 Financing Gaps and External Dependency

Financing is a critical obstacle across all three frameworks. Agenda 2063's flagship projects require substantial upfront investment that most AU member states cannot mobilise domestically, leaving implementation dependent almost entirely on external financing whose availability and the terms and conditions for accessing it are completely outside the control of African governments and institutions.<sup>104</sup> For example, the AfCFTA Secretariat has operated under persistent resource constraints since its establishment.<sup>105</sup> In addition, trade-facilitation infrastructure such as customs modernisation, one-stop border posts, and the establishment of efficient logistics corridors requires a heavy capital outlay that perhaps only a few signatory

states have been able to adopt and domesticate in their national laws.<sup>106</sup> With regard to STG, reference is made to the AU's inability to autonomously mandate its missions without relying heavily on external partners and assistance.<sup>107</sup> Clearly, the fact that these two AU flagship initiatives are heavily reliant on donor funding compromises the norms to assert Africa's institutional independence.<sup>108</sup> External financing erodes African agency, as project implementation is determined not solely by Africa's agency and priorities but also by the rules and financing cycles of external partners. In essence, whatever agency is gained at the stage of framework design is likely ceded or upended in the implementation phase.

## 6.2 Fragmented Bargaining

The integration agenda is stalled by fragmented bargaining options and positions. Rather than negotiating from a position of strength as a united bloc, AU member states are still eagerly negotiating bilateral, rather than multilateral, agreements. Ultimately, this weakens the continent's bargaining power, slows the pace of integration and of Agenda 2063, which is meant to accelerate it, and leaves individual states more exposed to external agendas than a unified continental market would.<sup>109</sup> The implementation of the STG is also plagued with fragmentation issues. For example, although the AU Master Roadmap jointly defines roles for member states, regional economic communities, and the AU Commission, in practice poor coordination and collaboration sometimes result in dire situations that undermine the integration agenda. For example, the difference in approaches to the spate of Unconstitutional Changes of Government (UCGs) in West Africa resulted in AES's split from ECOWAS; a development that has unwittingly reversed integration gains achieved since 1975.

## 6.3 Uneven Domestication of Relevant Treaties

The uneven adoption of relevant treaties and their consequent implementation at the national level is a hindrance common to all three frameworks. Statistics from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063 reveal that only 10 countries had implemented 50% or more of the goals by the end of the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (FTYIP), from 2014 to 2023. In the same period, 11 countries have an implementation rate of 30% or less. Reasons for the uneven adoption and poor implementation rate are linked to weak institutional or technical capacity.<sup>110</sup> The AfCFTA has a relatively more impressive adoption record, with 49 AU member states having already deposited ratification instruments. However, far fewer have domesticated the protocols or implemented key obligations. For example, while the Free Movement Protocol, essential to the full implementation of the AfCFTA, has been signed by 32 countries, only 4 have ratified and deposited the instrument, falling short of the 15 required for entry into force.<sup>111</sup> A core reason for this uneven adoption lies in capacity asymmetry rather than in the general apathy of political leaderships toward the integration agenda. For example, the preconditions for AfCFTA's tariff preferences, such as rules-of-origin certification, customs digitisation, and standards harmonisation, require technical and administrative capacity that is unevenly available across the continent. Indeed, countries experiencing active conflict situations are at a further disadvantage.

## 6.4 Conflict as Cause and Effect of Implementation Failure

Active conflicts hinder the implementation of Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA. While earlier sections have highlighted how active insecurity situations affect the development of trade corridors, the security challenges in the conflicts have affected the operation and development of trade corridors in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa; directly undercutting progress of Agenda 2063,<sup>112</sup> as well as the success of the STG. Progress in implementing the STG initiative is a bedrock for achieving and sustaining progress on both Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA. This is not to suggest that the implementation of these frameworks is linear; in practice, to be effective, a robust implementation strategy is required that regards the three as a single interdependent system (rather than three separate accountability lines). The notion of STG, broad and somewhat vague, also requires a nuanced understanding, including within the institutions responsible for its implementation.

