



Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2023

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What's new? In the third week of February, the African Union (AU) will hold its annual heads of state summit. The meeting affords African leaders a chance to assess the AU's readiness to confront the numerous internal and external challenges the continent faces in the year ahead.

Why does it matter? Recent years have been marked by bloody civil wars, armed insurrections, coups and other crises that have spread instability and cost thousands of lives on the continent. External shocks have contributed to instability. While agreements reached in 2022 offer hope in some places, renewed hostilities have flared elsewhere.

What should be done? This briefing sets out eight priorities the AU should focus on in 2023: reforming its own institutions; nurturing agreements in Ethiopia and Sudan; urging regional cooperation around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam; easing tensions in the Great Lakes and Central Africa; and steering talks to unlock Libya's stalemated transition.

Overview

The 2023 African Union (AU) heads of state summit will take place at an especially delicate moment for the continent. The past two years have brought deadly internationalised civil wars in Ethiopia and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The situation in the central Sahel shows no sign of improving, with armed groups destabilising swathes of it and seeking footholds elsewhere. Somalia, Mozambique and other countries, such as in the Lake Chad basin, continue to battle jihadist insurgencies. Intercommunal fighting rages in South Sudan. Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine, meanwhile, unfolded just as much of Africa was charting a path to economic recovery after the shock of COVID-19. The invasion, and the Western sanctions that followed, have rattled African economies and left many in deep distress. Amid all this ferment, the leaders meeting in Addis Ababa should concentrate on crises where new or intensified efforts by the AU can be of greatest help, while recommitting to norms and reforms that will better enable the body to do its job.

The summit will see the chair of the assembly of heads of state, the AU's highest decision-making body, pass from Senegal to the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago of Comoros. The handover will occur in line with an AU tradition of rotating the position.

The new chair, Comoros President Azali Assoumani, will require the support of other senior African leaders to discharge the role, given his country's limited diplomatic heft.

The heads of state will have some recent successes to build on. When COVID-19 struck, the continental body rallied in coordination with the World Health Organization and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to help member states ramp up screening and testing, as well as obtain vaccines. The continental free trade area endorsed by heads of state in 2018 has secured member state ratification at a rapid clip. In a strikingly positive development, a panel of eminent leaders convened by the AU helped secure a 2 November 2022 agreement that ended fighting in the devastating conflict centred in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

Still, some of these achievements came with caveats. The comprehensive cessation of hostilities deal for Ethiopia was hugely welcome, but the AU Commission drew substantial criticism for not acting more quickly to bring parties to the table. (In fairness, the constraints it faced in negotiating with a major member state that also hosts its headquarters were considerable.) While many governments have ratified the free trade area agreement and might be willing to allow the free movement of goods when it suits them, very few have ratified the accord on free movement of people, raising questions as to how effective the effort will be.

Nor is the AU free of institutional challenges. Member state divisions dog its efforts to hold the line on cherished ideals, not least its norm against unconstitutional change of government. As discussed below, that norm suffered when the organisation decided not to suspend Chad's membership (as its rules prescribe), instead giving it a grace period, after a junta seized power following the death of President Idriss Déby in 2021. The organisation has not repeated that mistake amid a rash of other coups in Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, but the precedent remains worrying. There are other reasons for concern as well: the flawed execution of personnel reforms intended to streamline the organisation has weakened certain core functions and led talented staff to leave; and perennial struggles to achieve financial self-sufficiency have failed to produce meaningful progress.

The organisation also has a more than full plate when it comes to peace and security issues. The 2023 summit will take place ten years after the AU endorsed its flagship Agenda 2063 vision document. That charter lists ending conflict on the continent as a key goal. The gathered heads of state should take the opportunity to examine the AU's track record, assess ways it can do better and consider where its efforts are especially needed now. A few openings leap out: agreements in Ethiopia and Sudan create an opportunity for the institution to consolidate important gains. But the AU may also have an important role to play in places where it has had a lower profile of late – such as the DRC, where AU engagement is likely to become more important as the UN inevitably pulls back, and the Central African Republic (CAR), where the AU could help alter troubling dynamics with more assertive diplomacy.

With these points in mind, Crisis Group has identified the following eight priorities that merit AU attention over the course of 2023:

1. Bolstering the AU's institutional capacity;
2. Steering diplomacy in CAR;
3. Pitching in to rescue Chad's drifting transition;
4. Calming inter-state tensions and supporting the DRC's elections;
5. Nurturing Ethiopia's fragile peace agreement;

6. Ending the impasse over Ethiopia's Nile dam;
7. Helping the UN chart a way out of Libya's political deadlock;
8. Making Sudan's Phase II negotiations a success.

This list is, of course, non-exhaustive. It does not feature a number of hotspots – among other reasons because the AU's role is already well defined or is not likely to become consequential, or because Crisis Group has weighed in extensively in other recent publications. Somalia is one example: there, the priority for the AU should be to chart a transition away from its long-running military deployment and to find pathways to a wider, sustainable political settlement for the country. The Sahel is another. In both cases, the AU should keep supporting comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution that go beyond security operations. Backing efforts by local authorities to improve governance, especially in rural areas, offers a more sustainable path to resolution, particularly when paired with exploring talks with groups willing to consider a settlement.

Finally, as they work through these and other priorities, the AU and its chair will find themselves facing a number of challenges with implications for the whole continent. They will need to help marshal the international support that can help member states weather the socio-economic fallout from global shocks including the war in Ukraine – so that these do not feed loops of conflict. Elections in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and (as discussed below) the DRC will also demand attention; the AU should strive as much as it can to encourage transparent voting that respects the will of the people in all these countries. Last but not least, the AU and member state leaders will have to negotiate a fluid geopolitical environment, which will require careful judgments about how to engage with major powers as they sharpen their own rivalries elsewhere – and how to prevent the continent's most vulnerable, conflict-scarred countries from being caught in a damaging tug of war.

1. Bolstering the AU's Institutional Capacity

The AU summit scheduled for 18-19 February comes at a crucial moment for the organisation. With the continent buffeted by economic shocks, insurgencies and climate-related security challenges, there is no shortage of issues that cry out for AU leadership. The organisation's global influence is also poised to grow, as discussion about its accession to full membership in the G20 reflects.¹ On the other hand, the body is wrestling with internal challenges including reform efforts gone astray or never begun; the erosion of membership standards that are core to the organisation's capacity to promote good governance and regional stability; and difficulty coordinating with regional blocs that are often at the forefront of stabilisation efforts. Much as leaders gathered for the 2023 summit will focus on the pressing security and economic issues of the day, they should also reserve time to address the institutional issues

¹ Both France and the U.S. have signalled support for the AU's inclusion as a permanent member of the G20. A final decision is expected to be announced at a summit later in 2023 hosted by G20 chair India. "Leaders call for integration of African Union into G20", *The East African*, 25 November 2022.

that shape the AU's capacity to perform its mission, looking in particular at the four outlined here.

