



Peace & Security Council Report

The reform of the African Union Commission needs a rethink

Funding shortfall threatens African Union Commission restructuring

Weighing up the success of the African Union PAPS merger

Tackling democratic subversions is the pathway to preventing coups in Africa

Africa's humanitarian system taking strain

The reform of the African Union Commission needs a rethink

When the African Union (AU) initiated the reform of the AU Commission (AUC) nearly a decade ago, it was presented as a historic opportunity to modernise the institution, sharpen its focus and enhance its efficiency. Led by President Paul Kagame, the process sought to reshape the AUC into a leaner, more coherent body, equipped to carry out the continental agenda. The central feature was reducing the number of commissioners from eight to six. This was achieved through major mergers, including the political affairs and peace and security departments and the trade and industry and economic affairs departments.

The creation of a single mega-commission produced a department where crisis response overshadows accountable governance and conflict prevention

The goal was an agile and streamlined AUC having a predictable division of labour with the regional economic communities (RECs). The reform promised clearer mandates, better coordination and institutions fit for purpose. Six years later, however, the results are mixed and, in several areas, deeply problematic.

Challenges

The merger of political affairs and peace and security into one single mega-commission – PAPS – remains one of the most emblematic decisions of the reform. Yet its logic is still unclear. In practice, the move has produced a department where crisis response overshadows accountable governance, conflict prevention and policy foresight. These are precisely the functions that should allow the AU to anticipate and mitigate conflict before it escalates.

Acronyms and abbreviations

| | | | |
|---------------|--|---------------|--|
| AfCFTA | African Continental Free Trade Area | ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| APRM | African Peer Review Mechanism | IHL | International Humanitarian Law |
| AU | African Union | PAPS | Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department |
| AUBP | AU Border Programme | PRC | Permanent Representatives Committee |
| AUC | AU Commission | PSC | Peace and Security Council |
| CEWS | Continental Early Warning System | RECs | Regional Economic Communities |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of the Congo | SACA | Skills Audit and Competency Assessment |
| ECCAS | Economic Community of Central African States | UN | United Nations |

Striking internal asymmetries have also appeared: an oversized Peace Support Operations Division now outweighs the entire governance and conflict-prevention directorate, leaving long-term preventive work under-resourced and institutionally marginalised.

Some key units and pillars have become collateral damage. The Continental Early Warning System, central to the security architecture, was literally ‘forgotten’ and officially mainstreamed under regional desks. The AU Border Programme also disappeared as a full unit when border governance, cross-border mobility, integrated border management and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are becoming crucial to continental integration.

The economic and integration cluster reflects similar inconsistencies. The merger of the economic affairs department with trade and industry could have brought industrialisation, trade policy and economic governance under one coherent umbrella. Instead, the simultaneous establishment of the AfCFTA Secretariat in Accra – with an unusual degree of autonomy – led to competing centres of power.

Returning to eight or even more commissioners could ensure that key mandates are not diluted nor structurally marginalised

While the AUC is technically responsible for trade and economic policy, an autonomous secretariat takes charge of implementation. The two mobilise resources independently and operate from different locations. The outcome has been duplication, fragmentation and avoidable rivalry. While a specialised body was justified to implement AfCFTA, autonomy, combined with the secretariat’s physical distance from AU headquarters, has weakened strategic coherence and blurred accountability.

Last but not least, relations between the AU and the RECs remain ambiguous despite a protocol. Institutional and political competition persists over who does what, when and why. Beneath the institutional language lies a political reality: the AU as a political organisation probably needs to demonstrate its economic worth to its own members. States should easily identify why they are better off inside the AU than outside. These inconsistencies call for pause to revisit some assumptions on which AUC reform was grounded.

Rethinking

The scope, scale and complexity of continental priorities have increased: climate security, digital governance, pandemics, peace operations, migration, continental trade, industrialisation and the geopolitics of critical minerals are more challenging today. Returning to eight or even more commissioners could ensure that key mandates are not diluted nor structurally marginalised.

Current PSC Chairperson

H.E. Ambassador Jean-Leon Ngandu Illunga, Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the AU and PSC Chairperson for January 2026

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

The creation of PAPS should also be revisited. Governance, democracy, transitional justice, prevention and early warning require their own institutional ecosystem. PAPS, as currently structured, is oriented overwhelmingly for reactive crisis management. A restored and strengthened governance and prevention portfolio would reinforce Africa's long-term conflict-prevention capacity and give meaning to the AU's early-warning mandate. This is particularly important as the resurgence of coups exposes the weakness of African security mechanisms' capacity to support member states' governance problems.