## 6.5 Sovereignty-Enforcement Tension

The lack of consequences and sanctions for non-implementation of agreed commitments under the three frameworks is a major challenge. The institutional set-up of the AU contributes to the myriad challenges in implementing its frameworks. The same non-interference principle that gives the AU political legitimacy, for instance, also limits its ability to sanction or compel member states that sign continental frameworks to domesticate and implement them. Another illustration is that the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is built on consensus-based sovereignty norms that constrain the AU's capacity to compel member states to comply with continental commitments regarding trade liberalisation schedules, human rights benchmarks under Agenda 2063's governance aspiration, or ceasefire and disarmament obligations under STG. In essence, there is an absolute lack of systemic steps to follow through on continental agreements. Rather, commitments are followed through on based on the willingness of member-state leadership.

## 6.6 Political Will

The political will to promote and sustain the three frameworks is arguably the most important singular element towards their successful implementation. Political will comprises three critical elements: committed support, shared agreement, and the ability to overcome challenges. Applied to Agenda 2063 and its supporting frameworks, this will include agreed continental goals as expressed in subsequent frameworks, ratification and domestication into national laws, the making of requisite sustainable financial provisions, and the creation of the conditions necessary for practical implementation. With regard to Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, in particular, this would include free movement of persons, goods, and services. The commitment to overcoming challenges may be tricky in practice, particularly given the complexities of Africa's peace and security landscape discussed earlier. Given the importance of political will in implementing frameworks, this topic is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## 6.7 Moving from Policy to Action: A Convergent Agenda

This section suggests ways Africa can move from policy to action by overcoming the challenges identified above.

**Intentional sequencing of security and economic implementation.** Recognise the interconnectedness of the frameworks and implement them in sequence rather than treat them as parallel tracks. For example, the effective operationalisation of Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA requires the strategic sequencing of security and economic frameworks, rather than managing them in isolation. The limited implementation of STG imperatives on peace and security directly impedes the delivery of AfCFTA and Agenda 2063, particularly in conflict-affected jurisdictions. The marginalisation of demographic groups such as women and youth in borderlands has been shown to compound regional instability and disrupt the development of trade corridors.<sup>113</sup> Thus, the AU planning processes should promote the strengthening of security and economic frameworks rather than allowing them to operate in silos.

**Fund African initiatives by first pooling and committing domestic capital.** Develop a model to pool and deploy resources to implement key priorities, before scaling external financing. The AU's own repeated commitment to reduce dependency on external partner financing for its peace operations should be extended explicitly to Agenda 2063 flagship projects and AfCFTA infrastructure, using instruments such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and Afreximbank trade-finance facilities to demonstrate that a baseline of continental commitments can be met without waiting on external partners, even if full-scale implementation still requires external co-financing.

**Unify trade and investment negotiations at the continental level.** To fix fragmented trade positions that weaken collective leverage, the AU Commission and AfCFTA Secretariat need a clear, member-state-approved mandate to negotiate framework terms in conjunction with major external partners. While individual member states will still handle implementation, the current system of 54 separate bilateral negotiating tracks will have to be replaced to maximise continental bargaining power.

**Invest in implementation and interpretive capacity.** Priority should be given to furthering the common understanding of how existing protocols and roadmaps apply in practice. Focus should shift from north-south, externally designed technical assistance frameworks to South-South cooperation initiatives delivered through peer-to-peer experience-sharing exercises. Frontrunner states with experience implementing specific frameworks should be able to provide the technical expertise needed to navigate Africa's peculiar circumstances.

**Resolve the conceptual ambiguity in Silencing the Guns.** The AU Peace and Security Council should adopt an explicit, operational definition of what "silencing the guns" entails and requires at national and regional levels. This will enable better understanding within and outside the institutions and enable the Master Roadmap's monitoring and evaluation mechanism to measure progress against a shared standard rather than continuing to assess an initiative whose central term remains contested even among the very institutions responsible for its implementation.

**Accept asymmetric, phased implementation rather than uniform continental timelines.** The reality of wide variation in institutional capacity and security conditions across member states and regions implies that continental frameworks need to be cascaded downward to embed explicit, differentiated timelines and support tracks for conflict-affected and low-capacity states. This is against the current system in which all member states of the AU are held to identical benchmarks; one in which, realistically, frontrunner states can meet benchmarks while many others predictably miss. Furthermore, this shift will ensure that monitoring reports serve as honest, realistic, and constructive tools for accountability.