Reinforce the Lomé Consensus

A key issue that requires attention is the organisation's position on member states that experience an unconstitutional change of government. Until recently, the organisation's unyielding (if not universally popular) approach was to suspend those states until constitutional rule was restored. This position dates to the Lomé Declaration, which member states adopted in July 2000. The idea was to help consolidate democracy on the continent by denying AU recognition to governments that come to power through military power grabs. On the whole, this approach has served the region well.²

But it has suffered a setback in recent years. In 2021, the organisation made an exception for Chad, when it gave the junta that seized power there after the death of long-time leader Idriss Déby Itno an eighteen-month grace period to arrange fresh polls and a transition to elected government. The failure to suspend Chad owed both to deft Chadian diplomacy and to lobbying by powerful countries, such as Nigeria, which worried about the impact of suspension on security partnerships with N'Djamena aimed at fighting jihadists.³ It also caused worry among AU watchers, who wondered if the organisation's chief instrument for motivating peaceful transfers of power might be about to disappear.

While the Lomé approach hardly has a perfect track record of preventing coups (a staggering four countries are suspended at present due to extra-constitutional transitions), the continent can ill afford to lose one of the few potent tools it has in this domain. The issue has all the more saliency in light of growing evidence that countries under effective and legitimate governance are more likely to enjoy peace and security.⁴ Some African leaders appear to recognise this connection. Since Chad received its exception, the AU has taken steps to limit the damage. In May 2022, for example, the heads of state meeting in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, recommitted to upholding the Lomé Declaration and affirmed their "unequivocal condemnation of unconstitutional changes of government".⁵ At the forthcoming summit, AU and member state leaders should look for opportunities to affirm their commitment to Lomé and Malabo principles, including when discussing countries under suspension.

Repair Damage from Cuts

The AU needs to overcome the effects of a restructuring and reform process that the organisation rolled out in 2021. One major change involved the merger of the political affairs and peace and security departments, which resulted in culling personnel from both departments. As Crisis Group noted before the streamlining took place, plans to cut large numbers of staff in the departments "would be devastating to mo-

² "Declarations and Decisions Adopted by the 36th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government", African Union, 12 July 2000.

³ Crisis Group interviews, AU officials and regional diplomats, January 2023.

⁴ The four suspended countries are Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Sudan. See "2022 Ibrahim Index of African Governance Report", Mo Ibrahim Foundation, January 2023.

⁵ "Communique on the Declaration of Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa", African Union, 28 May 2022.

rale and reduce the AU's ability to respond to continental crises".⁶ Crisis Group has spoken to numerous insiders who say that the organisation has suffered as predicted, particularly from reductions in the above-referenced departments, which are critical to the AU's core peacemaking function. While acknowledging the need for reform, staff say the execution was flawed, leaving offices understaffed and many senior posts either vacant or filled by temporary "acting" officials. It also prompted talented staff in these pivotal departments to leave.⁷

With the cuts and restructuring more or less complete, the institution should turn its attention to what comes next, in particular how to bolster staff morale and retain personnel going forward. It can proceed in part by placing an emphasis on filling open positions, ensuring transparency in hiring and making merit-based appointments. Following these precepts can help repair the damage by improving morale, job performance and staff retention.

Reinvigorate Stalled Financial Reforms

The 2023 summit marks five years since the 2018 gathering, where heads of state committed to make a slate of reforms aimed at yielding a more effective organisation.⁸ It is time to reinvigorate some of those efforts. Progress on many fronts has been slow, with member states happy to greenlight changes that require minimal commitment from them – chiefly, the reduction of staff mentioned above – and hesitant to follow through with those that carry a cost.⁹

Of particular import, in 2018, heads of state endorsed changes aimed at boosting financial independence and transparency, as well as at introducing more stringent consequences – such as suspension of voting rights – for member states that do not pay their dues in full and on time. Yet too many states remain in arrears, and the organisation continues to be heavily reliant on donor support.¹⁰ AU countries should make sure their membership is fully paid up.

While the AU is struggling to finance its operations and programs, it is making better progress when it comes to contributing to funding of peacemaking and peace support operations on the continent.¹¹ The AU Peace Fund, a pillar of the AU's peace and security architecture, was reinvigorated in 2018 and is finally close to meeting

⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°151, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, 7 February 2020.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, AU insiders and close AU watchers, December 2022-January 2023. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, op. cit.

⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, op. cit.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, African diplomats, November-February 2023.

¹⁰ About 66 per cent of the AU's total budget (including peacekeeping) is funded by external partners, mainly the European Union). Close to half of its operating budget (excluding peacekeeping operations) is funded by partners.

¹¹ As far back as 2015, the AU vowed to cover 25 per cent of the cost of peacekeeping operations in Africa, with the understanding that the UN, through assessed contributions, would pick up the balance. The AU argues that the UN is ultimately responsible for international peace and security; and that it is mostly African soldiers who serve, at great risk to their lives, in peace missions on the continent. The debate about UN assessed contributions has stalled, but discussions on how to revive the initiative continue. For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020.

its target of \$400 million, albeit later than hoped (the original deadline was 2020).¹² The AU commission has identified a list of 21 priority areas, mostly short-term projects or stopgap measures to help peace support operations cover costs, to be paid for through the Peace Fund. External fund managers were appointed in 2022, after many delays. Still, no actual funds have been disbursed, and member states and regional blocs are starting to become impatient. The AU should urgently announce the projects that will be funded and the modalities of access to the fund. It should make sure a number of pilot projects are funded in the months immediately following the summit. Over the medium term, it should ensure that the fund reaches its full \$400 million goal and that it is replenished on a regular basis.

