ISS INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

ISSUE 180 | JUNE 2025

Peace & Security Council Report

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PSC subcommittees: delivering results or drifting along?

The African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is the central decision-making organ for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict in Africa. Since it began its work in May 2004, five subcommittees have been established to enhance its performance. These are the Military Staff Committee (MSC), Committee of Experts (CoE), Sanctions Committee, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) Committee and Counter-terrorism Committee. This article assesses the value of these bodies and how they have enhanced the PSC.

The subcommittees can be broadly categorised into two groups: the active – the MSC and CoE – and the largely inactive, which are the other three. This distinction provides a useful entry point for analysis based on the following four criteria: legal mandate and institutional status, composition and technical capacity, operational activation and functionality, and political momentum and operational support.

Legal mandate and institutional status

The PSC Protocol, under Article 8(5), empowers the Council to establish subsidiary bodies – comprising either individual states or groups – to assist in mediation, legal and military expertise or ad-hoc technical support. These bodies have a legal and advisory role in strengthening the PSC's decision-making. However, their legal foundation differs, with implications for their instituting authority and preeminence.

Four of the subcommittees fall under Article 8(5), while the MSC is under Article 13 (8 to 12) in the chapter on the African standby force.

- The CoE was established by a PSC decision at the 83rd Meeting in July 2007 emanating from the conclusions of the PSC retreat in Dakar the same month. Its mandate includes the drafting of Council communiqués, concept notes and decisions.

Acronyms and abbreviations

AfHA	African Humanitarian Agency
Africa CDC	Africa Centres for Disease Control
AIMS 2050	Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy
AU	African Union
CMTF-GoG	Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea
CoE	Committee of Experts
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
MNJTF	Multi National Joint Task Force
MSC	Military Staff Committee
PAPS	Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department
PCRD	Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development
PSC	Peace and Security Council
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
UN	United Nations

- The Sanctions Committee, established at the 2009 Ezulwini retreat, supports the implementation of PSC Protocol Article 7(g). It monitors political developments, identifies violators, recommends sanctions and advises on their mediation or lifting.
- The Counter-terrorism Committee was established at the 249th meeting in 2010 to guide the PSC's response to the growing threat of terrorism and violent extremism on the continent.
- The PCRD Committee was also founded in May 2010, at the 230th meeting, with a mandate to support long-term peacebuilding and recovery in post-conflict settings.

Article 8(5) allows the PSC to create such structures as are needed without formal PSC Protocol amendment. They are, therefore, non-permanent and exist only as long as the PSC deems them necessary. This flexibility enables the PSC to adapt to emerging trends such as resurgence of coups or terrorism.

While not labelled a subcommittee in the PSC Protocol, the MSC is mandated to advise the Council on and assist it in military and security requirements. Thus, it has a legal mandate to function as a subcommittee, fulfilling the military advisory role also referenced in Article 8(5). Its enshrinement in the protocol, however, gives it a stronger and more permanent legal status than others have.

Article 29 of the Charter gives the UN Security Council discretion to create subsidiary bodies – such as committees, working groups and panels of experts

The distinction between the MSC and other subcommittees mirrors the structure of the United Nations (UN). Under Article 47 of the UN Charter, the UN MSC is a standing body, while Article 29 of the Charter gives the UN Security Council discretion to create subsidiary bodies – such as committees, working groups and panels of experts – as it deems necessary.

Despite longstanding debates, including the 2004 recommendation for its dissolution for lack of relevance, the committee persists not least because removing it would require a formal amendment to the UN Charter. Similarly, the AU MSC's existence is safeguarded as it cannot be dissolved without amendment subject to Article 22(6) of the PSC Protocol and Article 32 of The Constitutive Act, which would include an AU Assembly vote.

Composition and technical capacity

The composition and technical capacity of the subcommittees vary widely. They are often a reflection of the priority member states accord to their AU permanent representations. The 15-member MSC, for example, comprises senior military staff (defence attachés) of permanent missions. Although it

Current PSC Chairperson

H.E. Ambassador Innocent Shiyo, the Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for June 2025

PSC members

Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda

has long suffered from the absence of attachés in some permanent missions, this has improved in recent years, with only one mission currently without a dedicated attaché. This reflects increased awareness by states of the crucial role of defence attachés in Africa's most important multilateral station.

The CoE's members are 15 mid- to senior-level diplomats, depending on the individual mission's composition. Experts generally carry out much of the PSC's technical work to enable decision-making by their respective ambassadors. They assist in drafting documents and decisions in the run-up to Council meetings and work with the secretariat to prepare communiqués and press releases when they chair the PSC.

The African Defence Attachés Forum has become a crucial gathering in which embassies' military staff exchange notes on key defence and security matters

However, compared to its UN equivalent, the secretariat carries more weight than the CoE in developing communiqués. As the AU does not nurture the practice of pen-holding, the secretariat does the heavy-lifting. This is often a function of short-staffed permanent missions, but also because states do not always provide their diplomats deployed to Addis Ababa with the training needed to perform in a multilateral station. While the Sanctions Committee also has 15 members, the Counter-terrorism Committee and PCRD Committee have five members each, representing the five AU regions.