Taken together, these steps address the financing dependency, fragmented bargaining, uneven capacity, and conceptual ambiguity that this chapter has identified as the primary and widely shared drivers of the gap between Africa's policy ambition and its delivery.

# 07

## CHAPTER 7: POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter engages with the discourse on “political will” to offer actionable recommendations for enhancing it to deliver on the priorities of the three continental frameworks discussed in previous chapters, namely Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the STG initiative. While the rather slow implementation of these frameworks across Africa is frequently attributed in part to a lack of “political will”, the term itself often remains vague, with little or no consensus on its specific elements or dimensions. In the context of continental integration, political will is aptly defined as “the collective commitment of a sufficient set of decision makers to execute a shared policy solution.”<sup>114</sup> Importantly, it comprises identifiable and measurable elements including commitment, implementation, financing, inclusion and accountability. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is therefore possible to track and measure political will and develop strategies to enhance it if its specific dimensions are clearly identified.

### 7.1 Strategies to enhance political will.

Political will is not simply a matter of leadership commitment, as it is often used in day-to-day conversations and public discourse. It is measurable and targetable. Political will is most tangible when policies directly support all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable living in the margins or fringes of society. This section outlines key strategies to strengthen political will to implement continental and regional frameworks—specifically, Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the STG initiative. This, in part, requires framing the implementation agendas as mechanisms that deliver real and enduring human security benefits to the people who need them most. This can only happen, in the first instance, when the implementation agenda resonates with and becomes institutionalised within national development agendas, and is communicated effectively to the public to gain genuine acceptance, support and credibility.

First, the necessary reforms required to successfully implement the three continental frameworks must be framed around national and regional priorities and interests. Political leaders are, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to support implementation of frameworks when they see how reforms can or have positive impacts on indicators of national growth and development as well as peace and security priorities such as improved border security, quantum leap in gross domestic product (GDP) and national revenue, improvement in public services delivery, reduction in external dependency, and the legitimacy of state institutions, for example. With the uneven technical competencies across the continent, it should not be taken for granted that normative provisions can be easily or automatically translated into practical responsibilities across the board. Recommendations on resource governance, regional integration, peace financing, maritime security, and borderland development should therefore be presented not only as normative commitments, but as practical tools for state resilience and political survival.

Second, implementation should generate visible short-term wins, not just for the top-echelon elites but also for the majority of ordinary citizens. Long-term reforms such as security sector reform, natural resource governance, regional integration, decentralisation, and institutional coordination can be politically costly and slow to produce results. Moreover, the initial investment may be considered heavy and, therefore,

not a priority that many poor countries, contending with a plethora of other developmental priorities, can easily take on, especially those emerging from protracted conflict situations. Initial actions should therefore prioritise practical gains that citizens and leaders can identify with, such as reopening trade corridors, restoring services in conflict-affected areas, improving border security, expanding humanitarian access, supporting women's and youth livelihood programmes, and better resourcing local security forces to make them more accountable.

Third, implementation should be linked to financial incentives. Political will often increases when reforms are tied to predictable financial support, such as development assistance or infrastructure funding. The AU, RECs, African development finance institutions, and partners can encourage implementation by linking support to credible implementation benchmarks and ensuring that such incentives reinforce African ownership.

Fourth, political will is best broadened through coalitions of reform-minded champions rather than framing it around an individual with a short-term or one-off mandate. This means implementation should not depend on a single leader, ministry, or institution. Focussing on a single person or entity bears the attendant risk of reversal and vulnerability to leadership changes or elite resistance. Such a broad-based coalition of the willing should be inclusive enough to cover political leadership, citizen engagement, technical competence, faith-based and traditional authorities, and the private sector, amongst others. Consideration should be given to financing of reform agendas and priorities as well as the active participation of funding partners. These multiple actors can champion the cause in their regular engagements, thus eliminating the reliance on high-level convenings that tend to end with mere restating of commitments with limited technical action.