A stronger effort to boost self-sufficiency is likely to become increasingly important. Even before the war in Ukraine, the European Union (EU), by far the AU's biggest external funder, had signalled that it would roll back support for long-running missions such as the AU's deployment in Somalia. In 2021, Brussels replaced the African Peace Facility, a fund dedicated to financing African-led peace support operations, with two successor funds that have a more global remit.¹³ The EU's commitments on the continent risk being scaled back further, as European perceptions of the threat posed by Russia increase and the EU and member states channel resources closer to home.¹⁴

Coordinate Better with Regional Blocs

The AU needs to develop a better modus operandi for working with the regional economic communities that are often at the forefront of crisis mitigation efforts. In some of the crises discussed below – including in the DRC, Chad and CAR – perennial confusion over the proper division of labour between the AU and regional blocs, and among the regional blocs themselves, hinders coherent steps at resolution. In line with the principle of subsidiarity, regional blocs are expected to offer the first response to emerging crises. But sometimes neighbours are unwilling or unable to deal with developments threatening peace and security in their vicinities. In such cases, the AU has a responsibility to step in. It has done so in CAR and elsewhere.¹⁵ As Crisis Group has advocated in the past, the AU and regional blocs should fashion a clear mechanism for sharing information and communicating intentions about who will intercede where, which will make all the bodies more operationally effective.¹⁶

¹² According to an AU official, the fund had \$380 million by the end of January 2023. Crisis Group interview, February 2023.

¹³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°297: *How to Spend It: New EU Funding for African Peace and Security*, 14 January 2021.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, AU and UN officials, January 2023.

¹⁵ The AU, in line with the provisions in the Peace and Security Council Protocol, also has the responsibility of informing AU member states and the outside world about crises that require continental and global attention. It uses its convening power to ensure proper financing of these interventions and often coordinates efforts among the AU, regional blocs and the UN.

¹⁶ In many cases, cooperation between the AU and regional blocs is good – including in Somalia, South Sudan, the Sahel and the Lake Chad basin. Yet regional blocs sometimes ignore the AU until it is almost too late and reach out only when they need more money. The Southern African mission in Mozambique was a case in point. The first meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council about

Since 2019, a regular mid-year coordination meeting takes place between the AU and regional economic communities and regional mechanisms. Regular meetings between the AU Peace and Security Council and its regional equivalents could also improve coordination. The AU should also have offices at the headquarters of the regional blocs and attend their summits to boost cooperation.

2. Steering Diplomacy in the Central African Republic

The situation in CAR today shows signs of troubling deterioration. Fighting rages in the countryside between armed groups and national security forces supported by Russian military contractors and the Rwandan army, with civilians caught in the crossfire. President Faustin Touadéra's declared intent to amend the constitution and seek a third term – rather than relinquish power when his second ends in 2025 – has divided Central Africans and provoked a strong reaction from the opposition and civil society. The AU has played an important role in CAR stabilisation efforts for the past decade and should use its good offices to help de-escalate tensions among rival factions.

CAR has been home to rebellions of varying intensity for decades, but the past ten years have been particularly turbulent.¹⁷ In 2013, a mostly Muslim coalition of rebels known as the Séléka toppled President François Bozizé's administration and briefly held power before nearby countries forced it to step aside. A series of flawed peace deals followed, notably one in February 2019 involving fourteen armed groups. Unfortunately, those served mainly as elite power-sharing arrangements rather than as means of easing tensions and relieving the suffering of the population, which is living through a humanitarian disaster of grim proportions.¹⁸

After the constitutional court ruled that Bozizé could not contest the last elections in 2020, a new armed coalition allied to the former president marched on the capital Bangui. At President Touadéra's request, however, a force made up of Russia's Kremlin-linked Wagner private contractors and Rwandan soldiers pushed the rebels back. A national army counter-offensive in early 2021 drove them out of most of the provincial towns they had held but did not manage to stabilise the country. Continued fighting between government forces and rebels around mining sites in the hinterland has led to a reported rise in human rights violations and displacement.¹⁹

Although it is no longer at centre stage, the AU has played a key role in CAR stabilisation efforts over the years. Several months after the coup, in July 2013, it deployed a peacekeeping mission to the country, which was later absorbed into a UN force. In 2016, when fighting resumed among a slew of armed groups, the AU sent a Mauritanian diplomat, Mohamed El Hacem Lebatt, to act as its special representative in CAR. A year later, in July 2017, the AU proposed a roadmap for peace that, after initial re-

the Cabo Delgado conflict took place a full six months after troops had been dispatched to the area. According to procedure, the Council is supposed to authorise any such deployments in advance.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Statement, "Saving the Central African Republic's Elections and Averting Another Cycle of Violence", 22 December 2020.

¹⁸ About 3.4 million Central Africans, around 75 per cent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance. "Central African Republic Situation Report", UN OCHA, 9 February 2023.

¹⁹ "CrisisWatch – Central African Republic", Crisis Group, January 2023.

sistance, won broad support, leading to conclusion of the 2019 agreement referred to above. But that deal was deeply flawed, as noted, and while both the AU and the UN were ostensibly guarantors, in the end their commitment has come to very little.

As 2023 begins, CAR finds itself in an increasingly fraught situation. With Wagner mercenaries positioning themselves as one of the regime's security providers (in addition to Rwanda), France and the EU have ended military cooperation with Bangui. Partly due to Wagner's role, budgetary aid from Western countries is suspended, leaving the economy in ruins. Touadéra's declared intention to seek re-election is another cause of tension.

While there may be limits to what the AU can do to help CAR out of these straits, its diplomatic capabilities could be of use. It should refresh its commitment to act as guarantor of the 2019 peace agreement and, working closely with the UN mission, offer its good offices with rival factions to prevent an escalation in fighting and begin exploring what a durable settlement might look like. The AU's recent announcement that it would be dispatching the Panel of the Wise, a consultative body it deploys to conflict zones to provide information to the Peace and Security Council, was a welcome first step that could serve as the basis for decisions on ways the AU can more meaningfully engage in resolution of CAR's protracted crisis.

3. Pitching In to Rescue Chad's Drifting Transition

Following the battlefield death of long-time ruler Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021, many Chadians hoped that the country was on the cusp of major change. Déby's son Mahamat, hastily installed at the helm of a fifteen-member military council, took steps toward reform. He reversed a decades-long ban on protest marches, allowed the popular Les Transformateurs opposition movement to become a political party, committed to offering amnesty or pardons for exiled or imprisoned rebels, and ushered in a national dialogue.²⁰ Yet the positive momentum did not last. The younger Déby soon went back on his commitment to turn over a new leaf and now seems intent on assuring a dynastic succession. The AU should keep a close eye on the situation, looking for openings to work with the UN or individual African heads of state to urge Chad's leaders to revisit their increasingly heavy-handed rule.

