



Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2024

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What's new? In the third week of February, African leaders will meet in Addis Ababa for the annual African Union (AU) summit. The gathering will be an opportunity for them to tackle the many challenges facing the continent and decide on how best to bolster the AU's intervention in its various crises.

Why does it matter? Civil strife is escalating in many parts of Africa, as is jihadist violence. Interstate war is a growing risk in some places. Preventing and resolving conflict is becoming increasingly difficult as collective response mechanisms weaken worldwide.

What should be done? In 2024, the AU should explore new ways to address governance crises; work to save Sudan, resolve Ethiopia's conflicts and steady the DR Congo; maintain diplomatic channels in the central Sahel; put Cameroon's Anglo-phone conflict on the agenda; refresh its partnership with Somalia; and help ready South Sudan for elections.

Overview

The African Union (AU) summit will take place on 17-18 February with millions of lives on the continent under threat from escalating conflict. Insurgencies bedevil countries from Mali to Mozambique, while state collapse looms in Sudan, ten months into a ferocious struggle for power between the army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The possibility of a major interstate war is also real: tensions in the Horn and Great Lakes regions are particularly alarming. The AU has ambitious institutional commitments and tools for mediation and peacekeeping, but it lacks the political and financial strength to make the most of them, partly because of often weak member state support. Still, the organisation plays an important role by advancing African perspectives in global debates and helping meet continental peace and security challenges that seem to proliferate by the day. The annual summit is an opportunity for member states to develop an agenda for addressing these challenges, while shoring up the organisation's capacity to do so.

Many of the institutional difficulties facing the AU are common to other multilateral organisations at a time of increasing international friction. Member states are looking inward, closely protecting their sovereign prerogatives rather than investing in collective security and struggling with geopolitical tensions that undermine coop-

erative efforts. For the AU, money is a major constraint as well. The organisation relies heavily on international funding, much of which comes from the European Union – exposing it to African criticism for its perceived lack of independence.

Yet for all its challenges, the AU occupies a unique niche when it comes to African diplomacy and peacemaking. The G20 forum of the world's largest economies recognised its important role in September 2023, when it made the AU a permanent member. The AU thereby got a seat at the table for discussions of issues of great consequence to African states, such as reform of international financial institutions. Three months later, the UN Security Council handed the organisation another major win when it cleared the way for the use of assessed contributions to help pay for AU-led peace operations.

New platforms and new tools can create new opportunities for the AU to advance peace, security and prosperity on the African continent – as discussed further below. But to make best use of them, member states will need to help put the organisation on a stronger footing. As leaders gather for the mid-February summit, several institutional issues should be at the top of the agenda, some related to key appointments.

First, the AU must find a way to better navigate disputes between two of its biggest funders, Morocco and Algeria, which are preventing it from running smoothly. The quarrels are grounded in geopolitics: Rabat considers Western Sahara to be part of its own territory, but Algiers backs the Sahrawis led by the Polisario Front who have proclaimed it independent. This longstanding disagreement has spilled over into the selection process for a new AU chairperson – a largely ceremonial but potentially influential role that rotates each year among five regions. At the start of the 2024 summit, the current chair, Comorian President Azali Assoumani, is due to hand over the position to a candidate from North Africa. Both Morocco and Algeria were possible candidates for the job, which led to an impasse. Mauritania has been floated as a possible compromise.

Against this backdrop, member states should focus on two goals. The immediate priority should be to encourage North African states to unify behind a candidate and not allow arguments over the chair's appointment to derail the summit. The longer-term priority is to encourage Algeria and Morocco to set aside their zero-sum thinking when they engage in AU decision-making. Too often, Algiers and Rabat reflexively oppose what the other supports. While getting them to change may be a long shot, member states with influence in these capitals should impress on them the costs of their dispute to the region and encourage them to find a *modus vivendi* that will allow the AU to pursue its mandate more effectively.