Fifth, AU and REC peer accountability should be used to drive and sustain momentum. Regular scorecards, summit reporting, peer review, public progress tracking, and implementation dashboards offer visible and demonstrable opportunities to create reputational incentives for action. Peer pressure is most effective when it is linked to tangible support, such as access to financing, technical assistance, mediation capacity, or regional infrastructure platforms. Beyond tracking progress, this method is also useful for identifying the support a country needs to ensure uptake.

Sixth, the perceived political costs of reform should be reduced through careful sequencing and negotiated transition pathways. Since certain reforms can threaten entrenched interests or raise fears of losing control, care must be taken to manage their fallouts while strengthening political will by gradually sequencing sensitive reforms.

Seventh, implementation should be connected to citizens if it is to gain and leverage public trust and acceptance. Leaders are more likely to sustain reforms when citizens can see that implementation improves everyday life and livelihoods. Communication and delivery should therefore show how reforms contribute to the pressing needs of the citizenry, such as improved, safer road networks; improved border security and access; food and fuel stability; jobs; fairer resource benefits; accountable security forces; and stronger local services.

Eighth, continent-wide reforms should be domesticated through national and regional institutions. Recommendations should be embedded in national development plans, peace strategies, parliamentary processes, budget cycles, inter-ministerial committees, AU and REC monitoring systems, and local consultations. Institutionalisation makes political will more durable by reducing dependence on individual leaders and making implementation harder to abandon when political leadership and priorities shift.

## **7.2 Tracking Progress in Political Will**

Political will should be monitored through observable changes in commitments, budgets, implementation behaviour, inclusion, accountability, and public trust. Progress cannot and should therefore not be assessed by mere declarations alone, but also by whether institutions allocate resources, meet milestones, include

affected communities, and adapt when political risks emerge. Monitoring political will, therefore, requires both formal indicators and close attention to elite behaviour, the changing character of civic space, and implementation bottlenecks. Below are a few ways to track progress made via political will.

First, formal commitments should be tracked. These include AU and REC summit communiqués, national action plans, cabinet or parliamentary approvals, ministerial roadmaps, peace agreement implementation plans, and formal mandates assigned to institutions or task forces. Political will becomes more credible when commitments are converted into approved plans with responsible institutions, timelines, and public reporting requirements.

Second, budget allocations and disbursements should be monitored. Political will becomes meaningful only when money closely follows commitments. Relevant indicators include budget lines for peace financing, borderland development, youth employment, women's participation, climate adaptation, resource governance, implementation units, and AU or REC peace funds. Monitoring should distinguish between allocations and actual disbursement, because delayed or symbolic funding is often a sign of weak follow-through.

Third, institutional follow-through should be assessed. Indicators include the creation of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, the appointment of qualified and responsible officials or envoys, regular meetings of implementation bodies, published work plans, joint AU/REC reporting, and coordination among peace, trade, finance, climate, digital, and security institutions. Political will is stronger when responsibility is institutionalised rather than left to ad hoc political attention.

Fourth, implementation milestones should be measured. These may include restored services in conflict-affected areas, reopened trade corridors, improved customs procedures, enhanced border security, mediation follow-up missions, resource governance audits, humanitarian access guarantees, functioning local peace infrastructures, and funded participation mechanisms for women, youth, displaced people, and borderland communities. These milestones show whether political will is producing practical change on the ground, where it matters the most.

Fifth, inclusion and civic space should be tracked as indicators of meaningful participation beyond the rituals of symbolism. Monitoring should assess whether women, youth, local mediators, informal traders, pastoralists, displaced people, and civil society have funded participation, protection, representation in implementation committees, access to information, and grievance mechanisms. It should also examine whether community feedback is acknowledged and mainstreamed in ways that lead to actual changes, bearing in mind that participation without influence can mask weak political will.

Finally, AU and REC peer accountability can make political will visible and comparable. Scorecards, peer-review reporting, annual dashboards, summit-level updates, country-by-country implementation trackers, and public progress reports can create reputational incentives for action. These should be paired with public communication that explains how reforms improve security, livelihoods, sovereignty, and institutional accountability.