Developments in Chad have taken a grim turn of late. Although the ruling junta had initially promised, in line with AU demands, to give up power eighteen months after the senior Déby's death, that deadline has come and gone. Instead, in early October, Chad's military authorities endorsed recommendations from a woefully unrepresentative national dialogue. Those adopted recommendations – advanced by the military and its allies – extended the transition by another two years and, more provocatively, declared all members of the military council eligible to run in elections now scheduled for 2024.

But the recommendations lacked buy-in from the most prominent opposition and civil society leaders, who had boycotted the national dialogue after they sought (and failed to receive) guarantees that the junta would return power to civilians at the

²⁰ "After the Crackdowns, Is Chad's Transition Unravelling?", *Hold Your Fire!* (Crisis Group podcast), 28 October 2022.

transition's end. They reacted with fury to the generals' October announcement. Following their lead, thousands of Chadians took to the streets in protest. Authorities responded with brute force. Police fired on demonstrators – killing at least 50 people, wounding roughly 300 and arresting at least 600.²¹

President Déby and his entourage have since doubled down on their authoritarian, exclusionary approach to governance.²² Déby named mostly pro-government figures to key committees in charge of carrying out the national dialogue recommendations and drafting a new constitution. At the same time, he has made no public commitment to transfer power to civilians when the transition ends.

For now, there seems little prospect that authorities in N'Djamena can be persuaded to reverse course. Déby is intent on consolidating power, focusing on installing loyalists in key positions ahead of the 2024 elections. His effort, and that of his circle, to maintain power without creating space for meaningful political opposition spells trouble for Chad's stability. A new rebellion has formed in the north of CAR, along Chad's southern border. In January, the group announced that it seeks the ouster of Déby's regime. In addition, the continued hold on power of northern ethnic elites aligned with Déby risks fuelling north-south polarisation and intercommunal conflicts that killed 600 in 2022, according to the UN.²³

The AU's posture with respect to the events following Idriss Déby's death has missed the mark in one very prominent respect. As noted above, it made an exception to its longstanding practice of suspending governments that come to power extra-constitutionally. It offered this forbearance on the condition that the transition would last no more than eighteen months and that members of the military council would not run in the elections following that period.²⁴ But more than eighteen months later, the transition has veered off course, and a return to constitutional order looks increasingly unlikely in the near future.

Ideally, senior African statespersons would persuade the younger Déby not to run in the next election. The chances that such a proposal would fly with Déby, however, appear remote. For a variety of reasons, the AU will not be able to lead formal mediation between the regime and the opposition in N'Djamena: in addition to objections from major member states, Chadian authorities perceive AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, who is a Chadian citizen, as a potential domestic opponent. Still, the organisation can look for openings to quietly encourage member states and others with ties to Déby to reconsider his approach. In this vein, the AU should support the efforts of international organisations, such as the Rome-based Sant'Egidio, a lay Catholic community with an expertise in peacebuilding, that have explored the possibility of talks to mediate between the government and armed groups.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Some member states opposing Chad's suspension had advanced the argument that keeping the country in the AU fold would give the body leverage over authorities in N'Djamena. In practice, the AU's decision has done little to moderate the Chadian junta's behaviour.

²³ Since the senior Déby rose to power in 1990, the Chadian state has been dominated by his Zaghawa allies, breeding discontent in the south but also among factions in the north.

²⁴ The exception given to Chad, in what now seems the naïve expectation that the junta would keep its promises to transfer power to civilians, an African diplomat said, had given other would-be putschists a "blueprint" for how to seize power and still keep international respectability. Crisis Group interview, January 2022.

4. Calming Inter-state Tensions and Supporting Elections in the DR Congo

Renewed violence in the DRC's troubled east has heightened diplomatic tensions in the Great Lakes and poses steep challenges for the conduct of elections due to take place in less than eleven months. The AU should coordinate efforts both to smooth out disagreements among the country's neighbours and support preparations for the polls.

Uneasy neighbours, Rwanda and the DR Congo have been at daggers drawn for much of the past year. Backed by a growing body of evidence, Kinshasa blames Kigali for supporting the M23 insurgency, which re-emerged in November 2021 after years of dormancy. Rwanda fervently denies the claims and instead blames the deteriorating situation on the Congolese government. Kigali's position is that instability in the DRC is a result of poor governance and also of Kinshasa's collaboration with the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a remnant of the militia responsible for the 1994 genocide, and other armed groups. It also points to the alleged mistreatment of the DRC's Tutsi minority, which the M23 claims to be defending.²⁵

Relations worsened on 24 January, after Rwanda's defence forces fired a missile at a Congolese warplane overflying Goma, the capital of North Kivu province and a commercial hub that lies on the border between the two countries.²⁶ The incident deepened fears that the two neighbours are locked in an escalatory cycle that could even tip into a declaration of war (although that remains unlikely).

The crisis is very much a regional one. One reason for Rwanda's pique at the DRC is that, in 2021, the latter invited forces from neighbouring Uganda into its territory to combat the Allied Democratic Forces, a mostly Ugandan group that became an Islamic State franchise in 2019. Rwanda, which like the DRC's other neighbours has exploited the country's resource-rich east for its own economic purposes, felt that it was being boxed out. Rwanda's security apparatus is also focused on any threat, however small it may be in reality, emanating from the FDLR elements now in the DRC. Both of those factors led Rwanda to seek to join the new force put in place in the course of 2022 by the East Africa Community (EAC) regional bloc to fight insurgents. The force comprises Ugandan, Burundian, South Sudanese and Kenyan troops, the latter making up the mainstay of the disparate and little-coordinated force.

The AU does not presently play a major role in the DRC, having historically yielded the front seat in the peace and security sphere to the UN. The UN runs one of its largest peacekeeping missions in the country. But that mission (known as MONUSCO) is now planning its withdrawal. Despite some successes, notably in supporting highly complex elections in 2006, 2011 and 2018, its work is now under a cloud of bad feeling after its failure to stem years of bloodshed driven by the many rebel groups that hold predatory sway over large parts of the eastern DRC.

The EAC force, which must grapple with tensions among EAC member states, is also struggling. As plans for the force were put in place, the DRC refused to allow Rwandan troops to participate and, in late January, Kinshasa expelled Rwandan staff officers working at the force headquarters. This action drew the ire of the EAC Secre-

²⁵ "Paul Kagame : M23 en RDC, Tshisekedi, Macron, présidentielle au Rwanda... L'entretien exclusive en vidéo", *Jeune Afrique*, 31 January 2023.