Operational activation and functionality

Of the five subcommittees, the MSC and the CoE are the only ones demonstrating sustained engagement. The MSC is the most visible as its members also serve on two structured and very active military forums – the African Defence Attachés Forum and the Military Attachés Association. The former was set up in 2020 and brings together all Addis-based African defence attachés. In only a few years, the increasingly formal group has become a crucial gathering in which embassies' military staff exchange notes and experiences on key defence and security matters. It convenes an annual retreat and sometimes field visits to countries of interest.

The latter is the association of all defence attachés deployed to Addis. It organises regular meetings and workshops to enhance the knowledge and skills of its members. Beyond creating a sense of belonging, involvement in those two forums adds substantive value to the work of the MSC and exposes its members to current thinking and policymaking on peace and security. Since its inception over 20 years ago the MSC has convened 27 meetings and undertaken two field missions, including to Somalia in 2023.

The CoE is the invisible engine of the PSC but is much less noticed from the outside world than its military counterpart. CoE members are also part

OF THE FIVE SUBCOMMITTEES, THE MSC AND THE CoE ARE THE ONLY ONES DEMONSTRATING SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT

of the Technical Experts Forum (now known as Forum for African Diplomats in Addis Ababa) that brings together all experts of AU member states. The forum has recently become a formal group that regularly meets for workshops, trainings and other skills-enhancing sessions. It organises annual retreats to foster group identity and mutual understanding.

The CoE operates as a technical drafting unit that supports almost every PSC outcome. These include drafting the PSC budget and the report on PSC activities and compilation of the State of Peace and Security in Africa for the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. It also develops terms of reference and/or reactivation for the sanctions, PCRD and counter-terrorism committees.

By contrast, the last three-mentioned committees are minimally active. The Sanctions Committee, despite being established in 2009, held its inaugural meeting only in June 2024, with its report considered by the PSC two months later.

The Counter-terrorism Committee, created in 2010, was referenced at the PSC's 1 237th meeting in October 2024, which requested a progress update by the first quarter of 2025. However, as of mid-2025, no report has been submitted and no terms of reference have been drafted, indicating a continued lack of activity. Meanwhile, the PCRD Committee has draft terms of reference developed by the AU Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, pending deliberation by the CoE before consideration at ambassadorial level. This, however, comes five years after the PSC mandated the CoE at the 958th meeting in October 2020 to mandate these terms.

Political momentum and operational support

The two active subcommittees operate on a needs basis, reflecting strong political backing by member states. The other subcommittees struggle to become functional for manifold reasons. For instance, the Sanctions Committee was in 2009 the reflection of an international context in which norms and values of acceptable behaviour were more or less consensual. In the current geopolitical context of power rivalries and norm competition, sanctions are often perceived as biased or a relic of a world order under western hegemony. Several African countries have been subjected to UN sanctions often perceived by governments as unfair.

The recent creation of the Alliance des états du Sahel in West Africa cast another doubtful light on sanctions as their contestation now threatens the very existence of collective security mechanisms. Against this backdrop, it would be important to see how an activated Sanctions Committee would operate and what type of acceptable behaviour sanctions would impose on member states.

The renewed calls for the Counter-terrorism Committee followed a sharp rise in terrorist fatalities, especially in the Sahel, now a global hotspot for violent extremism. Additionally, the 1 237th PSC communiqué of October 2024 reveals this disparity in priority. Paragraph 11 merely 'requests' the committee's implementation – without follow-up, even by the first quarter of 2025 – while Paragraph 14 explicitly 'underlines the importance' of the AU Ministerial Committee on Counter-terrorism. This signals political prioritisation and potential duplication, as both consult the PSC but differ in authority levels.

Cybersecurity, space security and artificial intelligence sovereignty may require the creation of new subcommittees

The PCRD Committee is about to become active but it is unclear what problem it will solve. Post-conflict reconstruction is as much a matter of strategy as of financial resources. At a time when the international conflict prevention and management toolboxes are being reviewed and traditional donors are retreating, the existence of this committee appears more symbolic.

As security threats evolve, challenges such as cybersecurity, space security and artificial intelligence sovereignty may require the creation of new, albeit temporary, subcommittees. Just as the UN Security Council has discontinued various subsidiary bodies since 1945, the AU should also treat its subcommittees as flexible instruments. Their mandates should be activated only, when necessary, with clear thresholds for success and redundancy.