### **7.3 Politics at the Margins and Sovereignty from Below**

An appreciation of political will is incomplete without attention to politics at the margins. The concept of politics at the margins refers to how communities, territories, and economies that are formally or practically excluded from centres of power think and act.<sup>115</sup> These include borderland communities, informal workers, pastoralist groups, displaced populations, refugees, returnees, stateless persons, customary authorities, religious actors, local mediators, rural youth, and women's networks. These constituencies offer a critical vantage point on governance as their lived experiences diverge sharply from national policy. Conversely, where such communities are meaningfully included in governance and its dividends, they signal that legitimacy is strong and is being actively reinforced by political will to sustain peace alongside national development.

The extent to which previously marginalised groups are drawn into governance systems and the benefits they receive speak directly to the substance of sovereignty. Sovereignty is conventionally framed in terms of borders, state authority, and international recognition, but it is equally a lived experience, one felt locally through access to justice, protection, livelihoods, identity, infrastructure, and voice.<sup>116</sup> Where marginal communities do not experience institutions as legitimate or responsive, sovereignty remains formal rather than substantive. Here, the state is received as a distant absentee one. The ensuing governance and legitimacy gap creates space for alternative authorities, including armed groups, criminal networks, or external actors to exercise control.

Building sovereignty from below, accordingly, requires adequate and long-term investment in local governance, conflict-sensitive service delivery, cross-border cooperation, land and resource dispute resolution, and meaningful participation in political settlements. Essentially, sovereignty from below equates to political legitimacy; described as the “capacity of institutions at every level to advance human security and fulfil their moral and legal responsibilities towards the people under their jurisdiction.”<sup>117</sup> In practice, it means the state has to consider citizens' peculiar circumstances and respond accordingly to protect them.

Across Africa and particularly in borderland communities, active and conflict-prone zones, and areas with concentrated vulnerable populations, this principle has direct policy implications. States that recognise informal economies as survival systems, rather than treating them purely as illicit activity, and that provide pathways for their transition into formal, regulated spaces strengthen their own legitimacy in the process. Displaced and unsettled populations similarly require enabling frameworks that support integration and protect their rights, benefiting both these populations and the host communities around them. Policy responsiveness to gender-differentiated needs further reinforces social cohesion and narrows the space available for manipulation or exploitation.

In sum, sustained attention to politics at the margins and to the deliberate construction of sovereignty from below is what allows government to be recognised as a legitimate source of authority. This recognition underpins the social contract between state and citizen, and it is this contract that ultimately determines whether the domestication of regional and continental frameworks for economic growth, peace, and security is embraced rather than resisted.

# 08

## CHAPTER 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations to the African Union

- Explicitly anchor thematic normative frameworks within the overarching Agenda 2063 results framework. By systematically embedding thematic activities and outcomes into this continent's overarching development framework, continental bodies and national governments can leverage a unified tracking system to measure macro-level progress. Also, this will provide policymakers with the empirical, data-driven evidence needed to demonstrate how continental policy frameworks tangibly improve the daily lives of citizens at the Member State level.
- Institutionalise political will as a measurable and trackable variable. The AU Peace and Security Council and the AU Commission should adopt formal indicators of commitment, financing, implementation, inclusion, and accountability, and publish regular scorecards and implementation dashboards so that political will can be tracked, compared across member states, and linked to reputational and material incentives.
- Reduce dependency on external financing. The AU should extend its own commitment to reduce donor dependency for peace operations to Agenda 2063 flagship projects and AfCFTA infrastructure, deepening the use of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and Afreximbank trade-finance facilities to demonstrate that a baseline of continental commitments can be met with pooled domestic and continental capital.
- Adopt differentiated, capacity-sensitive timelines. Rather than holding all member states to identical benchmarks, the AU should build explicit, differentiated implementation tracks and support packages for conflict-affected and low-capacity states, paired with an operational definition of "silencing the guns" that allows the Master Roadmap to measure progress against a shared standard.
- Fund inclusion as a governance and economic strategy, not a normative add-on. AGA-APSA, the Gender, Peace and Security programme, the Youth for Peace programme, FemWise-Africa, Youth-Wise, and related mechanisms should receive predictable, multi-year budget lines tied to measurable indicators of participation and influence, so that women's and youth's engagement moves beyond quota representation toward substantive legitimacy in peace processes.
- Embed sovereignty from below in continental planning. Post-conflict reconstruction and development planning, APSA programming, and the STG Master Roadmap should explicitly fund local governance, cross-border cooperation, and service delivery in borderland and marginalised communities, recognising that legitimacy built at the margins underpins the domestic political will needed to implement continental commitments.
- Strengthen the inextricable link across peace and security, governance, trade, climate, digital, and development agendas. This will ensure that conflict prevention is integrated with, rather than treated separately from, economic transformation. This will require both intra- and inter-continental organisations improving collaboration and partnerships in service delivery as "One AU."
- Invest in sustained implementation support for signed peace agreements, rather than episodic