²⁶ "A Dangerous Escalation in the Great Lakes", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 January 2023.

tariat, which claimed that Kinshasa could not expel force members who were there with the consent of EAC heads of state, unless it had signoff from the same heads of state.

Against this backdrop, the AU is set to hold discussions on the situation in the DRC at a side meeting of heads of state alongside the main summit agenda. This attention is more than welcome, if nothing else because it is an opportunity for sharing information about the risk of protracted and worsening regional conflict. The question is what concretely the body might do. AU involvement in military matters is unlikely: whatever problems it may be facing, the EAC set up the force that is working at present to stabilise the eastern DRC. In all likelihood, this body and its member states will continue to call the shots on how the force is composed and deployed.

That leaves the diplomatic realm, where there seems to be greater need for the AU's capabilities. First, the AU could usefully put to work its convening power to improve coordination among the various diplomatic initiatives aimed at defusing tensions in the east. At present, three separate initiatives are jostling for space. These include a Nairobi track of talks between some armed groups (but not the M23) and Congolese officials, and separate tracks involving talks among heads of state; a second based in the Angolan capital, Luanda; and a third centred on the EAC, whose heads of state met in the Burundian capital Bujumbura on 4 February (without Angolan participation).²⁷ Unless the number of initiatives decreases, which seems desirable but unlikely (as powerful states belong to different groupings), the AU could try to ensure that the different efforts are synced up and consistent in their aims.

Secondly, the AU and member state leaders, especially Kenya, Angola and perhaps Congo-Brazzaville, should use public and private diplomacy to urge Kinshasa and Kigali to reverse their rhetorical escalation so as to dial down tensions. The AU Commission chair and member states with channels to the two parties should coordinate pressure on Rwanda to pull back support for the M23 and on Kinshasa to leave the door open for talks with its neighbour. They could usefully impress on Kinshasa that while the threat posed by the FDLR to Rwandan security may for now appear small, Kigali has a legitimate interest in seeking to minimise any damage it might do. The Congolese armed forces thus should not collaborate with the group.

Finally, the AU could play a role in helping Kinshasa prepare for forthcoming national polls. A peaceful vote that represents the will of the electorate would represent an important step in the country's efforts to entrench a culture of regular elections. Although in practice authorities in Kinshasa will remain in the saddle seat on election management, the AU Peace and Security Council should monitor the situation and urge authorities to extend the franchise throughout the country – including, wherever possible, in the east. It should also boost its permanent mission in Kinshasa to ensure it is better informed of progress toward elections and better prepared to use its voice in support of a free and fair vote and for any post-election mediation initiatives that may be necessary. The AU Commission should identify a senior African statesperson who could mediate in the event of a disputed count. More generally, it should press the candidates at every opportunity to commit to peaceful campaigning.

²⁷ Communiqué of the 20th Extraordinary Summit of the Heads of State of the East African Community, Bujumbura, 4 February 2023.

5. Nurturing Ethiopia's Fragile Peace Agreement

On 2 November 2022, the main belligerents in Ethiopia's devastating civil war – Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – signed a comprehensive cessation of hostilities agreement in the South African capital Pretoria. The surprise deal was a major achievement for the AU, under whose auspices the talks were held, after the body weathered heavy criticism for its earlier inaction. That said, the agreement left many questions unanswered, not least whether the parties are fully committed to it, given that a previous ceasefire had crumbled within months.

So far, however, there is reason for hope. The main actors have taken significant steps to fulfil the Pretoria agreement's terms as well as those of a follow-up military-military deal reached in Nairobi ten days later. Addis Ababa has restored services in parts of Tigray while allowing greater humanitarian access to previously besieged areas. In the presence of AU monitors, TPLF leaders handed over heavy weapons to federal forces on 11 January. Still, to maximise the odds that the accords succeed, the AU will need to remain fully engaged in supporting progress toward a sustainable peace.

Much could still go wrong. The horrific brutality of the conflict – which involved a months-long blockade of Tigray by Addis Ababa and its allies and may well have been the world's deadliest in 2022 – reflected deep-seated antipathy between Tigray's leaders and Abiy's government. The grievances remain unsettled, for the most part. Although Abiy and TPLF leaders have patched things up for now, and they held face-to-face talks on 3 February, trust among their allies and supporters runs low and bitter recriminations linger. A territorial dispute between Amhara and Tigray over Western Tigray (which the Amhara call Welkait) festers. Even more dangerously, Eritrea's ruler Isaias Afwerki, whose forces cut a particularly devastating swathe into Tigray during the war, remains intent on the complete elimination of his long-time foes among the TPLF leadership. Eritrean troops reportedly began leaving parts of north-western and central Tigray in January, but Tigrayan officials say they still control some rural areas.²⁸

In this context, it is critical that the AU High-Level Panel consisting of former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and former South African Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka continue to actively encourage the parties to stay on the path to peace. They should try to engage with Isaias' government and assure Asmarat that Eritrea's territorial and security concerns will be appropriately addressed. Working with partners like the U.S., EU and UN, the Panel members should press for the full withdrawal of Eritrean troops. With donor and UN support, they should urge the parties to increase the number of inspectors in the under-resourced team tasked with monitoring and verifying the agreement's implementation and regularly reporting to the AU Commission chair on progress.

Finally, the AU should not limit its attention to Tigray, as it is not the country's only serious flashpoint. Among the fault lines that could cause upheaval elsewhere, the most prominent is an insurgency in the country's biggest region, Oromia, which au-

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, December 2022.

thorities seem intent on crushing by force.²⁹ It is understandable that Addis Ababa is meeting armed threats with armed responses. But fighting will not close the fissures in Ethiopian society. These include growing tensions among Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara, that manifested in early February following a splintering in the powerful Ethiopian Orthodox Church.³⁰

The AU chair and those heads of member states with Addis Ababa's ear should urge them toward a national dialogue in which all Ethiopia's constituencies are meaningfully represented and heard. The country's leaders should not try (as they appear to be doing) to control that process through Abiy's party, his government and like-minded allies. Achieving consensus among Ethiopia's major ethno-regional factions will not be an easy task, but an inclusive dialogue may be the best way to forge a workable path toward that goal.