Secondly, the organisation will also begin the important process of choosing a new AU Commission chairperson, who will replace incumbent Moussa Faki Mahamat. Unlike the AU chairperson, the Commission chairperson has a four-year term and runs the organisation's secretariat, the repository of its institutional expertise. The new chair will be selected at the next AU summit, in 2025, as will the deputy and six commissioners, who together with the chair make up the Commission's top leadership. In an effort to ensure that candidates are chosen on merit and not solely through dealmaking between states and regions, the AU decided to set up a panel of eminent persons that will vet candidates and draw up a shortlist. By the end of 2023, however, only three of Africa's five regions had met the deadline to submit a candidate to serve on the panel. The lag does not bode well for a smooth process or an optimal outcome.

The future chairperson of the commission should be someone with gravitas and all the necessary skills and experience to bridge the many linguistic and regional divides in the AU. She or he should be able to carry the AU through what is likely to be a very challenging few years and represent the continent globally at a time when visionary leadership is sorely needed. Countries have until May 2024 to put candidates forward. In choosing names, they should look not only to former heads of state and foreign ministers, but also to Africans who have excelled at statecraft in other domains, such as in the UN system. For purposes of balanced representation, they should widen the pool to include as many women as possible. This principle should also apply to gender inclusion at the peace table in the conflicts discussed below.

Finally, if African states want the AU to succeed, then stepping up their own commitment to the organisation can only help. The continent's leaders expect a lot from the AU but often hesitate to give it firm political backing or enough financial support. The new UN financing mechanism will help pay for peace missions, but it will only cover up to 75 per cent of the cost, leaving the continent to fill the gap with its own funds or seek external support. If self-sufficiency is the goal, then member states – particularly those with the largest economies – will have to dig deeper. More financial support for the organisation's diplomatic capacity would also enhance its effectiveness. AU offices around the continent are poorly staffed, and envoys lack basic travel budgets, as has been the case with the Sahel envoy (see below).

The more the AU and its member states can do to address these challenges quickly and effectively, the better placed the organisation will be to meet the overlapping peace, security and governance challenges that face it in the coming year. Eight such challenges that merit particular attention, and that are discussed further below, include:

1. Better dealing with democratic backsliding;
2. Stepping up to help save Sudan;
3. Preserving Ethiopia's stability;
4. Averting escalation between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda;
5. Reinvigorating diplomacy in the central Sahel;
6. Putting Cameroon's Anglophone conflict on the agenda;
7. Refreshing a key partnership in Somalia; and
8. Helping South Sudan steer safely toward elections.

This list is neither exhaustive nor intended to be. Rather the idea is to suggest an agenda for the coming year that considers – among other things – which crises appear most threatening to regional stability, pose the greatest risk of humanitarian catastrophe or seem most amenable to resolution with the AU's assistance. New conflicts can and likely will emerge, and old ones flare, in ways that will command the AU's attention. But as it looks ahead at 2024, the organisation can be assured that time allocated to ameliorating these eight trouble spots will be time well spent.

1. Better Dealing with Democratic Backsliding

Since 2020, the AU has suspended six countries after military officers overthrew civilian authorities.¹ The organisation's policy of "zero tolerance" for unconstitutional seizures of power imposes a cost on those who breach it, but the proliferation of coups on the continent makes clear that too many are prepared to bear it. In none of these cases have the officers relinquished the reins of government. Instead, some are dragging their feet in holding elections that would restore constitutional rule and entering alliances with other military regimes rather than engaging with the AU and regional blocs. AU leaders have expressed consternation, but to little apparent avail.² In 2023, two fresh putsches – in Niger (July) and Gabon (August) – came in close succession. The trend has many causes, including the military's outsize role as defence budgets balloon in the face of insecurity, incumbents who resist leaving office, popular frustration with state corruption and a dearth of jobs for the burgeoning youth cohort. The AU urgently needs to develop new methods for promoting democratic governance in an era of backsliding.