Chart 1: AU PSC Subcommittees

Subcommittee	Legal mandate and status	Composition and technical capability	Operational activation and functionality	Political momentum and operational support
Military staff Committee	Established under Article 13 (8 to 12) of the PSC Protocol; part of African Standby Force structure, more permanent than the other committees	15 senior military or defence attachés, inconsistent representation due to some member states lacking defence attachés	Very active: 27 meetings and two field missions (one to Somalia); advises the PSC on military security matters	Stronger political will and legal support due to its PSC Protocol enshrinement
Committee of Experts	Created at 2007 Dakar PSC retreat; under Article 8(5) of the PSC Protocol	15 mid- to senior-level diplomats; constrained by rotating membership and variable expertise	Less apparent but fully functional drafting unit; supports most of the PSC's outcomes, budgets, terms of reference and biannual reports	High political relevance due to technical necessity; the engine room of PSC documentation and technical policy formulation
Sanctions Committee	Created at 2009 Ezulwini PSC retreat under Aritcle 8(5) of the PSC Protocol; guided by Article 7(g)	15 mid- to senior-level diplomats	First meeting in 2024, 15 years after formation; slowly emerging from dormancy	Politically reactivated due to recent coups; now receiving attention after long neglect; unclear future due to sanctions fatigue
Counter-terrorism Committee	Created in 2010 at meeting 249; under Article 8(5) of the PSC Protocol	Five-member body from AU regions; lacks standing experts support and institutional clarity	No terms of reference nor activity as of mid-2025; referenced in 2024, but little follow-through	Weak prioritisation compared to the AU Ministerial Committee on Counter-terrorism
PCRD Committee	PSC decision-based; aims to support long-term post-conflict peacebuilding under Article 8(5)	Five-member body from AU regions; likely to suffer from limited staffing and thematic expertise	Inactive since inception in 2020; terms of reference draft undergoing review	Low on political agenda; over-shadowed by crises needing immediate intervention; uncertain future due to lack of funds and review of peacebuilding instruments

The future of subcommittees

The PSC's subcommittees are unevenly functional, being shaped more by political momentum than by clear structural design. While the CoE and MSC remain essential, the others risk becoming symbolic unless purposefully activated and resourced. Their non-permanency is a strength, not a weakness, if they are treated as flexible tools. As threats evolve, a strategic, demand-driven approach to subcommittees can help the PSC remain responsive and efficient in delivering continental peace and security.

Return to constitutional order in Guinea: a major stress test

The adoption of a new constitution, approved by 89.39% of votes cast in the 21 September referendum, has paved the way for the presidential election on 28 December 2025. This election and the subsequent legislative and local elections are key to Guinea's return to democracy. They will mark the end of the transition that began after the 2021 military coup in which Alpha Condé's regime was overthrown.

Condé's authority was contested after the adoption of a 2020 constitution that allowed him to run for a third term. Questions are being raised about the conditions in which the December election will be held and about the roles of the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in managing the transition.

Unilateral transition management

In response to the 2021 coup, the AU and ECOWAS suspended Guinea from their decision-making bodies and demanded the adoption of a transition timetable. More than a year later, Guinean authorities and ECOWAS agreed on a 24-month transition beginning in December 2022, which was later extended until 2025. This timetable would enable Guinea to restore constitutional order and travel a path to stability.

The constitution adopted in September is one of 10 timetable elements that Guinea authorities deem essential for deep sociopolitical reforms. It introduces major changes to fundamental rights such as the right to petition. Furthermore, the country's political system and institutions will streamline presidential powers. A senate will be created to introduce bicameralism and a special court of justice to hold the government criminally liable.

However, some politicians perceive these changes as disconnected from a truly inclusive process, which undermines their legitimacy. Certain members of the political class and civil society called for a boycott of the referendum, but this had limited impact as 86% of registered voters went to the polls. The detractors believed the constitutional text served more to legitimise the ruling regime's continued leadership of the country.

Alongside concerns over delays and a lack of clarity on the transition timetable, criticisms have mounted over the unilateral conduct of the transition. These are due notably to the ban on political or civic demonstrations since May 2022, the kidnappings and disappearances of dissenting voices and a shrinking media space.

Major political parties such as the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea and the Rally of the Guinean People have been suspended within the framework of the political party evaluation process initiated by the transitional government. Against a backdrop of intraparty quarrels, this move has sparked strong reactions within the political class, which indicates that it may consolidate transitional authorities' position ahead of elections.

Despite the AU urging the authorities to implement the agreed transition calendar and dialogue with ECOWAS, the latter appears to have little influence on the process. It imposed sanctions on the country in September 2021, which it lifted in February 2024 to revive dialogue and negotiations.

The called-for boycott of the referendum had limited impact as 86% of registered voters went to the polls

However, these initiatives have run into issues of inclusion and participation among political actors, despite ECOWAS and AU calls for an inclusive process. Establishing the ECOWAS-led committee to monitor and evaluate the timetable has remained a dead letter, even though it would not only uphold the spirit of the October 2022 agreement but build trust among political stakeholders.

Electoral process concerns

The new constitution provides for an independent technical body for electoral management comprising representatives from political parties and civil society. However, the electoral code promulgated on 27 September allows the general electoral directorate of the ministry of territorial administration and decentralisation to oversee all end-of-transition elections. This has fuelled fears of unfair polls.