6. Ending the Impasse Over Ethiopia's Nile Dam

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) remains a source of tension in the Nile basin, mainly between upstream Ethiopia and the furthest downstream country, Egypt. Over the course of 2022, Addis Ababa completed the third filling of the GERD's giant reservoir and commenced power generation from two of its thirteen turbines. The dam, one of Africa's largest infrastructure projects, should in principle be a catalyst for regional cooperation and integration. But, so far, it has been a source of substantial contention between Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as Sudan, and as it nears completion those frictions could well increase. The AU, working with others, should redouble efforts to ease difficult relations between the two sides. The AU Commission chair could call for high-level talks to resolve the issue, as well as behind-the-scenes diplomacy to get all parties around the table.

The root of the trouble is that both Ethiopia and Egypt view the project through a nationalist lens that leaves each little room for accommodation of the other party's interests. In Ethiopian eyes, the dam serves twin objectives: first, it is seen as the key to turbo-charging Ethiopia's economy and boosting its drive toward industrialisation in aid of efforts to battle poverty. Secondly, Ethiopia perceives the GERD as correcting what it views as the historic injustice of colonial-era treaties that allocate all the Nile's waters to Egypt and the other key downstream country, Sudan.³¹ By contrast, Egypt perceives the project in existential terms. It relies on the Nile for almost the entirety of its freshwater needs. It worries that Ethiopia could throttle its water supply during sustained droughts. Sitting between the two regional powers, both geographically and figuratively, Sudan has at times expressed support for the GERD while at others saying it shares Cairo's concerns.

Neither Ethiopia nor Egypt is likely to abandon its maximalist position, as in both countries a hard line enjoys considerable public support. Still, as Crisis Group has long advocated, a more pragmatic stance would serve both well.

²⁹ "Army threatens to eradicate Oromo armed group, again, claims success in liberating villages", *Addis Standard*, 3 January 2023.

³⁰ "Ethiopia blocks social media amid Orthodox church tensions", *The East African*, 10 February 2023.

³¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019.

If approached in the right way by the parties, the GERD could be a source of regional development and vitality. The project's estimated 5,150-megawatt output will double Ethiopia's installed power generation capacity and its electricity output. Upon completion, Addis Ababa hopes to become Africa's top electricity exporter – although much work remains to build interconnections with neighbours and sign power purchasing agreements. More regulated flows from the dam are also expected to help control flooding in Sudan and boost agricultural production there. Egypt, too, would stand to benefit from cheap agricultural imports from Sudan, in the event that the dam's operations yield the anticipated surge in Sudanese agrarian output.

In short, the GERD's benefits need not stop at Ethiopia's border. But to ensure the benefits are shared, the parties will need to back away from an uncompromising approach to negotiations that has turned the dam into a flashpoint.

For Ethiopia, compromise would mean sharing more information on hydrological conditions and dam operation to assuage Khartoum's safety worries, as well as being more open to addressing Egyptian and Sudanese concerns about how it will run the GERD during times of prolonged drought. From Addis Ababa's perspective, a dam that is less contentious will be good for business, given Ethiopia's desire to recoup its outlay on construction by exporting power to its neighbours, including Sudan.

As for Cairo, which arguably squandered an opportunity for more meaningful diplomacy with its unyielding opposition to the dam since its 2011 inception, a rethink is needed. Accepting that the project is now on course for imminent completion and seeking to address its concerns through compromise (rather than increasing diplomatic and other pressure on Ethiopia) would serve its own interests. Such a stance would make Ethiopian cooperation more likely. Pressure tactics, including veiled or explicit threats about the use of force, will not.³²

The AU, which has played an on-and-off role in facilitating talks to resolve the GERD dispute, should continue, in concert with other key actors including the U.S., EU and United Arab Emirates (UAE) to encourage all sides to lower the diplomatic temperature and quietly pursue an agreement that accounts for their respective interests.³³ In 2020, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, then the AU chair, helped a great deal in bringing the leaders together and calming tensions. It may be difficult for the incoming chair Comoros to do the same, given its lack of political heft. The AU Commission chair could request Ramaphosa to step in once more should tensions spike and mediation be required. The AU should also encourage the parties to look beyond their grievances and work toward the sort of basin-wide transboundary agreement on cooperative management of shared resources that would keep future projects from being plagued by GERD-style disputes that the parties view through a zero-sum lens.³⁴

³² "Egypt's Sisi warns Ethiopia dam risks 'unimaginable instability'", Al Jazeera, 30 March 2021.

³³ Given the scant trust between Ethiopia and Egypt, it has always been necessary to have several facilitators rather than one. Ethiopia favours the AU taking the lead. Egypt views the AU as too pro-Ethiopia and demands action by the UN Security Council. At present, the UAE seems to be the most heavily engaged party behind the scenes.

³⁴ Miryam Nadaff, "A row is raging over Africa's largest dam – science has a solution", *Nature*, 3 February 2023.

7. Help the UN Chart a Way out of Libya's Political Deadlock

Since March 2022, Libya has found itself again torn between two feuding governments, each claiming legitimacy, and only dim prospects that they will soon patch up their differences. The standoff pits a Tripoli-based interim government against a rival executive operating from the country's east. While neither side seems to want conflict, limbo is not a good place for Libya to be. Oil production, the pillar of the national economy, is constrained and efforts to stabilise the country by uniting rival security forces have stalled. The AU plans to discuss the Libyan situation at the summit, and it may seek a bigger part to play in resolving the stalemate. While the AU's interest is both helpful and understandable given Libya's importance for North African and Sahelian peace and security, it should consider its role carefully. Rather than launch a new initiative, the AU should strongly encourage the UN secretary-general's special representative to table a roadmap for resolving the crisis, and throw itself into diplomatic efforts to get the parties' buy-in.

Libya's crisis has its roots in Muammar al-Qadhafi's 2011 ouster, which gave rise to rival armed groups throughout the country and triggered spreading instability across Libya's borders.³⁵ The power vacuum in post-war Libya allowed Islamist factions and jihadist groups to gain ground there. Diverging domestic and foreign views on how to deal with the perceived Islamist threat, coupled with domestic feuds over the contested 2014 elections, led to a political crisis that until 2020 divided Libya into two rival governments and military coalitions: one that enjoyed international recognition and was based in the capital Tripoli, and another that had the support of the Tobruk-based parliament and was based in the east.