The AU's main instrument for dealing with coups, the Lomé Convention of 2000, compels the organisation to suspend countries that have seen an unconstitutional change of government. The threat of suspension seems to have worked in discouraging military takeovers for a time.³ There were fewer coups from 2000 to 2014 than in the preceding 40 years, and those that did occur were arguably less violent.⁴ Those regimes that seized power were generally keen for their countries to regain admission to the AU, because AU membership would help them repair other damaged ties abroad and win them legitimacy at home. At least some coup leaders followed steps agreed upon with the AU in returning to constitutional rule. In 2010-2011, for example, a military council in Niger held a presidential election within a year of deposing Mamadou Tandja. Under outside pressure, Guinea's military also oversaw a transition to elections in 2010 after the disastrous reign of junta leader Moussa Dadis Camara, who left the country for medical treatment after an assassination attempt.

But times have changed, and juntas have less reason to fear the organisation's opprobrium. Even when under a Lomé suspension, a world of heightened geopolitical competition is making it easier for them to play different foreign actors off one another to their own political benefit. In Mali, for example, officers fostered closer military and political ties with Russia at the expense of traditional partners, like France, mainly to obtain cheap military equipment and the gloves-off services of Wagner Group mercenaries in combating jihadists. Other countries, such as China and Saudi Arabia, may inadvertently hamper the AU's efforts to impose its norms with sanctions. In their quest to secure raw materials and supply chains in Africa, they may

¹ The AU has suspended Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Sudan.

² Speech by Moussa Faki Mahamat at the opening session of the 36th AU summit, 18 February 2023.

³ A notable exception was Chad's military takeover in 2021, when the Lomé Convention was not applied. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°186, *Eight Priorities for the AU in 2023*, 14 February 2023.

⁴ Of the 88 coups in Africa between 1952 and 2014, only twelve occurred after the Lomé Convention was adopted. See Issaka Souaré, "The African Union as Norm Entrepreneur on Military Coup d'États in Africa (1952-2012)", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 4 February 2023; and "The African Governance Report: Unconstitutional Changes of Government", African Peer Review Mechanism, July 2023.

lend coup-installed leaders legitimacy by inviting them to summits and bilateral meetings. In November 2023, for example, Burkina Faso's junta leader Ibrahim Traoré arrived at the Africa-Saudi Arabia summit in Riyadh in full military regalia, much to AU officials' chagrin.⁵

Still, unless the organisation wishes to encourage the subversion of democratic rule in even more countries – with the attendant risks of violence – then it should both hold its ground with respect to the Lomé principles and more clearly condemn other methods that politicians may use to circumvent democratic processes. Here, the AU should take its cue from the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, signed by most African leaders, which mandates certain safeguards. For example, the charter prohibits “self-serving” constitutional amendments (eg, those intended to help incumbents stay in power) and “auto-legitimation of perpetrators of coups” (eg, measures that allow the officers to stand for election).⁶ The AU rarely denounces such transgressions because its members are hesitant to impinge upon what they see as the prerogatives of sovereign states.⁷ Yet the line between these manoeuvres and military takeovers is awfully fine. It is unlikely that the AU will expand its criteria for suspension, but it should exert much greater pressure to discourage such steps and cry foul when they occur.

The AU's hesitancy to speak out about fraudulent elections has also tarnished its reputation as a guarantor of democratic norms. Opposition frustration with incumbents accused of ballot rigging can lead not only to disputed outcomes but eventually to coups in countries where voters have lost confidence in civilian politicians. Such was the case in Mali (2020) and Gabon (2023). AU observer missions should publish honest, unequivocal judgments about the fairness of elections rather than couch their findings in diplomatic language that can all too easily be ignored.

When coups do unfold, AU member states and regional blocs are often divided over what to do. Some have proposed harsh measures, including military force, to reverse coups, while others prefer dialogue to urge countries to return to constitutional rule. The AU should use its convening power to find common ground with regional blocs on how to respond. Targeted sanctions can encourage coup plotters to hand back power or at least agree to a timeline for elections.⁸ But sanctions enforcement generally requires the cooperation of regional blocs, non-African countries and, in some cases, multilateral financial institutions. Moreover, certain punitive measures – if too broad or lacking regional buy-in – can harm ordinary people in struggling economies, impede security cooperation and heighten regional tensions.⁹ The AU should weigh the pros and cons of economic sanctions with these costs in mind. It should avoid blanket sanctions that inflict suffering on the population in fa-

⁵ Crisis Group interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, September 2023.