Added to this are the absence of major political leaders' from the presidential election and General Mamadi

Doumbouya's debated candidacy validated by the Supreme Court. Doumbouya has promised repeatedly that neither he nor any member of the transitional government or parliament will stand for election to end the transition. That decision violates Guinea's transitional charter as well as ECOWAS and AU normative frameworks.

Growing support for Doumbouya's candidacy in the election coincides with controversial provisions in the new electoral code. These provisions appear to favour the military authorities, as they require that an independent presidential candidate be endorsed by at least 30% of mayors from at least 70% of Guinea's municipalities. Since the dissolution of municipal councils, the presidents of special delegations – directly appointed by the National Committee of Reconciliation and Development – have replaced the elected mayors. This raises the risk of challenges to the integrity and legitimacy of the end of the transition electoral process and of a return to constitutional order marked by political and social unrest.

A peaceful election

The current context does not favour ECOWAS, AU, United Nations and bilateral partners normative frameworks and the application of some of their political instruments. But these stakeholders must remember that the situation arose from electoral crises that brought instability in Guinea, such as in 2020. In addition to the Guinea transition monitoring mechanism requested by the PSC in September 2021, these actors should coordinate diplomatic and mediation efforts ahead of not only the presidential but also the ensuing legislative and local polls. Past lessons must be applied to break the cycle of electoral violence.

ECOWAS and the AU should continue to encourage sincere dialogue to overcome disagreements and reopen the democratic space, as recommended by the AU African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in its August 2025 media release. The two bodies should remind Guinean authorities of the rules and principles for a member state. They should also encourage broader dissemination of the new electoral code to familiarise more citizens with it.

Although the authorities claim to be conducting the process in a sovereign manner, ECOWAS and the AU must secure the financial and logistical resources needed to organise the elections. This would be in line with ECOWAS calls for Guinean authorities to accelerate the establishment of a joint committee to monitor and evaluate the transition roadmap. This also aligns with the PSC's field mission to Conakry in May to evaluate the transition, as well as with ECOWAS and AU efforts to deploy missions to assess the country's electoral needs in April and July, respectively.

Governance marked by patronage, corruption and authoritarianism paves the way for constitutional order breakdown

Having deployed experts to polling stations during the referendum, ECOWAS and the AU must send election observation missions to identify and report irregularities. Increased support must be provided to civil society organisations that can raise awareness and conduct early-warning and citizen-observation missions. This is essential amid weakening civic space, which encourages disinformation that could worsen divisions and sociopolitical tensions.

Pivotal moment

Supporting Guinea's return to constitutional order represents a major test for ECOWAS and the AU as both organisations grapple with legitimacy exacerbated by the handling of coups d'état since 2020. This situation challenges their ability to uphold their own democratic principles and frameworks. The 2021 coup occurred in a context of strong popular demand against past government abuses. The success of the transition depends less on elections at its end than on inclusive structural reforms that can lay the foundations for lasting stability. Otherwise, Guinea could spiral into another cycle of institutional crises.

West Africa's recent coups show that governance marked by patronage, corruption and authoritarianism paves the way for the next constitutional order breakdown. Thus, ECOWAS and the AU must ensure that the post-transition elected authorities are bound by the structural reforms initiated during the transition.

With aid abating, African solutions must kick in

Seventy-five percent of the world's humanitarian crises are on African soil. Since 1946, it has been home to one-third of all armed inter- and intra-State conflicts and, since 1989, 75% of non-state conflicts. The number of displaced Africans has doubled since 2018 – more than 44 million have been forced from their homes. For the 14th consecutive year, conflict, violence, unrest, climate change and disasters have displaced record numbers of citizens.

Organisations such as the AU and regional economic communities (RECs) have played a secondary role to international aid in funding and delivering humanitarian assistance on the continent. Aid has been widely used by wealthy states – notably western liberal democracies – as a tool for global policy influence. International humanitarian aid has provided life-saving support in emergencies … but at a price. It has most often been conditional on serving political and economic interests of and building dependency on donor countries, although Africa is a net creditor and donors earn US$7 to US$8 per dollar spent on aid.

Donor countries have majorly slashed humanitarian funding in response to changing domestic priorities, economic uncertainty and fatigue. Many have seen inward political shifts, surges in defence spending and corresponding aid cuts, shuttering off refugee resettlement programmes and increasing border security.

As far back as the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, the AU and its member states have been urged to exercise their own authority and agency. The AU has created humanitarian instruments such as African Risk Capacity in response to natural disasters and extreme weather conditions and Africa Centres for Disease Control (Africa CDC) for public health emergencies. There is also the Humanitarian Policy Framework and Special Emergency Assistance Fund for humanitarian relief and the African Humanitarian Agency (AfHA). Implementation progress for most remains hampered by funding and low political will to prioritise such issues.

AfHA was established at the 2016 AU Summit, but is not operational. In contrast, Africa CDC founded at the same event was launched by 2017, operates across many areas of its mandate and has responded robustly to weak health systems in several countries.