Following a deadly, inconclusive assault on Tripoli launched by the east-based Libyan National Army under Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in 2019-2020, the UN succeeded in bringing the warring factions and their respective foreign backers to the negotiation table. They met under the auspices of the UN-sponsored Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, where the parties agreed to form an interim unity government led by Abdelhamid Dabaiba, who took office in March 2021.³⁶ The factions also agreed to unify the military and organise elections.

Hopes that these developments would begin to unify the country were short-lived, however. Dabaiba, who hails from western Libya, fell out with Haftar and his supporters following disagreements over payments to his forces. Then, parliamentary and presidential elections, slated to take place in December 2021 with the expectation that they would lead to appointment of a new elected government, were cancelled at the last minute amid legal and political disputes.³⁷

Alternative plans to appoint a new executive then got under way. In March 2022, the east-based parliament endorsed a new interim government headed by former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, who also had Haftar's backing. But Tripoli-based and pro-Dabaiba factions contended that the vote was fraudulent, and Dabaiba vowed to

³⁵ Crisis Group Report N°130, *Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts*, 14 September 2012.

³⁶ On the east's side were the UAE, Egypt and Russia, while Tripoli enjoyed support from Qatar and Turkey.

³⁷ Crisis Group Commentary, "Reuniting Libya, Divided Once More", 25 May 2022.

stay in power until elections are held. He continues to enjoy international recognition as prime minister (though several countries, including neighbouring Egypt, insist that he has lost legitimacy). By contrast, the Bashagha-led government has the support of parliament but has not received formal recognition from any foreign state other than Russia.

While hostilities between the two sides briefly flared in August 2022, neither wants to return to war. Nor do their foreign backers. Still, the stalemate they have settled into has significant costs. Occasional closures of the country's oil and gas production and disputes over how revenues are distributed are a blow to the country's economy – which relies on oil income above all else. Efforts to bring rival security forces under a single banner have also unhelpfully stalled. The deadlock needs to be resolved.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative Abdoulaye Bathily is best positioned to urge Libya's factions to consider a settlement.³⁸ When he took office in September, Bathily inherited a UN-backed political negotiation track in which the east-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based High State Council sought agreement on a constitutional framework for elections. But that track has seen little progress. Some in Libya and outside are hoping that the UN will take the initiative to develop a roadmap out of the impasse.³⁹

No small task, drafting a roadmap will require the special representative to take a clear position on two key issues. The first is whether to hold elections now (and, if so, whether those should be for just the parliament or both the parliament and president), or instead to appoint a government and postpone voting for at least two years. The second is who should be at the table to negotiate Libya's near-term future – the two assemblies with which the UN has been working recently, or an updated version of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum that the UN used as the basis for political discussion in 2020.

Foreign capitals are divided over the way forward. Western powers would like to see the UN coax the parties onto a path straight to elections, ideally by bringing together a version of the dialogue forum to agree on the details of an electoral roadmap. By contrast, Egypt, an influential AU member state, considers the formation of a new unified government a priority, with elections to follow. It also prefers that the assemblies with which the UN has been working most recently remain at the centre of talks.

While there is no perfect solution to Libya's challenges, prioritising dialogue leading up to elections rather than, as Cairo favours, forming a government first probably holds the most promise. The AU should back this option.⁴⁰ Holding elections – ideally for a parliament that would then select an executive – would restore sorely needed legitimacy to Libya's government.⁴¹ Convening a revised political dialogue

³⁸ Bathily is well known at the AU. A former minister in the Senegalese presidency, he vied for the AU Commission chairmanship in 2017 and is generally well regarded at AU headquarters. Although he was not the Commission's official candidate for the Libya post, he was appointed following consultations among the A3, the AU member states represented on the UN Security Council.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Libyans and Western diplomats, Tunis, Rome, Berlin, Cairo and by telephone, October 2022-February 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°85, *Steering Libya Past Another Perilous Crossroads*, 18 March 2022.

⁴¹ A presidential election would be a step too far at this delicate moment, as the losing factions might not accept the result.

forum would appear to be a better way forward than entrusting negotiations to two assemblies with an abysmal track record of deal-making. Many Libyans believe these bodies are inherently interested in maintaining the status quo.

The AU – whose attention to Libya has waxed and waned, but who has recently said it would like to play a bigger role – can do the most good by supporting UN efforts in this direction.⁴² Republic of Congo President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who heads an AU high-level committee on Libya, announced in January that his country will host a reconciliation conference for Libyan factions in May.⁴³ While such a conference might be driven by good intentions, there is a risk that it could compete with the UN-led initiative. The AU and its member states should instead encourage the UN special representative to convene a new dialogue forum and work briskly within it to develop an electoral roadmap so that Libya can begin knitting its frayed governance back together.

8. Making Sudan's Phase II Negotiations a Success

The momentum in Sudan's effort to shift away from authoritarian rule has swung back and forth between civilian leaders and the military since the security forces deposed long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 following months of protests. On 25 October 2021, Sudan's generals staged a coup against the civilian-led government installed following Bashir's ouster. The putschists had hoped to crush the aspirations of the inspiring protest movement that swept Bashir out of power. Their gambit failed, and now civilian forces are on the ascendancy yet again. On 5 December, the military concluded a framework agreement with dozens of civilian leaders under which the generals would give up much of their political power and hand control of the country to a civilian government. But that agreement, while welcome, needs bolstering, and the next phase of negotiations will be crucial. The AU can play a key role in helping them succeed.

While many Sudanese remain sceptical about December's framework agreement, the deal was a triumph for the civilian opposition, as it demonstrated the extent to which the October 2021 coup had failed. That failure was due to both internal and external pressure. Sudan's protesters, against long odds, stayed out on the streets. Abroad, the coup drew strong disapproval. The AU suspended Sudan's membership. The EU and U.S. froze hundreds of millions of dollars in support, while international financial institutions halted critical debt relief negotiations. Even the military's traditional supporters among the Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular – were cautious, no doubt seeing that the generals had painted themselves into a corner with the Sudanese people.

Although an important step forward, the latest agreement has significant shortcomings, particularly related to the process of its formulation.⁴⁴ Clinched after months

⁴² An AU official indicated that Libya will be included on the forthcoming summit's agenda. Crisis Group interview, February 2023.

⁴³ Safa Alharathy, "Ahead of Libya's reconciliation conference, president of host state lays out a plan for peace in Libya", *The Libya Observer*, 7 January 2023. Tweet by Abdoulaye Bathily, @Bathily_UNSMIL, special representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, 9:16pm, 28 January 2023.