Reform should establish the type of commission that could support Agenda 2063 priorities

If the AU and RECs suspension regime once reduced the occurrence of coups, it was due partly to an international environment characterised by the dominance of liberal values of peace. The faltering of this order and lessons learnt from the implementation of suspension regimes require the AU's recommitment to basic standards of accountable governance.

The relationships among the Department of Economic Development, Tourism, Trade, Industry and Minerals, the AfCFTA secretariat and the AU Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development also require clarity. The multiplication of autonomous bodies with overlapping functions undermines coherence. If their autonomy cannot be reversed, their roles must be anchored in a clear principle: the AUC sets continental policy, while these specialised entities implement it. Coordination should be institutional, not dependent on personalities or informal arrangements as it is now.

The AU should also consider appointing a commissioner for partnerships and multilateral engagement. The African and AU diplomatic landscape has expanded dramatically to include Europe, China, the United States, Türkiye, India, the Gulf, BRICS+, the G20, the United Nations and climate frameworks. Member states will not be expected to abandon their bilateral interests, but there are arenas where

continental coordination can amplify African influence. A dedicated portfolio could bring strategic coherence to this rapidly evolving landscape.

Internal security and mobility also demand a rethink. Responsibilities are scattered across many departments: border issues under PAPS, migration within social affairs, displacement under humanitarian affairs and police cooperation within the AU Mechanism for Police Cooperation. Meanwhile, the free movement protocol struggles to progress, due partly to security concerns. A commissioner for internal security and mobility could bring border management, identity systems, justice cooperation, movement of persons and counter-terrorism under one coherent umbrella, aligned with continental integration goals.

A strategic principle must be reaffirmed: specialised agencies exist to execute the policies of the AUC, not to run independent policy agendas. Over time, some agencies have become de facto centres of autonomous policy development, fuelled by independent resource mobilisation. This weakens AU policy coherence. The AUC should coordinate resource mobilisation to prevent fragmentation and institutional drift.

Long-term vision

AUC restructuring was a necessary step toward a more efficient AU. But reform is not an event – it is a process. The success of the AU depends on its ability to evaluate, adjust and course-correct where needed. The AUC's architecture must reflect Africa's evolving realities, not past assumptions.

It is time to step back, take stock and refine the reform process to allow the AUC to fulfil its mandate with clarity, coherence and strategic purpose. As key decision-making organs, the Permanent Representatives Committee and the Peace and Security Council have a strategic role to play in steering the reform dynamics. The cost-cutting rationale that presided over the initial reform drive might have been welcomed at the time but cannot substitute a long-term vision for the AUC.

If Agenda 2063 is the long-term goal, then reform should establish the type of commission that could support its priorities. Members need to decide what AU they want for the next 30 years because this will determine the type of competences they must provide to the AUC.

Funding shortfall threatens Africa Union Commission restructuring

Heads of state, at the 11th extraordinary summit of the AU Assembly on 17 and 18 November 2018, entrusted the AUC with proposing a ‘streamlined and detailed’ departmental structure. This would be part of the AU institutional reform initiated in 2017 and would replace the 2003 Maputo structure, which was considered too large, cost-ineffective and operationally inefficient. Under the auspices of the Rapporteur Group of 10, the AUC recommended reducing its departments from eight to six. The AU Executive Council considered this at its 35th meeting in Niamey, Niger, on 27 and 28 June 2019, and it was adopted by the AU Assembly in 2020.

The restructuring of the AUC was based on AU institutional reform objective four: ‘Manage the African Union’s workings effectively and efficiently at the political and operational levels.’ A successful restructuring would result in a more efficient AUC, capable of driving the AU’s transformation into a stronger entity. To roll out the plan, the council (EX.CL/Dec.1073(XXXVI) instructed the AUC to remain strictly within resources available from the AU budget and partners’ funds to avoid extra costs for member states.