Political will in humanitarian aid is complex, particularly in conflicts, where control over responses is highly politicised and instrumentalised to establish control and undermine opponents' legitimacy. In many cases, aid is intentionally blocked and aid providers attacked by warring parties. AU initiatives and agencies compete for limited funding and the AU, with its many priorities, has to attract attention and funding from a limited and shrinking audience.

Overwhelming crises

In June, the United Nations Refugee Agency released its annual global trends report. At the end of 2024, 123.2 million people were displaced – an increase of seven million in one year. Climate change, protracted state and non-state conflicts and economic fragility are converging to compound crises. Most displaced Africans remain in their home countries or in neighbouring countries – most resource-poor and suffering from similar conflict, unrest or disasters.

With 5.3 million displaced persons, the DRC accounted for 45% of all internal displacements worldwide in 2024

The number of internally displaced persons in Africa has tripled since 2015 (from 11.8 million to 35.4 million). Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) accounted for 45% of all internal displacements worldwide in 2024 (5.3 million in the DRC and 3.8 million in Sudan).

As of April 2025, the agency reported a slight drop in global refugee numbers for the first time in a decade, down 1% to 122.1 million. In 2024, 1.6 million people returned to their homes, most to Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Many have returned to poor conditions, having given up trying to access rights and services in host countries.

South Sudan was the only African country to see a significant number of returns. Going home is not viable

for most refugees on the continent, due to the protracted conflicts. Many spend their lives in severely underfunded camps, unable to work, study or move freely. Funding cuts will worsen their prospects.

Sudan is the world's largest displacement and humanitarian crisis – the civil war has driven 14.4 million people from their homes and left two-thirds of the population needing aid. About 11.6 million are internally displaced and 2.8 million are across borders. At the end of 2024, conflict in the DRC had created 1.22 million refugees and asylum seekers and 6.9 million internally displaced persons. As of April 2025, only 10% of Sudan's humanitarian appeal had been met.

The DRC now hosts the most displaced persons in history (7.8 million) and 27.7 million people face crisis levels of food insecurity. South Sudan has 4.3 million displaced people and 9.3 million reliant on aid.

International aid and solidarity plummeting

In December 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the AU co-hosted the launch of the global humanitarian overview for 2025, an appeal for US$47 billion, US$20 billion (41%) of which is needed in Africa. Of the world's 305 million people needing assistance in 2025, 46% are in Africa: 85 million in southern and eastern Africa, 59 million in the Middle East and North Africa and 57 million in West Africa and Central Africa. The appeal sounded the alarm that only 43% of the 2024 appeal for US$47 billion had been met.

The Norwegian Refugee Council issues an annual list of the top 10 most neglected displacement crises globally. Eight in 2025 are African: Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Mali, Uganda, the DRC and Somalia. Nine of the 10 were African in the 2024 list, which rated Cameroon the world's most neglected crisis, assigning a zero out of 30 rating for political will and 'negligible' media coverage.

Cameroon hosts people fleeing internal conflicts and violence in Lake Chad Basin and the Central African Republic. It hosts 1.1 million displaced persons and 480 000 refugees and has 2.8 million people facing acute food insecurity.

At the start of his second term, United States President Donald Trump issued an executive order imposing a near-full halt on foreign aid and the refugee admissions programme. This was quickly followed by a halt to activities supporting refugees. Reports also indicate Trump is diverting US$250 million from foreign aid budgets to repatriating foreigners, without due process and at times against court orders.

While the United States has made the harshest changes, the United Kingdom reduced development assistance by 40% and European countries such as France and Germany announced their own reductions. The European Union redirected some of its development budget to Ukraine and border management.

Before these major slashes, global refugee funding gaps had already reached US$24 billion in 2024 – what the world spends on military defence in four days. Funding for humanitarian food aid is projected to drop by up to 45%, and most forcibly displaced people are in areas of food crises. The concomitant reductions in development aid will reduce host country governments' fiscal capabilities to support refugees.

AU humanitarian action lagging

On 1 July 2025, the PSC addressed Africa's humanitarian situation at its 1 286th meeting. The ensuing communiqué expressed concern over the crises and deep concern over dwindling financial support. In the spirit of equitable burden and responsibility sharing, it emphasised the need for global solidarity for African countries hosting large numbers of displaced people.

It further recognised the links among peace, humanitarian aid and development and the need to enhance synergies, coordination and joint action among the AU, RECs, regional mechanisms and humanitarian actors. Peace and security cannot be achieved amid an overwhelming humanitarian crises. The communiqué reiterated calls to activate and sustainably finance AfHA and for member states to fulfil their pledges from the 2022 Malabo extraordinary humanitarian summit and pledging conference.

At the 26th AU Summit in January 2016, the AU Assembly decided to establish an African humanitarian agency anchored on regional and national mechanisms and funded with Africa's resources. It asked the AU Commission to follow through with architecture built on principles of pan-Africanism and African shared values.