⁶ See “The African Governance Report”, *op. cit.*; and “Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance”, African Union, 30 January 2007, Articles 23 and 25.

⁷ “The African Governance Report”, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ ECOWAS sanctions against Niger, following a coup in July 2023 caused a humanitarian crisis that the AU should take note of and make sure to avoid when it imposes its own sanctions. Nnamdi Obasi, “ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate”, Crisis Group Commentary, 5 December 2023.

vous of targeted measures. These should be designed to ensure that diplomacy with leaders can go on and to be easily lifted if their objectives are met.

2. Stepping Up to Help Save Sudan

Sudan's civil war rages on with no end in sight. Fighting between RSF paramilitaries led by General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo and the army under General Abdel-Fattah Burhan has displaced six million Sudanese since April 2023. Despite the conflict's scale and Sudan's geostrategic importance, international efforts to broker a ceasefire have been woefully inadequate.¹⁰ One reason is the proliferation of initiatives by outside powers whose interests diverge. The AU, which was involved in peacemaking in Sudan after strongman Omar al-Bashir's ouster in 2019, has thus far been largely absent from mediation. In mid-January, the AU Commission chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, appointed a panel of eminent Africans to try to restore peace to Sudan. With other diplomatic tracks struggling, this panel should work with Ramtane Lamamra, the UN envoy for Sudan, African heads of state, and Arab and Western powers to press the belligerents to stop shooting.¹¹

Although little is certain, the conflict seems likely to expand in the coming months. The power struggle between the Hemedti and Burhan camps is increasingly entangling new actors such as the UAE, backing the RSF, and Egypt, Eritrea and Iran, helping the army to differing degrees. It has shuttered schools, hospitals and banks in the capital Khartoum; and left the country without a central authority and at risk of de facto partition, if not complete state collapse. The RSF now occupies most of the country's west, including the Darfur region, as well as Khartoum, and has advanced east of the capital, with its forces capturing Sudan's second-largest city, Wad Madani, in December. The army, meanwhile, holds most of the rest of the east from its command centre in Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast. It is now arming civilians in an attempt to deter the RSF from advancing farther.

The UN estimates that the conflict has killed over 12,000, no doubt a dramatic undercount as most areas are too dangerous for outside observers to enter.¹² Neither side has shown concern for mitigating civilian harm. Both have recklessly bombed densely populated areas. Reports indicate rampant atrocities committed by the RSF and affiliated militias as they conquer territory, including mass killings, systematic looting and sexual violence against women and girls in Darfur.¹³ The two sides have

¹⁰ "After Six Months of War, Sudan is Disintegrating", The Horn (Crisis Group podcast), 13 October 2023.

¹¹ Crisis Group Statement, "Sudan's Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss", 9 January 2024.

¹² "Sudan Emergency", UN High Commission for Refugees, January 2024.

¹³ Survivors of sexual violence in Darfur lack adequate medical services. The UN Population Fund has warehouses filled with reproductive health kits, including contraceptives and items for post-rape treatment, but the fighting has blocked access to these facilities. See Cristal Downing and Floor Keuleers, "Strengthening the Response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," Crisis Group Commentary, 6 July 2023.

also repeatedly reneged on commitments to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it most.¹⁴

While Sudan is already fragmented, a prolonged war guarantees a shattered state situated at the crossroads of the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and North Africa, next to maritime routes in the Red Sea and not far from the Levant and Arab Gulf monarchies. Territorial control would likely be de facto parcelled out among warlords, communal militias and other armed groups. Islamists linked to the Bashir regime are also resurging and fighting alongside the army. Many fear that state collapse will invite others, such as jihadists, to join the fray. The rapid breakdown, in some ways reminiscent of Somalia in the 1990s, could take decades to repair. In the meantime, the instability it generates could ripple through the region.