Delays in implementing the AUC’s new structure were due mainly to member states’ struggles to cover the financial gap

However, the latest Skills Audit and Competency Assessment (SACA) special audit report – issued in January 2024 – noted the new structure’s supplementary costs were 70% higher than funding for the Maputo institutional composition. The report indicated that delays in implementing the AUC’s new structure – in assessed staff placement, compensation for unfit staff termination and recruitment – were due mainly to member states’ struggles to cover the financial gap.

Nevertheless, the council, during the AU and RECs mid-year coordination meeting in July 2025, reiterated adherence to the initial decision to not exceed resources. The AUC was instructed to proceed with placements and terminations and with recruitment to fill vacancies across departments.

Financial implication

While the Maputo structure comprised 1 244 staff and cost US\$75 677 883, the new structure amounts to US\$128 744 201 for 1 380 personnel according to the SACA 2024 audit report. This translates to a US\$53 066 318 supplementary financial burden and an additional staffing need, to be covered primarily by member states.

THE NEW STRUCTURE
BRINGS WITH IT

> US\$
53 million
SUPPLEMENTARY
FINANCIAL BURDEN

Chart 1: New AUC structure cost implications

| Category | Maputo structure | New AUC structure | Additional cost | Difference in percentage |
|--|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Total personnel | 1 244 staff | 1 380 staff | +136 staff | +11% increase |
| Total cost | US\$75 677 883 | US\$128 744 201 | +US\$53 066 318 | 70% increase |
| Total additional financial burden on Member States | – | – | US\$53 066 318 | – |
| Breakdown of additional costs | | | | |
| • Compensation for termination of unfit staff | – | – | US\$25 537 343 | – |
| • Consultancy fees (Dalberg and Rappor-teur Group of 10) | – | – | US\$450 000 | – |
| • Fixed operating costs | – | – | US\$27 078 975 | – |

Source: January 2024 SACA special audit report

Although 49% of the supplementary amount covers one-off payments such as service terminations and consultant fees, US\$27 078 975, or 51% of US\$53 066 318, is to be allocated every year by member states. According to members of the AU Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) and the SACA steering committee, the long-term burden would be consequential for states amid growing domestic socioeconomic struggles and shifts in donor interests.

A 10-year projection by an AU senior finance officer — interviewed by the *PSC Report* — indicates a cumulated fixed operating cost of US\$270 789 750, which could exacerbate members' financial burden. However, the challenges stem from states' irregular and capped contributions to the AU budget, despite the 2015 Johannesburg plan promoting states' 100% cost coverage of the AU-assessed budget.

49%

OF THE SUPPLEMENTARY AMOUNT COVERS ONE-OFF PAYMENTS

As of January 2024, non- and partially contributing member states were US\$84 719 488 in arrears, which the AU finance department is trying to recover – although without a clear strategy according to SACA auditors.

Moreover, as the auditors indicate, since 2020, the AU Assembly has maintained a capped contribution to the AU budget of US\$250 000, shared among states, which contrasts with the ongoing ambitious reform process, including the AUC restructure.

More efforts needed

Members' reluctance to invest more resources in AUC restructure is understandable, given their stretched domestic and continental/global commitments.

However, the success of the process requires adequate and predictable funding for two reasons.

Member state commitment to fund staffing across several departments since 2023 could not be fulfilled

The first is the growing AU positioning in multilateralism and the numerous internal issues that the AUC, particularly, must address across its five regions. These require the ability to drive African initiatives and manage multilateral partnerships, implementing and following up on decisions of heads of state, the PSC and other AU key organs. The decision to proceed with placements and additional recruitment should, therefore, be re-examined.

A *PSC Report* discussion with an AU senior leader revealed that member state commitment to fund staffing across several departments since 2023 could not be fulfilled. Staffing at the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, was to be covered 75% by member states, yet they've covered their commitment at only 35% to date, leaving a 65% deficit.

This case, according to other AU interviewees, demonstrates funding struggles stemming from accumulated arrears and declining state contributions. This is compounded by the current shift in donors' priorities, which has been noticeable since early 2025.

Secondly, in the prevailing labour environment, the AUC needs to offer competitive wages, benefits and growth plans to attract and retain the best talent. To achieve its core Agenda 2063 projects and position itself globally, the organisation should build in-house operational capacity. Saving costs at the expense of this would be a missed opportunity.