diplomatic engagement. This will assert the AU's agency in managing and resolving conflicts in accordance with its "African Solutions for African Problems" mantra.

### **Recommendations to Regional Economic Communities**

- Serve as the operational bridge between continental frameworks and local conflict realities. Strengthen cross-border early warning systems, mediation capacity, and joint border management.
- Link regional integration directly to peacebuilding. RECs should not rely on trade momentum alone to secure regional stability; they should pair AfCFTA implementation - infrastructure corridors, customs reform, digital trade platforms, and regional value chains - with investment in governance, security sector coordination, and cross-border infrastructure, particularly along corridors historically captured by armed actors, such as the Lake Chad area and the Sahel's tri-border area.
- Formalise cross-border trade to crowd out conflict financing. RECs should accelerate harmonisation of customs procedures, standards, and rules-of-origin certification, including for critical minerals, to make formal, documented and traceable trade more competitive than the informal and smuggled channels that finance non-state armed groups in eastern DRC, the Sahel, and other borderland economies.
- Preserve continental connections amid regional fragmentation. Where regional bodies split or realign, as in the ECOWAS-AES rupture, RECs and the AU should treat continuing AfCFTA membership as a functioning channel to keep breakaway states connected to continental frameworks and pursue parallel security arrangements rather than allowing trade and security cooperation to collapse together.
- Protect and formalise informal cross-border traders. RECs should extend protection, documentation, and access to finance to women, youth, and informal traders who dominate cross-border commerce, ensuring that free-movement suspensions or border closures adopted for security reasons do not disproportionately deprive them of their primary livelihoods.
- Strengthen joint reporting and coordination with the AU Commission. RECs should formalise joint monitoring and reporting mechanisms with the AU Commission on the STG Master Roadmap and AfCFTA implementation, closing the coordination gaps that have, in the past, allowed member-state divergence to reverse integration gains achieved over decades.
- Collaborate with Member States towards stabilisation and PCRD in conflict-affected zones. In the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Great Lakes, Horn of Africa, and Cabo Delgado, work with member states to align trade facilitation, border security, climate adaptation, and livelihood recovery as mutually reinforcing agendas.

### **Recommendations to the Private Sector and Financial Institutions**

- Adopt conflict-sensitive investment as a core business principle in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This includes assessing risks related to displacement, land rights, labour conditions, environmental harm, elite capture, corruption, conflict financing, and community grievances.
- Invest in ways that build local resilience rather than bypass it. Businesses and financial institutions should prioritise local procurement, decent work, technology transfer, and support for women- and youth-led small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in borderland and conflict-affected regions. Investing in regional value chains, small and medium enterprises, digital inclusion, renewable energy, agro-processing, local manufacturing, and skills helps build the economic foundations of peace.
- Adopt traceable, conflict-sensitive value chains. Companies trading in critical minerals and other conflict-linked commodities should implement documented, rules-of-origin-compliant supply chains consistent with AfCFTA protocols, reducing the commercial viability of smuggled or armed-group-taxed minerals moving through informal channels such as those linked to the Rubaya mining cadastral in eastern DRC.
- Expand use of African-owned financial infrastructure. Financial institutions should scale up the use

of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and Afreximbank trade-finance instruments to reduce foreign-exchange costs and reliance on external currencies, thereby reinforcing the continent's fiscal autonomy in trade settlement and post-conflict reconstruction financing.