⁴⁴ Alan Boswell, "A Breakthrough in Sudan's Impasse?", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 August 2022.

of secret talks among leaders of the civilian coalition known as Forces for Freedom and Change and the military, the negotiations left out many important constituencies. But the agreement was also very broadly framed, leaving space for so-called Phase II negotiations to flesh out its terms. These have already commenced and create an opening for more inclusive discussions that can help put the transition on a better footing.⁴⁵

The AU's record amid all these developments has been mixed. It sent a helpful signal by suspending Sudan's membership twice, first, following a massacre of civilian protesters in June 2019 and, again, following the October 2021 coup. The AU also was instrumental in brokering the power-sharing agreement that ushered in a civilian-led government in 2019. Overall, however, the organisation has failed to maintain consistent high-level diplomacy aimed at bridging the chasm of trust between the civilian leaders and the military. It could have done much more to nurture the fragile 2019 power-sharing agreement.⁴⁶ The AU joined a "trilateral group" with the UN and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development regional bloc to support the negotiations that led to the 5 December deal, but wound up playing a limited role while a Quad group that included the U.S., the UK, Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped drive the talks toward agreement.

Now that talks to get the transition back on track have entered Phase II, however, the trilateral group's distance from the prior negotiations may turn out to be an asset. Some of the civilian factions, ex-rebel leaders and tribal groups that will need to be part of this round of negotiations if they are to succeed regard the Quad with suspicion because of the closely held way in which it conducted the talks that produced the 5 December deal. The trilateral group is therefore likely better positioned than the Quad to bring together a wide range of parties and coax them toward agreement on issues such as security sector reforms and transitional justice.

Work to broaden the framework agreement is already under way. The trilateral group is leading negotiations on implementation of the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, which brought some leaders of rebel groups from Sudan's peripheries into transitional governance arrangements. Talks are also in train to convince chieftains from eastern Sudan, who rejected the Juba agreement, to join the latest round of negotiations. Facilitators should continue this effort at consensus building, while recognising that the 5 December framework agreement remains the best hope for steering Sudan toward a new transitional civilian-led government and eventual elections. Providing additional resources to the AU mission in Khartoum would help ensure that the body is optimally contributing to the trilateral group's important efforts.

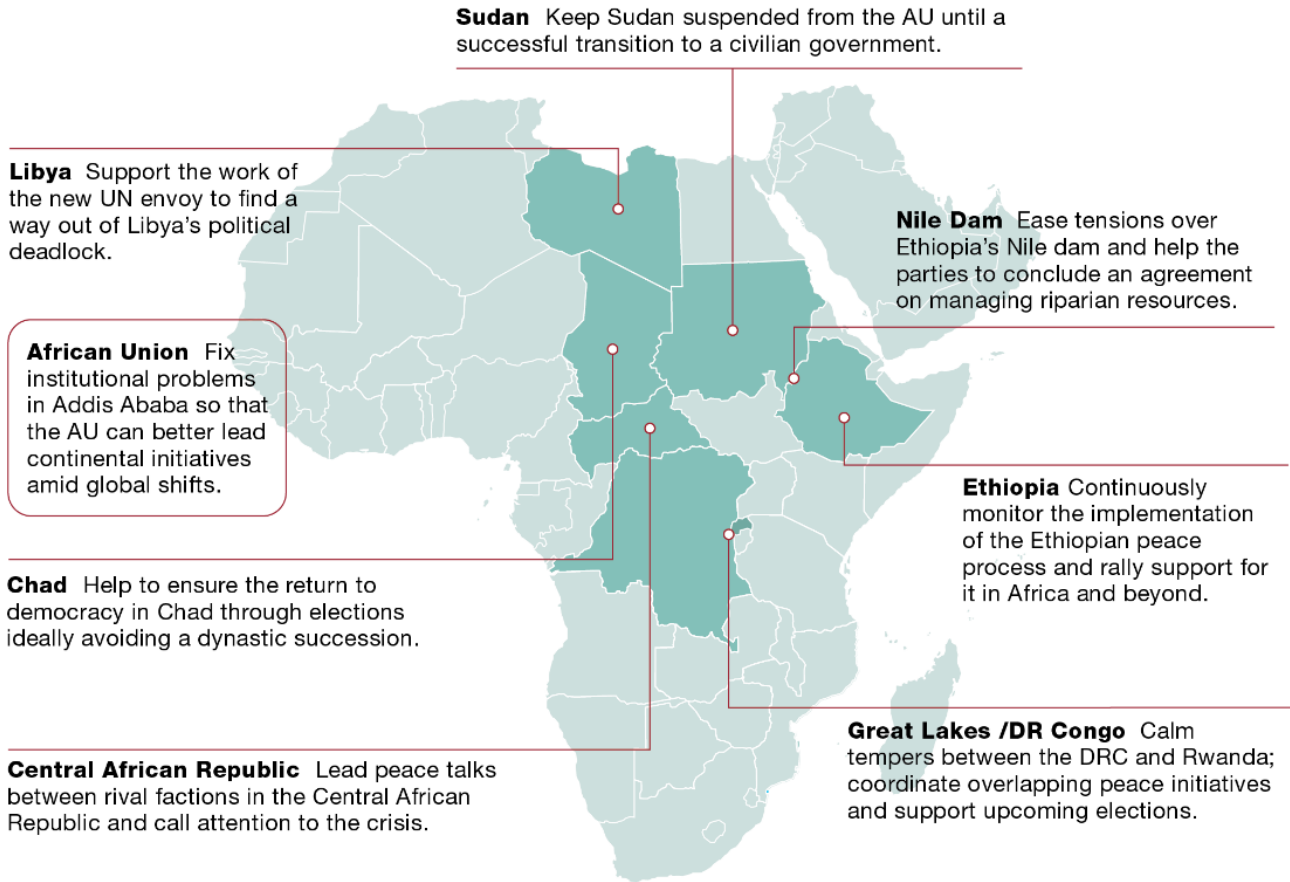
As for Sudan's suspension, the AU should keep it in place, despite lobbying by Khartoum, until a civilian government with broad opposition buy-in takes shape. The framework agreement was a step in the right direction, but much could still go awry in what has been a fraught political transition. It would be premature to let up the outside pressure until the new government assumes office.

Nairobi/Brussels, 14 February 2023

⁴⁵ Crisis Group Statement, "A Critical Window to Bolster Sudan's Next Government", 23 January 2023.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, present and former AU officials, January 2023.

Appendix A: The African Union's Priorities in 2023





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