AfHA is meant to fill a coordinating void and facilitate collaboration among development security, the private sector and humanitarian actors. It is expected to be funded through the regular AU budget and develop creative sources of funding to ensure African ownership and direction.

AfHA should lead the development of response strategies and build capacity among member states and other actors. It will institutionalise best practices, mobilise resources and coordinate humanitarian responses, collaborate with states, RECs, regional bodies and humanitarian aid agencies.

The structure was ratified in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in May 2022, with participants pledging US$176 million. The summit led to the Malabo Declaration and established the 10-year Post-Malabo Implementation Plan 2023 to 2032. Its strategic priorities included strengthening the role of the state in humanitarian action; reforming Africa's humanitarian architecture, addressing causes, proposing durable solutions and moving from norm setting to implementation. Member states adopted the statute in February 2023 at the 36th AU Summit. Uganda was selected to host AfHA in July 2024 and it is reportedly currently recruiting management staff.

Unprecedented humanitarian crises call for the AU to collaborate with RECs, member states and international organisations

The communiqué following the 1 176th PSC meeting in 2023reiterated the call for the AU Commission to expedite AfHA by 2024/25. It is not yet operational and details remain vague on how it will become functional, coordinate with existing humanitarian actors and member states and source funding. In the nine years since the 2016 decision, the AU footprint has remained negligible and even absent at times. And many questions abound about how countries, RECs and the AU will coordinate humanitarian action.

The AU has the Humanitarian Policy Framework, Kampala Convention, the common African position on humanitarian effectiveness and the African Regional Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction. However, it struggles with implementation linked to long-term funding, coordination within and across bodies and a lack of political will among some member states.

The 2015 policy framework aimed to provide the AU and other humanitarian actors with strategic approaches and guidelines to improve their capacity for prevention, preparation, response and mitigation. It encouraged strengthening capacities and capabilities, emphasises using Africa's resources for Africa's action and tasked the AU with securing predictable and adequate funding and member states with channelling 1.5% of their gross domestic product into the effort.

Some have questioned whether the AU needs another humanitarian agency when it already has frameworks that aren't fully implemented. A new structure will not resolve the situation unless it is sustainably funded, able to respond quickly and implemented. The AU has established other agencies to respond to disasters and crises with varying degrees of success. AfHA can draw lessons from Africa CDC.

Catalysed partly by the 2014 to 2016 West African Ebola crisis, Africa CDC helps member states build public health capacity and infrastructure to detect, prevent, control and respond to public health threats. It was established at the 26th Ordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government in January 2016 and launched in January 2017.

The initiative has been lauded for its progress. Its successes include the New Public Health Order for Africa, Africa Medical Supplies Platform and African Vaccine Acquisition Trust. It also coordinated a continent-wide Covid-19 response, negotiated vaccines and prevented donations of expiring vaccines.

With unprecedented humanitarian crises and the move away from solidarity and support from traditional aid partners, it is more important than ever that the AU collaborate with RECs, member states and international organisations to drive its own responses.

The situation is an opportunity to rethink the humanitarian landscape, break silos among security, development, humanitarian actors and the private sector, and implement coordinated, cohesive responses. Innovative ways must be found to raise funding from non-traditional sources, such as the African private sector or philanthropists, or even combining forces to leverage African Risk Capacity.

Maritime security should be plain sailing once essential structures are established

In his 9 June address at the 'Africa at the heart of ocean action' session during the third UN Ocean Conference, the UN Secretary-General highlighted Africa's central role in global ocean efforts. He cited Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050) as a model for regional cooperation on maritime security and ocean governance. Despite this spotlighting, AIMS 2050 urgently needs to review its approach, adapt to new threats and new actors, and better coordinate continental maritime policy-making.

Time is running out, as this year marks the end of the 'Decade of African seas and oceans' (2015 to 2025). This should prompt calls for renewed leadership and strategy updates to face current and emerging maritime security threats.

Momentum to address issues fluctuated over the decade. The AU began the period by launching the flagship AIMS 2050. However, it soon prioritised the African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter 2016) as the way to anchor maritime security into continental decision-making. The charter remained the AU's priority during the decade, yet it was a different, the older charter – the revised African Maritime Transport Charter (adopted by the AU in 2010) – that finally reached in 2025 the 15 ratifications needed to enter into force.

There have now been five years of sustained attention on maritime security at the PSC, most recently at the 1 275th PSC meeting on 23 April 2025. However, the issue must continue to be institutionalised. This will require regular policy reviews, dedicated budget lines, standing institutions and continuous operational activity undertaken by a coordination mechanism or maritime security unit. Three flagship initiatives, derived from the most recent PSC communiqué and the past practices and challenges confronting AU initiatives, should be prioritised to turn maritime aspirations into achievements.

First is the establishment of an African maritime security expert group to enhance coordination, knowledge and experience-sharing among member states. Evidence from similar initiatives suggests that informal, compact and evolving expert-driven platforms can be crucial in supporting decision-makers. For instance, the AU's cybersecurity expert group established in 2019 demonstrates how a small unit can provide support and overcome fragmented implementation efforts.