Funding possibilities

Member states should be reminded of the rationale for the AUC restructure – to strengthen implementation and delivery capacity. While managing continental affairs should be cost-effective, savings should be aligned with operational needs. Member states' strict adherence to cost limitation seems to overlook operational realities.

The council and member states should consider SACA recommendations for a reassessment of staffing needs and financial implications.

The AUC, specifically its finance department, must recover arrears from member states and implement the 0.2% import levy to fill the financing gap. It should explore funding alternatives, maybe following the AU Peace Fund's diversified resource mobilisation model, attracting contributions from member states and the private sector.

The AU Peace Fund has generated considerable profits, US\$19 million of which was disbursed to sustain peace efforts between 2023 and 2024

Similarly, part of the mobilised resources could be endowed to generate a profit, which could replenish the budget and enhance medium- and long-term financial capacity. With more than US\$400 million, the AU Peace Fund has generated considerable profits, US\$19 million of which was disbursed to sustain peace efforts between 2023 and 2024.

Extending this resource generation approach to the AU's assessed budget management, even partially, could provide a considerable share of the US\$27 078 975 fixed operating yearly cost of the new structure.

Weighing up the success of the African Union PAPS merger

The election of the AUC in 2020 marked a turning point in the institutional reform process initiated in 2017. One of its most visible and symbolic dimensions was the creation of the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), resulting from the merger of the departments of political affairs and of peace and security. The United Nations and the Economic Community for West African states (ECOWAS) had effected similar mergers earlier. The architects of AU reform hoped that the organisation would be best placed to respond to multidimensional crises if the governance and the peace and security architectures were managed in a single commission.

Five years on, and in view of the planned extraordinary summit on the reforms, it is essential to assess their impact. PAPS remains the AUC's largest department in both staffing and budget. Its trajectory could indicate the successes and limitations of the broader reform effort.

Exclusion of key functions

From the onset, the manner in which the merger was realised raised serious concerns. Beyond the absence of a framework for policy and bureaucratic coherence, some analysts identified technical inconsistencies. The first was the dissolution of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), an organ established by the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council.

CEWS was absorbed into the regional desks structure, which significantly reduced its capacity to anticipate and monitor emerging threats. This change weakened the early warning function, shifting focus toward crises already on the Peace and Security Council (PSC) agenda. It left emerging or latent risks insufficiently addressed. With only three officers typically assigned to each regional desk, the structural capacity to absorb CEWS's preventive mandate was clearly inadequate. The legality of this dissolution was also questioned as it happened without a review of the PSC Protocol.

The second issue was the exclusion of the AU Border Programme (AUBP) from the new departmental structure. This omission is particularly striking given the simultaneous adoption in 2018 by the AU of protocols on the AfCFTA and the free movement of persons. These

two protocols require coherent continental approaches to border governance, which was centralised within AUBP. Also, transnational terrorism and organised crime call for innovative border management responses. The removal of this programme from the PAPS structure reflects a troubling disconnect between institutional structure and policy priorities.

These two oversights raise deeper questions about the strategic rationale behind the merger. They suggest that the reform may have been driven more by the need to reduce costs and project an image of rationalisation than by a coherent vision for the integration of governance, peace and security. While the merger was intended to promote coordination and improve efficiency, it failed to introduce the necessary mechanisms. Specifically, it did not improve AUC capacity to address governance issues.

There are other operational and institutional shortcomings. One is the absence of a functional coordination mechanism between the previous departments. The new PAPS structure appears to place this responsibility on the commissioner, an elected official whose role is inherently political. In the previous structure, dedicated directors managed coordination and reported to the respective commissioners. This arrangement ensured that technical coordination, particularly between governance and peace and security, was institutionally embedded. By contrast, the current structure risks fostering institutional rivalries and silo work, particularly as these thematic areas are inextricably linked and require consistent operational integration.

No unified framework

A second missing element is a unified policy framework. Although there have been some interactions between the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the PSC since the merger, these have yet to yield a clear policy process or strategy connecting governance with peace and security. The architecture for governance and that for peace and security remain institutionally distinct. While the PSC Protocol covers both domains, the merger has not produced a genuine convergence of instruments such as the APRM and the Conflict and Structural Vulnerability Assessments. More fundamentally, there

have been limited efforts to articulate a shared policy direction or clarify how the new department should function as an integrated structure.