- Close the credit gap for women and youth entrepreneurs. Banks and financial technology providers should expand collateral-free, mobile money-based lending and de-risking instruments for women- and youth-owned informal enterprises, given that conventional collateral requirements systematically exclude women who hold limited formal land rights.
- Anchor reconstruction financing in African-led frameworks. In post-conflict contexts such as Sudan and the DRC, private and development finance institutions should structure reconstruction and investment financing through African-led vehicles, including the African Development Bank, Afreximbank, and AU-mediated arrangements, rather than primarily through bilateral deals with external powers that risk deepening dependency.
- Publish transparent local-content and beneficiation reporting. Extractive and infrastructure companies should disclose data on local procurement, employment, and beneficiation to strengthen public accountability and reduce the space for elite capture, corruption, and conflict financing associated with opaque resource contracts.

## **Recommendations to African Governments**

- Domesticating continental commitments into national instruments. Governments should embed Agenda 2063 targets, AfCFTA protocols, and STG Master Roadmap obligations directly into national development plans, peace strategies, budget cycles, and parliamentary processes, rather than treating them as external commitments layered on top of domestic policy.
- Frame reforms around national priorities and deliver visible short-term gains. Governments should present resource governance, regional integration, and security sector reforms as practical tools for national resilience and political survival, sequencing early actions, such as reopening trade corridors, restoring services in conflict-affected areas, and improving border security, so that citizens and elites alike can see tangible benefits before longer-term reforms mature.
- Ratify and implement outstanding protocols, especially the AfCFTA Free Movement Protocol. Governments that have signed but not ratified key instruments should prioritise domestication, including the rules-of-origin certification, customs digitisation, and standards harmonisation on which tariff preferences depend, with dedicated technical assistance sought where domestic capacity is the binding constraint rather than political will.
- Recognise and formalise informal economies rather than criminalise them. Governments should treat informal cross-border trade and other informal livelihoods, particularly those that sustain women, youth, and borderland communities, as survival systems to be regularised and taxed transparently, thereby providing pathways into the formal economy rather than relying solely on enforcement.
- Invest in borderland and marginalised communities as a matter of sovereignty. Governments should extend service delivery, justice, infrastructure, and livelihood support to borderland and conflict-affected regions, recognising that where the state is experienced as distant or absent, armed groups, criminal networks, or external actors readily fill the resulting governance vacuum.
- Invest in robust national peace strategies. Integrate borderland development, support for the informal economy, climate adaptation, youth employment, women's participation, and regional trade facilitation into national peace strategies.
- Fund and institutionalise women's and youth inclusion domestically. National governments should allocate dedicated and predictable budget lines for women's and youth peace and security programming, land and credit access reforms, and digital-skills initiatives, converting continental frameworks such as the WPS and YPS agendas into funded national action plans with clear implementation responsibility.
- Participate transparently in AU and REC peer accountability mechanisms. Governments should

engage constructively with scorecards, peer reviews, and implementation dashboards, submitting timely and honest progress reports even where performance is weak, since credible self-reporting is itself an indicator of political will and a basis for targeted support from continental partners.