Despite the stakes, diplomatic efforts to halt Sudan's downward spiral have been lacklustre and complicated by the fact that outside powers have taken sides. Egypt backs the army, and the UAE supports the RSF. Sporadic Saudi- and U.S.-sponsored talks brought the warring parties together in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, but focused on humanitarian issues and confidence-building measures, and failed to make headway before breaking up – at least for the time being – in early December 2023. Other tracks are stuttering. In June 2023, leaders of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regional bloc agreed that South Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia should try to mediate, but those efforts stagnated for months. IGAD stepped up its diplomacy in December, coming close to getting the belligerents to the table. But bloc chair Djibouti had to cancel a summit scheduled for 28 December because it proved impossible to persuade Burhan and Hemedti to meet face to face. Another setback came when Sudan suspended its IGAD membership to protest the bloc's invitation to Hemedti to join a January summit.

Meanwhile, many Sudanese and diplomatic sources say the two deputies of Burhan and Hemedti met several times in Bahrain in January in a secret track convened primarily by the UAE and Egypt, which also included Saudi participants and a U.S. observer. Many saw these talks as a positive sign, though they appear to have broken off for now. Saudi Arabia has also invited the warring parties back to Jeddah for negotiations.

The AU has yet to assume a meaningful role in efforts to end the war. Shortly after fighting began, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) asked the Commission chair, Faki, to urgently step in to lead mediation. The AU Commission then created what it called an expanded mechanism for Sudan that included the UN, the League of Arab States, IGAD, PSC members, neighbouring countries, Gulf powers, the U.S., the EU and the UK. With that initiative, the AU hoped to coordinate international work to secure an immediate ceasefire, provide humanitarian aid and resume a political process to heal Sudan's internal rifts.¹⁵ The group met in May, June and December, but most members ended up acting individually or broke away to join smaller groups outside the AU's purview.¹⁶

¹⁴ Statement by Mike Hammer, U.S. special envoy for the Horn of Africa, at the IGAD summit in Djibouti, 7 December 2023.

¹⁵ "Statement by the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security to the UN Security Council, 22 May 2023 on the Report of the UNSG on Sudan", African Union, 24 May 2023.

¹⁶ An African ambassador told Crisis Group that the expanded mechanism resembled a "mini-UN" that was too big to succeed. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2023.

There are several explanations for the AU's marginal relevance throughout the crisis. One is that it had little leverage over the warring parties. Another is that the mediation field appeared to be occupied. Two big players – the U.S. and Saudi Arabia – were running the on-and-off Jeddah talks, creating the impression that this forum for Sudan diplomacy would be the main one. But that process suffered from the limitations noted above and others as well. Riyadh and Washington did not always see eye to eye, and the U.S. sought to avoid “political” topics, focusing on obtaining a ceasefire. The Jeddah track also excluded important players such as Egypt and the UAE (whose participation Riyadh blocked after Washington sought belatedly to add them) as well as the AU, though it was ostensibly included in October in the person of an IGAD representative who was also to speak for it. Some AU officials believe that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia deliberately sidelined the AU because they wanted to control mediation.¹⁷ Still, many on and off the continent were desperate for the AU to step into a leading role and frustrated that it did not.

The AU also fumbled the appointment of a Sudan envoy. Ideally, at the outset the organisation would have named a continental leader to this post, someone with the influence to mount a major peacemaking initiative capable of galvanising regional efforts. It did not. The role sat empty until November 2023, when the PSC asked the AU Commission to put together a panel of envoys. On 17 January 2024, the Commission's chairperson appointed a panel comprising Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the AU high representative for the Silencing the Guns conflict prevention initiative and a veteran negotiator who had previously led the UN-AU mission in Darfur; Speciosa Wandira-Kazibwe, a former vice president of Uganda; and Francisco Madeira, a former AU special representative for Somalia.¹⁸ Though the panel does not include a current or former head of state, reducing its gravitas, this move certainly positions the AU to do more on the Sudan file.¹⁹