These gaps underline the need for a comprehensive review of the merger. A useful starting point would be to fully reintegrate both CEWS and the AUBP into the department's organisational structure. However, what is ultimately needed is a fundamental rethink of the internal architecture of PAPS to make it more functional and responsive.

One option could be the establishment of a chief of staff or a secretary of the department within PAPS to oversee coordination across the directorates, managing partnerships, supervising the PSC Secretariat and ensuring financial oversight. This would help bridge the gap between political leadership and operations. It would also allow the commissioner to focus on strategic direction and high-level representation.

Coherence and efficiency

To ensure greater thematic and functional coherence, the internal configuration of the department should be reconsidered. Rather than merely juxtaposing the previous departments, a restructured PAPS might include three directorates. One would be responsible for conflict prevention and management and would integrate the regional desks. The second could focus on security affairs and operations and include all field deployments. The third would handle thematic issues such as governance, democratic institutions and human rights.

None of these changes will succeed, however, without adequate staffing and resourcing. The persistent mindset of 'doing more with less' has reached its limit. If the AU is to meet its peace, governance and security objectives, member states must invest in structures that match their mandates.

Ultimately, the PAPS merger will rise or fall on not only its efficiency but its ability to be a cohesive and capable institution. Five years on, this remains an open question that deserves careful reflection and bold corrective action by the new AUC leadership. The multiplication of governance and security crises in Africa requires a better equipped organisation.

As the most important AUC department, PAPS (and the chairperson's office) should develop standard operating procedures and predictable working methods based on a well-defined strategic approach of the AUC on issues. In the last eight years the relationship between PAPS and the chairperson's cabinet has been haphazard and heavily dependent on personalities' preferences and choices. The AU's approach to various conflicts – and ultimately the AU's image and legitimacy – has suffered.

AU reform should be guided by at least two priorities. First is a strategic vision for the AU beyond well-meaning slogans and current contingencies, which will give purpose to the architects of the reform. Secondly, a thorough understanding of current global and continental shifts should inform short- to medium-term adjustments.

A restructured PAPS might include three directorates



Tackling democratic subversions is the pathway to preventing coups in Africa

Over the last five years, the continent has witnessed 11 successful military coups in nine countries. These involved Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Chad (2021), Sudan (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Madagascar (2025) and Guinea-Bissau (2025).

These coups came in the wake of a wave of popular uprisings that began with the Arab Spring in late-2010. Seven uprisings led to the overthrow of ruling governments, including those in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, Burkina Faso in 2014, Zimbabwe in 2017 and Algeria and Sudan in 2019.

The uprisings typically start with peaceful popular protests against long-serving leaders, followed by military takeovers. However, recent cases involve direct military takeovers followed by public jubilation. The exceptions are Madagascar, which occurred amid Gen Z-led protests, and Guinea-Bissau, where the ousted leader allegedly engineered a coup against himself to prevent power from falling into opposition hands.

Expert analyses affirm that most recent military coups are expressions of discontent against flawed electoral processes, constitutional coups and lawfare that maintain the powers of regimes against citizens' wishes. Yet military regimes do not offer solutions to Africa's governance challenges. This requires regional interventions that address the causes of coups. But, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, adopted in 2007, has been implemented selectively, due to a regional fixation on addressing coup symptoms rather than holding democracies accountable.

There is no guiding framework for enforcing prohibitions against flawed legal and constitutional measures as stipulated by the charter. This is despite the Accra Declaration of March 2022, which urged the AU and RECs to clarify constitutional principles. The AUC has also reneged on implementing the PSC decision of 29 April 2014. This required the study of the constitutions of all AU member states 'to identify inconsistencies with good governance and standard constitutionalism'.

The PSC effort to revive its sanctions committee is often geared mainly towards juntas, with no decisive measures to sanction coupists disguised as democrats. Moreover, most RECs lack a protocol on governance and democracy, except for ECOWAS, whose protocol is currently under review.

Symptoms versus causes

In 2007, the AU led the adoption of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which offers a relatively comprehensive understanding of unconstitutional changes. Chapter 28, Article 23 bars coups, overthrows by mercenaries, rebel takeover, refusal by the incumbent government to relinquish power after elections and any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments to subvert democracy. The

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AU and RECs have demonstrated near consistency in intervening in the first four prohibitions, specifically in situations involving overt military coups and refusal to accept declared electoral outcomes. With the exception of Chad, regional actors have sanctioned coups religiously across the continent, even when they stem from popular uprisings or are widely acclaimed by citizens. However, effort to enforce the fifth prohibition regarding flawed constitutional amendments has been limited.