### **Recommendations to Civil Society Organisations**

- Track legitimacy, not only representation. CSOs, including women's and youth networks, should monitor and publicise whether peace processes and governance reforms are substantively shaped by affected communities, rather than treating quota-based attendance at negotiation tables as evidence of meaningful inclusion.
- Channel politics at the margins into continental decision-making. Organisations working with borderland communities, informal traders, pastoralists, displaced populations, and other marginalised groups should systematically document their experiences and priorities and feed them into AU, REC, and national planning processes for Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and post-conflict reconstruction and development.
- Contest the digital space. Civil society and youth-led organisations should invest in strategic digital engagement and counter-messaging to close the gap between the sophisticated online mobilisation of extremist groups and the comparatively limited digital outreach of formal African institutions, while supporting digital-skills and livelihood programming as counter-recruitment tools.
- Support women and youth organisations. This includes support with dedicated financing, security protections, data access, technical training, and institutional pathways to shape decisions in early warning systems, economic policy, digital innovation, and civic accountability platforms.
- Advocate for structural reform on land, credit, and informality. CSOs should sustain advocacy for reform of customary and statutory land tenure systems, expanded credit access for women, and clear pathways for the formalisation of informal economies, given the direct link between these structural exclusions and vulnerability to conflict and displacement.
- Build broad-based coalitions for reform. Civil society, faith-based and traditional authorities, and community leaders should organise as durable coalitions of the willing that champion implementation of continental commitments in their routine engagements, reducing dependence on individual political leaders and insulating reform momentum from leadership change or elite resistance.
- Provide independent accountability alongside official scorecards. CSOs should maintain independent tracking of commitments, budget disbursements, and implementation milestones under Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the STG initiative, complementing AU and REC peer-review mechanisms with public reporting that sustains pressure for follow-through between summits.

### **Recommendations to International Partners**

- Support African-defined priorities and avoid creating parallel systems that weaken continental and regional institutions.
- Align cooperation on security, trade, finance, climate, technology, migration, and resource governance with long-term African institutional capacity and mutual accountability.
- Expand African agency, support implementation of existing frameworks, and help convert geopolitical change into inclusive, sustainable, and people-centred peace.

# 09

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

This report has argued that Africa's peace and security challenges cannot be separated from questions of economic sovereignty, political legitimacy, and geopolitical positioning. Conflict trends across 2025 and into 2026 confirm that instability on the continent is increasingly regionalised, economically entrenched, and entangled with strategic competition over resources, digital infrastructure, and influence in a multipolar world order. Reactive, state-centric, and siloed approaches to peacebuilding have proven insufficient to address these dynamics. What is required instead is a paradigm that treats peace as a political economy problem, that is, one in which resource governance, digital transformation, institutional capacity, regional integration, and inclusive participation are addressed as interconnected elements of a single agenda, rather than as separate technical tracks.

The report has shown that Africa is not short of ambition or normative architecture. Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the Silencing the Guns initiative collectively represent one of the most comprehensive continental commitments to peace, prosperity, and integration globally. The persistent gap lies in implementation, which is largely a function of political will. Political will was defined as the sustained, resourced commitment of leadership to translate signed frameworks into domestic legislation, budget allocation, enforcement, and institutional follow-through, even when doing so entails short-term political costs. Financing gaps, fragmented bargaining, uneven domestication, and unresolved tensions between sovereignty and external enforcement all compound this constraint, but each is ultimately addressable where political will is mobilised and sustained.

Central to sustaining that will is the recognition that legitimacy is built from the ground up. Attention to politics at the margins, particularly borderland communities, informal workers, pastoralist groups, displaced populations, and other constituencies historically excluded from centres of power, is not peripheral to the continent's peace and security agenda but foundational to it. Where states invest in local governance, conflict-sensitive service delivery, and the meaningful inclusion of women and youth, they build the sovereignty from below that underpins a durable social contract with citizens. The social contract largely determines the success of the domestication and implementation of continental and regional frameworks.

The path forward requires coordinated action across every level of the continental architecture. The AU and RECs strengthening coherence, financing, and accountability; the private sector and financial institutions investing in ways that build resilience rather than extract from it; youth and women's networks resourced as strategic partners rather than consulted as afterthoughts; national governments prioritising inclusive political settlements and the foundations of economic sovereignty; and international partners aligning their support behind African-defined priorities rather than parallel systems. None of these substitutes for political settlement or credible mediation in active conflicts. But treated deliberately, and backed by sustained political will, Africa's peace, security, and economic transformation agendas offer the continent one of its clearest paths to converting a period of profound geopolitical change into durable, inclusive, and self-determined peace.

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The Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa (THLF) is an independent initiative of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of Addis Ababa University and eminent African personalities. The Forum aims to inform the gathering of African decision-makers, peace and security stakeholders, and their broader constituencies about an open and frank discussion of security issues and challenges facing the continent.

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TANA Forum 2026

# STATE OF PEACE AND SECURITY REPORT 2025 / 2026



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