Now that the IGAD initiative is stalled and the panel is in place, the AU has both reason and opportunity to take a more active role in helping end the conflict. It should act with urgency, looking to the panel for leadership, and working closely with UN envoy Lamamra (also a former top AU official), IGAD, influential member states and others (including the U.S. and key Gulf states) who can nudge the belligerents to the table. Rather than create a parallel effort, the panel should work with partners in a concerted push, supporting whatever coordinated path has the most traction. It should call on all partners not to compete with one another. In so doing, it should look for spots where it can step in to lead, including in mediation or jump-starting a political process, if the situation so requires. In short, it should look to use the AU's good offices to lend weight wherever best suited, without adding to the existing incoherence. A threshold step for either the group as a whole or Chambas as chair should be to meet with the two belligerents immediately, perhaps including by travelling to Port Sudan to press Burhan to attend direct talks.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2023.

¹⁸ “The AU Commission Chairperson Appoints High-level Panel on the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan”, African Union, 17 January 2024.

¹⁹ Sudan suspended its IGAD membership in protest of the bloc's decision to table the Sudanese issue during a 18 January summit. It said this move violated Sudan's sovereignty. Press release, Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 January 2024.

The AU panel's biggest role could come in a political process after a ceasefire. The AU should continue efforts to support discussions among Sudanese civilians, ensuring that women are meaningfully included. These discussions aim at carving out a political solution for Sudan once the fighting stops. When the war started, the AU Commission coordinated several meetings of influential Sudanese civilians in Addis Ababa. Other civil society groups met in Nairobi and elsewhere. In late 2023, former Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok united a sizeable number of non-partisan civilian activists and politicians in the Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces or Taqaddum. For now, this grouping has the most visibility. The AU panel should offer to coordinate among the various civilian tracks and to help lead any political process that follows a ceasefire, ideally in conjunction with IGAD and the UN.

In charting their course, the overarching objective for the AU and member states should be to join forces and encourage countries on the continent and those farther afield to join a coherent push for peace. What the Sudanese and the broader region cannot afford is a continued tug of war among outsiders for the mediation file while the country disintegrates, perhaps irrecoverably.

3. Preserving Ethiopia's Stability

Through talks convened in Pretoria, South Africa, the AU played a key role in reaching a deal in November 2022 between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that helped end the civil war in Tigray. After two years fighting federal and allied forces, Tigrayan leaders agreed to disarm their troops and allow federal authorities back into the regional capital Mekelle. In return, the government promised to restore services, including electricity and mobile networks, and allow humanitarian workers unfettered access to Tigray. The region now has an interim local administration. But it is still in tumult. Meanwhile, an insurgency continues to the south in the Oromia region, while in Amhara rebels have entrenched themselves in rural areas from which they, too, are resisting federal control.²⁰ The AU should work to sustain the Pretoria agreement, while lending its support to peace efforts relating to Oromia and Amhara. AU diplomacy can also help dial down tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, which rose on news that the former had reached a deal to build a naval facility in Somaliland.

The AU rightly celebrated the ceasefire agreement it helped broker in Pretoria as a victory for African mediation. The deal came amid heavy military pressure on Tigrayan leaders, which allowed the Ethiopian federal government to largely dictate the peace terms.²¹

But while the deal largely halted the bloodletting in Tigray, all is hardly well. By some accounts, parts of the country are on the brink of famine, due mainly to drought compounded by insecurity. The war's end also had ripple effects across Ethiopia, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed faces unrest in the Amhara and Oromo regions. The federal government's key wartime allies – ie, Amhara, a region that has struggled

²⁰ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°194, *Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara*, 16 November 2023.

²¹ Crisis Group Statement, "Turning the Pretoria Deal into Lasting Peace in Ethiopia", 23 November 2022.

with Tigray over certain border regions, and neighbouring Eritrea – both felt it had left them out in the cold. Many Amhara harbour grievances against Abiy's government, including that the Pretoria agreement does not protect their claims to disputed regions lying to Tigray's west and south. Amhara had wrested these from the TPLF's administrative control during the war.²² Further, the bitter rivalry between the Oromo and Amhara resurfaced, as dominant elites from the nation's two largest ethnic groups were no longer united in fighting the TPLF. Oromia, a majority-Oromo region, lies south of Amhara, and clashes over their common boundary have intensified. Some Amhara claim that Abiy, himself from Oromia, is ignoring Oromo militia atrocities against Amhara civilians in Oromia.