Between 2000 and 2023, one-third of African countries amended their constitutions to remove term limits (for example, Cameroon in 2008) or reset term limits (Central African Republic in 2023, Comoros in 2018, Côte d'Ivoire in 2016, Djibouti in 2010 and Guinea in 2020). Recently, incumbents have intensified the use of lawfare to suppress opposition, underscoring how democratic subversions are advancing more rapidly than Africa's normative frameworks.

Ideologies and Realpolitik

Although AU norms apply continentally, subregional dispositions continue to shape continental responses to political instability and insecurity in line with the politics of subsidiarity. The charter has been signed by 46 members and ratified by 36. But RECs are yet to domesticate its full provisions, especially the fifth. This highlights a growing continental dynamic in which ideologies tend to be agreed at AU level, but contested subregionally. Only ECOWAS has a dedicated protocol on good governance and democracy.

SADC has a guideline (revised 2015) that sets electoral standards. But it doesn't outline what could be sanctioned as unconstitutional changes, as the president of Zimbabwe seeks to amend the constitution to run for a third term. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the East African Community draft protocols on good governance have been under consideration for over a decade.

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has no protocol on good governance and democracy, despite various recommendations for it to develop one. But its members have undermined democratic provisions by resetting term limits (Central African Republic in 2023) and removing term and age limits (Republic of the Congo). Although weak, ECCAS's lack of protocol on democracy emphasises the unwillingness of subregional actors to address such subversions. The Community of Sahel-Saharan States and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa do not have protocols, due probably to their focus on economic integration over time. The Arab Maghreb Union has been largely inactive.

Domestication

While the charter applies continent-wide, subregions such as ECOWAS are less likely to intervene in constitutional coups outlined in the charter but non-existent in the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

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of 2001. Operationally, the AU, without ECOWAS, will be hamstrung in any effort to review, condemn and sanction flawed constitutional amendments in the region.

The ECOWAS protocol affirms that every power transfer must be through elections and it maintains ‘zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means’. But it does not delineate what other forms of unconstitutional governance exist, as does the charter.

Despite the recent spates of coups in the region, ECOWAS heads of state haven’t agreed on contentious aspects such as term limits and fraudulent amendments. The most recent attempt to revise the protocol began in 2021, following the coup in Guinea. The first botched attempt to revise the protocol in 2015 was due to discord on term-limit injunctions.

In a press statement signed by 54 non-governmental organisations across West Africa in 2024, civil society organisations demanded the inclusion of presidential term limits in a revised ECOWAS protocol. Long-term stay in power is not a problem per se, but regimes’ use of patronage networks to achieve constitutional amendments, disenfranchise opposition voices and secure victory in elections is. These leave citizens with limited choice to oust incompetent leadership, hence the demand for term limits. Yet ECOWAS has remained resolute in implementing cosmetic measures against military coups. In 2022 for instance, it was quick to commit to a regional force to restore ‘constitutional order’ where threatened. Part of the force was ostensibly deployed to quell the coup attempt in Benin on 7 December 2025.

In response to attempted coups in Guinea-Bissau, ECOWAS deployed its mission from 2012 to 2020 and from 2022 to 2025. The country eventually became a coup state in 2025 under the watch of the mission. This highlighted the pitfalls of overemphasising military takeovers at the expense of the fraudulent political processes and lack of democratic dividend that drive recent military coups and uprisings. The one-sided focus on military coups prompted the Alliance of Sahel States to leave ECOWAS.

Prevention



THE ECOWAS PROTOCOL
MAINTAINS ‘ZERO
TOLERANCE FOR POWER
OBTAINED OR MAINTAINED
BY UNCONSTITUTIONAL
MEANS’

The AU and RECs have two options: continuously fire-fight military coups or develop viable mechanisms to sanction so-called democracies involved in constitutional coups, electoral fraud, oppression and lawfare. Implementing the latter is painstaking due to the subtle nature of democratic subversions, but it is the path to political stability. The PSC and similar mechanisms subregionally should develop sanction guidelines.