The AU Assembly has repeatedly called for a maritime group. In 2020, for instance, it requested that the AU Commission put in place a consultative forum to periodically review progress in the maritime domain. In December 2022, at its 1 128th meeting, the PSC reiterated this call, entreating the AU Commission to establish a body of experts or a taskforce to coordinate, share knowledge and make recommendations on maritime security. The body would provide technical expertise to member states and other stakeholders, enhancing maritime security capabilities and facilitating and strengthening interdepartmental coordination.

Three flagship maritime security initiatives should be prioritised to turn aspirations into achievements

Maritime issues span several AU departments, sometimes impeding coordination of efforts. For instance, the Sustainable Environment and Blue Economy Directorate of the AU Commission's Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment implements policies, programmes and strategies on sustainable use of ocean resources. These efforts cannot be separated from maritime insecurity issues. The directorate must enhance collaboration with the AU Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department (PAPS) and the Office of Legal Counsel – the other custodians of maritime security work.

As with every such initiative, success hinges on overcoming chronic underfunding. The intention is for the expert security group to have no direct financial implications for the AU Commission. While this approach may increase the likelihood of the group

being formally established, the absence of dedicated funding may undermine its effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

A viable solution is to encourage member states to second experts to the group, which would reinforce national ownership and strengthen state engagement in shaping maritime priorities. To maintain quality and coherence, the AU Commission could ensure that secondees meet technical standards.

Broad participation in the design and operation of the group should be prioritised among AU organs and departments, regional economic communities, national maritime authorities, industry, academia, thinktanks and civil society.

A second priority – stemming from the 1 128th PSC meeting of 19 December 2022 – encouraged the AU Commission to conduct a maritime command-post exercise. Amani Africa III, organised by the peace and security department, would be the first maritime exercise under the African Standby Force's umbrella. Rather than at-sea or live-fire activities, it would test command and control functions through simulations of piracy, illegal fishing or an emergency such as landing troops to mount a seaborne evacuation of civilians. The security expert group could assist in developing the scenarios, evaluating the responses and providing a platform for reflection and lesson learning.

The exercise would be linked to ongoing efforts by taskforces such as the combined maritime taskforce to coordinate a response, including aligning with the standby force's information sharing, decision making and deployment planning. A taskforce was established in 2023 in the Gulf of Guinea to provide rapid, coordinated kinetic responses to piracy and armed robbery threats. It conducts coordinated patrols and joint operations and shares information, mirroring the operational approach of combined maritime forces such as those in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

The taskforce demonstrates how regionally driven platforms can align with and further AU objectives by enhancing capacity and capability. The Gulf of Guinea force should be a standing platform for regional expert engagements, feeding insights and operational lessons into continental processes. The PSC has repeatedly called for forces to be established in other regions, most recently in its 23 April 2025 communiqué, as the Gulf of Guinea force demonstrates a concrete regional ownership model and proactive, African-led responsiveness to maritime threats.

The third initiative is the revival of a chiefs of African navies and/or coastguards forum. The PSC, notably in the communiqué of its 1 128th meeting, has stressed the need for a working group to advise the AU on maritime security. This encouraged the AU Commission to assist member states to convene the inaugural meeting of the committee of heads of African navies and coastguards. Communiqués of the 1 174th, 1209th and 1 275th meetings requested that the first working group meeting take place.

The Gulf of Guinea force demonstrates a proactive, African-led responsiveness to maritime threats

While the security experts group would bring together experts for ad-hoc briefings, the committee is envisaged as a more formal, diplomatic and permanent platform for coordination and cooperation among senior officials of African navies and coastguards. Each state would designate a liaison officer, which could reduce the red tape that often undermines cooperation, while building trust and improving information- and resource sharing.

The Sea Power for Africa Symposium is a major continental forum at which African naval leaders discuss maritime security, regional cooperation and strategies such as AIMS 2050. The navies and coastguards committee could be convened during this event, which is designed for strategic dialogue and consensus building.

It could recommend priority reforms based on insights from often-neglected African naval and coastguard perspectives. This should become a biannual briefing to the PSC – assisted by the security experts' group – translating technical and operational insights into strategic advice for policymakers and ensuring momentum is sustained.

Closing the response gap: Africa's landmark maritime security initiative

The Combined Maritime Task Force can tackle Maritime security threats in the Gulf of Guinea given the right legal, technical and financial support. Commander of the force, Commodore Mohammad Saghir Shettima, shared his views with the *Peace and Security Council Report*.

How did the Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea (CMTF-GoG), established in May 2023, come about and what are its priorities?

The growing maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea has attracted global attention, thus during the briefing of the AUPSC the Chief of naval staff of Nigeria along with other relevant stake holders underscored the need to float a collaborative response mechanism to combat piracy and other maritime threats similar to the Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) arrangement combating terrorism in the Sahel region.