Oromia also has internal difficulties. Abiy's government and the allied Oromo regional administration have been unable to quell an insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Army that has displaced over 1.3 million people. The unrest has spread to the outskirts of Addis Ababa, unleashed a spate of kidnappings for ransom tied to the militants, and disrupted travel in and out of the capital – an unsettling prospect for residents of the city, which is surrounded by Oromia. Two rounds of talks in Tanzania in 2023 reportedly made progress but failed to reach an agreement, and the conflict appears to have intensified since the last session broke up.²³

Meanwhile in neighbouring Amhara, as tensions rose over opposition to Abiy's policies and disputed territory with Oromia and Tigray, respectively, Amhara militias known as Fano are fighting federal forces for control of the region. Major clashes broke out in August 2023 and then spread to important cities before federal troops succeeded in pushing the militias back to the countryside.²⁴ While the various Fano networks are only loosely connected and lack a central command, they benefit from significant popular support. Fighting continues in various parts of Amhara, at different degrees of intensity.

Preventing further instability in Ethiopia should be a priority for the AU given the country's size, location and role in regional politics, which is reflected in its status as host country for the AU, headquartered in Addis Ababa.²⁵ One focus should be keeping the Pretoria agreement on track. The AU's Political Affairs and Peace and Security Department deserves credit for pressing forward with the AU verification mission in Tigray throughout 2023.²⁶ The mission monitors the nascent disarmament process, but it is overstretched, given the small size of its team (ten experts from Kenya,

²² The federal government wants the territorial dispute to be determined by referendum, but it is unclear if one will be held. Some speculate that the area will remain a special zone under federal control. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara*, op. cit.

²³ The talks in Tanzania are facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, with the participation of IGAD, Kenya, Norway and the U.S.

²⁴ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara*, op. cit.

²⁵ The AU's immediate interest in Ethiopian stability was underscored when, in October 2023, it had to postpone a major annual gathering that was supposed to take place in Bahir Dar, capital of the Amhara region, due to fighting in the vicinity.

²⁶ Alhaji Sarjoh Bah, the AU's director of conflict management, conducted a visit to Mekelle on 19-20 May 2023. On 2 December 2023, representatives of the Ethiopian government, the TPLF and all the members of the AU high-level panel for Ethiopia again met to discuss the situation in Tigray. They urged the two parties to speed up the demobilisation of fighters and the resettlement of IDPs. The mandate of the verification mission was extended to December 2024. The AU also announced an additional \$1 million contribution from its Peace Fund.

Nigeria and South Africa) and the tremendous scope of its task. The AU should ensure that the full contingent of monitors remains in place – or, ideally, is expanded – and that they have adequate resources.

Beyond that, the PSC should press for regular feedback and early warning reports from the Ethiopian government about the situation in Tigray.²⁷ It should also keep close tabs on the peace agreement's implementation. While the TPLF has handed over heavy weapons consistent with the Pretoria agreement, many of its forces remain under arms. In September, Tigray's interim president, Getachew Reda, said the regional government is waiting for federal funds to demobilise over 270,000 troops.²⁸ The AU monitors should verify Tigray's claims in this regard and report their findings to the AU PSC so it can press the parties to move more swiftly with disarmament.

As for brewing problems in Oromia and Amhara, while the AU does not have the capacity or an invitation to mediate an immediate solution to Ethiopia's complex political disputes, it can at least put its weight behind peacemaking efforts. It can, for example, show its support for the Oromo talks, while the PSC should consider tabling the Amhara unrest on its agenda.²⁹ This step would make sure the Commission regularly informs AU diplomats about the situation, helping prepare them to step in to play a bigger role – as they did during the conflict in Tigray – if and when the time comes.