The AU and RECs must also empower their courts of justice to review constitutional amendments and democratic fraud to provide a basis for regional intervention. This entails implementing the African Court of Justice and Human Rights and empowering subregional courts such as that of ECOWAS. Furthermore, heads of state must be willing to implement court findings and judgments against bad governance practices.

Africa's humanitarian system taking strain

Dwindling funding, competing priorities and escalating needs all weigh heavily on the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts in Africa. *PSC Report* asked International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Vice-President Gilles Carbonnier for his perspectives on the most pressing issues.

Amid armed conflict, food insecurity and climate shocks, how does the ICRC assess Africa's humanitarian outlook and what are 2025's greatest pressure points?

Africa is a continent of paradoxes. It is home to entrepreneurial cities such as Addis Ababa, which has a young and dynamic population, but it also faces unprecedented scales of conflict and displacement. It is home to more than 50 active armed conflicts — a 45% increase in the last five years — representing 40% of all global conflicts.

Africa is home to more than 50 active armed conflicts, representing 40% of all global conflicts

Thus, the outlook remains deeply worrying. In many parts of the continent, conflict, food insecurity and climate shocks are converging to create suffering that is pushing millions to the edge. From the Horn of Africa to the Sahel, the Great Lakes and Lake Chad Basin, violence continues to uproot communities while droughts and floods destroy livelihoods.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Sudan, which faces the world's largest displacement crisis — over 13 million people forced from their homes, including more than three million who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Inside Sudan, disease outbreaks, attacks on civilian infrastructure and food shortages are compounding what is already a catastrophe.

We are also alarmed by the escalation of conflict in South Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where violence and collapsing basic services are leaving communities without healthcare, water or protection. In Somalia, a combination of

climate shocks and declining humanitarian funding is threatening to undo years of progress.

The Sahel remains one of the most complex and volatile regions. Millions of people continue to grapple with armed violence, driving mass displacement and deepening humanitarian needs. Persistent droughts, floods and climate stress are eroding livelihoods and fuelling competition for scarce resources. The consequences have extended into the Gulf of Guinea, increasing demand for humanitarian aid.

Amid these crises, the ICRC continues to deliver assistance and protection alongside National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. But the key priority remains clear: preserving humanitarian space. Civilians must have safe access to essential services and humanitarian actors must be able to operate independently and impartially. Protecting people, upholding international humanitarian law and safeguarding essential infrastructure are vital to prevent further suffering.

How can the ICRC and the AU reverse deteriorating compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) among both state and non-state actors?

Strengthening respect for IHL requires renewed political will and practical collaboration. The ICRC and AU have built a strong partnership over three decades, working together to embed IHL into policy frameworks, doctrines and peace support operation planning, capacity building and policy dialogue.

The African Humanitarian Agency brings new opportunities to reinforce adherence to IHL. The ICRC is supporting the agency technically, operationally and through strategic dialogue, ensuring that Africa's humanitarian response remains anchored in one enduring principle — humanity protected by law.

In addition, in response to widespread violations of IHL globally, the ICRC – with states including South Africa, Brazil, Kazakhstan, China, France and Jordan – launched a global initiative to renew political will for IHL. This effort – culminating in the 2026 high-level meeting to uphold humanity in war – aims to generate actionable recommendations for stronger compliance. This offers another opportunity to work with the AU to garner greater political support for IHL by member states.

Ultimately, ICRC and AU collaboration will continue to bridge law and practice – through technical expertise, shared operational insights and sustained dialogue – to ensure that humanitarian norms are upheld across Africa's conflict landscapes.

Restricted access remains a key challenge in conflict zones such as Sudan, the Sahel and eastern DRC. How does the ICRC balance its humanitarian imperative with the political sensitivities of AU member states when advocating safe humanitarian corridors?

Africa is a priority. We maintain 40% of our operations and budget on the continent. At the same time, access to people in need is at the heart of the ICRC's mission, even in the most complex and politically sensitive environments. In conflict zones, shifting frontlines, insecurity and violence make the delivery of aid extremely challenging. The ICRC navigates this by maintaining strict neutrality, impartiality and independence, engaging all parties to facilitate life-saving assistance without political bias.