This led to the call for the establishment of a regional maritime response mechanism by the AUPSC through communiqué 1 012 of June 2021. Based on the communiqué of the PSC, the CNSs of Guff of Guinea countries met on the sidelines of the International Maritime Conference in Port Harcourt and formed a multinational expert committee to work out modalities to implement the communiqué through the Port Harcourt Declaration.

Subsequently, the AUPSC continued to support the establishment of the CMTF through Communiqués 1 128 of December 2022, 1 174, of September 2023, 1 209, of April 2024 and most recently 1 275 of April 2025.

As the first African-led combined maritime security effort, it is a landmark initiative. The main priority of the CMTF is primarily to pave the way for implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, advance the continental blue economy and build regional capacity to combat transnational criminal networks. These networks are involved in piracy; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; arms and drugs trafficking, irregular migration and oil theft.

What is the relationship between the CMTF and existing regional maritime security initiatives?

The Gulf of Guinea has a number of maritime security initiatives notably the Yaoundé Architecture, which provides an important framework for coordination and information sharing. However, these arrangements do not have a reliable and effective response mechanism thereby reducing the effectiveness in countering maritime security challenges, thus the CMTF is synchronised with existing structures as a standing operational level response mechanism.

No outsider will sacrifice itself for Africa: local dialogue without foreign mediators is the way

In this regard, the CMTF would provide collective response mechanism to complement existing structures with the much-needed kinetic capabilities to respond effectively and decisively to maritime threats and emergencies in the region.

With the CMTF being a first, what lessons can it impart to similar forces in maritime regions such as the Horn of Africa? What are the key enablers or barriers to replicating it?

Continental maritime security in Africa has depended heavily on the goodwill of extra-continental actors, particularly in the Horn of Africa, where the United States and European Union navies, among others, are part of the Combined Maritime Forces.

No outsider will sacrifice itself for Africa: local dialogue without foreign mediators is the way. African navies can draw on global examples to harmonise and foster deeper cooperation through a framework comprising military

and political coordination. The major barrier to expanding the CMTF may be both capacity and the political will of African states.

As gaps in information- and intelligence-sharing affect several regional bodies, what measures exist for the CMTF-GoG to share intelligence among participating states?

The CMTF carefully examined several multinational military outfits around the world and came up with the idea for a mission steering committee as a multinational platform to harmonise stakeholders and political level. This would build trust among states and include a joint intelligence fusion centre, liaison officers and ship riders.

Securing the GoG and deriving maximum benefit from the sea can be achieved only through involvement of global stakeholders

As stated earlier, the CMTF would also leverage on existing structures for information sharing including the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa.

The infrastructure underpinning West African maritime security remains heavily reliant on external partners. How will the CMTF involve non-African actors? And will there be principles and limits for partnership in joint operations, training or intelligence sharing?

As the saying goes: 'The sea is the common heritage of all mankind'. The region's major security threat is transnational, hence the need for a transnational response.

Given the vast expanse of the GoG, securing it and deriving maximum benefit from the sea can be achieved only through involvement of global stakeholders. The CMTF's current concept of operations welcomes all partners to help combat the transnational criminal network.

As it often appears that maritime security is very expensive, how can the CMTF finance itself?

We need to see that the CMTF is providing solutions and economic advancement far greater than what is required to sustain the operations. For instance, there was a newspaper report credited to the Marine and Blue Economy ministry in Nigeria which stated that 'Nigeria alone loses about four billion US dollars annually to maritime security issues.' But deploying platforms alone cannot fulfil this – only sustainable funding will keep the force operational long term.

The CMTF understudied several multinational military outfits around the world. The CMTF must rely on member states but also seek funding from private industry and the international community, to motivate especially weaker members to deploy naval assets.

Private sector support would lower the funding burden on member states and make the sector an active stakeholder in maritime security.

What institutional, political or operational steps remain to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the CMTF?

At this stage, two things are critical. First, it is important to set up the Mission Steering Committee quickly, to enable transnational interaction at the political level.

Full political level endorsement at regional, continental and global level would give further credence to the CMTF thereby paving way for a sustainable operation of the CMTF towards global peace and stability.

The CMTF demonstrates that Africa can design and implement its own solutions. It complements existing initiatives by adding real response capacity, backed by shared resources and collective political will.

If we can sustain this momentum, while also bringing in the private sector and establishing dedicated structures at the AU level, Africa will finally take ownership of its maritime security.

About the PSC Report

The *Peace and Security Council Report* analyses developments and decisions at the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC). The monthly publication is the only one of its kind dedicated to providing current analysis of the PSC's work. It is written by a team of ISS analysts in Addis Ababa.

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The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa's future. Our goal is to enhance human security as a means to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible analysis, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

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The publication of the *PSC Report* is made possible through support from the Government of the Netherlands and the Government of Denmark. The ISS is also grateful for the support of the following members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the European Union and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

ISSN 2075-6232