The ICRC remains a neutral intermediary facilitating humanitarian dialogue – a status that allows it to act as a bridge between conflicting parties

To remain effective, we have adapted our operations. We prioritise humanitarian dialogue, maintaining contact with all actors even when communication is difficult, and we invest in proximity and local presence by working closely with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In Sudan, for example, the Sudanese Red Crescent's network of more than 9 000 volunteers across 18 states enables access to communities that few others can reach. In areas with non-functional health facilities, the ICRC deploys mobile surgical teams, supports frontline hospitals and provides cross-border assistance to ensure essential services continue.

Safety, dignity and protection underpin our work. This means securing guarantees from parties before moving aid or personnel, ensuring that humanitarian assistance is never politicised and embedding protection principles into all activities – from safe access to healthcare to respectful management of the dead.

Amid hostilities, the ICRC remains a neutral intermediary among many actors to facilitate humanitarian dialogue. This status allow us to act as a bridge

ICRC MAINTAIN

40%

OF ITS OPERATIONS
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AFRICAN CONTINENT

between conflicting parties, creating space where dialogue can occur and agreement can be reached to ensure the wellbeing of those affected.

By combining these strategies with trusted local partnerships, we reach the most needy while respecting the political sensitivities of AU member states. Principled humanitarian action and effective collaboration are not only compatible but essential in complex conflicts.

How will shrinking global humanitarian and development aid and shifting priority to military financing affect humanitarian response?

These factors are exacting significant pressure. In 2025, needs continue to rise across Africa while funding remains uncertain. Millions are enduring the effects of protracted conflicts in places such as Somalia and South Sudan, alongside crises such as in eastern DRC. Recurrent droughts and floods are worsening food insecurity and living conditions, leaving communities trapped in overlapping crises.

Chronic underfunding continues to threaten and erode hard-won gains. It undermines both the effectiveness and the sustainability of humanitarian action, limiting the ability of organisations to respond swiftly, impartially and adequately. Without predictable and sufficient funding, the humanitarian system risks becoming increasingly reactive and fragmented, leaving millions without the protection and assistance they urgently need.

In response, the ICRC has refocused on areas most aligned with its mandate – protecting people affected by conflict, promoting IHL and delivering impartial assistance. While our unique mandate allows us to add value in many places, we're also strengthening local capacities and supporting sustainable livelihoods to help communities rebuild and regain resilience.

The ICRC is invited annually to brief the PSC on Africa's humanitarian situation. What tangible outcomes or policy shifts have emerged from this?

Since 2007, this annual, closed-door briefing, which forms part of the Council's statutory programme, has provided a trusted platform to share field-based insights on contextual and thematic concerns. These engagements have deepened cooperation with the AU, supporting the implementation of certain Council decisions and giving the ICRC the opportunity to

participate in the development of several key normative and policy developments.

These include the Common African Position on the Application of International Law to the Use of Information Communication and Technology in Cyberspace, influencing a dedicated chapter on IHL, and the AU Peace Support Operations Doctrine with explicit references to IHL.

Priorities are to protect those affected by conflict, promote IHL and deliver impartial assistance

The ICRC also maintains regular dialogue with the PSC through monthly briefings to the rotating Council chairs. This ensures that humanitarian perspectives are systematically integrated into the Council's deliberations on continental crises. This engagement has strengthened recognition of humanitarian concerns within the PSC's agenda and reinforced the ICRC's role as a trusted neutral partner in shaping law, policy and operational responses.

How can the ICRC and the AU enhance cooperation to ensure implementation of PSC decisions to alleviate humanitarian challenges?

We have achieved a great deal together, from promoting IHL to integrating and implementing it. The AU provides political leadership and policy frameworks, while the ICRC brings operational expertise, legal guidance and a neutral presence on the ground. Amid unprecedented violations of IHL, it is even more important that our organisations strengthen their engagement. This can be achieved through regular consultations to ensure that humanitarian perspectives are systematically integrated into decisions.

The ICRC will continue to support the AU with technical and legal advice on IHL, the protection of civilians and humanitarian diplomacy, helping translate PSC mandates into concrete frameworks and field practices. Capacity building and sustained field presence remain essential to ensure these decisions have real impact. Training peace support personnel on humanitarian norms, coupled with the ICRC's direct work in conflict-affected areas, helps ensure civilians are protected and humanitarian space is preserved.

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.

About the ISS

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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