Finally, the Commission and the PSC should also keep a close eye on growing frictions between Ethiopia and Somalia, linked to the former's ambitions to have better access to the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden.³⁰ In January, Ethiopia angered Somalia by announcing it had struck an initial deal with Somaliland for a naval base on its territory. Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but remains unrecognised, says it may get formal recognition from Ethiopia in return.³¹ The dispute is heightening tensions in an already volatile region. The AU is well placed to marshal others to take preventive action. It has already dispatched former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, its high-level envoy to the Horn of Africa who led the Pretoria negotiations, to mediate. Member states should encourage direct talks between Abiy and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, possibly refereed by Obasanjo.

²⁷ The AU has placed a lot of emphasis on frameworks for ensuring post-conflict reconstruction and development in Africa in the past two decades. A new centre working on this issue has been inaugurated in Cairo. Rebuilding war-torn Tigray to prevent relapse in conflict is therefore in line with what the AU aims to achieve.

²⁸ See the report on Dimtsi Weyane Television, 6 September 2023.

²⁹ PSC communiqué, 15 June 2023.

³⁰ In a statement, AU Commission Chairperson Faki reminded leaders of the longstanding AU principle of respecting colonial-era borders. "The Chairperson of the AU Commission calls for mutual respect between Ethiopia and Somalia", African Union, 3 January 2024.

³¹ Press release, Republic of Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Relations, 2 January 2024.

4. Averting Escalation between DR Congo and Rwanda

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is facing considerable difficulties. On 20 December 2023, the country held a presidential election marred by logistical problems and allegations of fraud.³² According to the election commission, President Félix Tshisekedi won a second five-year term with 73 per cent of the vote. The opposition doubts the official result, however, and grievances persist. Meanwhile, armed groups are wreaking havoc in the country's east, despite the UN mission stationed there. An East African force that was in the east has left after a twelve-month stay. Troops from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have started to arrive. Amid this turmoil, tensions are rising between the DRC and Rwanda, which accuse each other of backing hostile rebel groups. Tshisekedi has threatened war with Rwanda over its support for the M23, an insurgency fighting the Congolese army in parts of North Kivu, an eastern province. Among these challenges, the AU and member states should focus on defusing the risk of interstate war between Kinshasa and Kigali, working with the U.S. and others to forge a deal.

Even though internal observers have generally validated Tshisekedi's victory as expressing the will of the people, despite widely acknowledged irregularities, election day chaos created a sense of disenfranchisement among the opposition that could fuel unrest. The nationwide polls were meant to take just one day, but they wound up spanning five in some areas, amid complaints of missing voting equipment, incomplete voter lists and voter intimidation. In the embattled east, the threat of M23 attacks made it impossible for hundreds of thousands to cast a ballot. These day-of-voting problems came on top of a long list of deficiencies in the four years of preparation that preceded the polls.³³

The risk of post-election instability is especially pronounced in the four provinces that make up the former Katanga province. Here, citizens voted massively for opposition leader Moïse Katumbi. Katanga is the home region of ex-President Joseph Kabila, who ruled the country from 2003 to 2018. Elites from Katanga are at loggerheads with elites in neighbouring Kasai, Tshisekedi's home province, over Katanga's extensive mineral reserves, the extraction of which is the mainstay of the economy.³⁴ Kasaians and Katangans regularly clash in Katanga's towns and cities over local government positions. In October 2023, the influential former national police chief John Numbi, who is in exile in Zimbabwe but was previously part of Kabila's government and his Katangan power base, urged the Congolese army to "resist" Tshisekedi, lead-

³² A preliminary report by civil society and church-based organisations detailed institutional failures that deprived millions of their right to vote. "Observation des élections présidentielles, législatives et provinciales du 20 décembre 2023, Déclaration préliminaire", Cenco/ECC, 28 December 2023.

³³ Crisis Group interview, senior member of Cenco/ECC observer mission, Kinshasa, 14 December 2023. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°312, *Elections in DR Congo: Reducing the Risk of Violence*, 30 October 2023.

³⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Lubumbashi-based journalist, 28 December 2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *Elections in DR Congo: Reducing the Risk of Violence*, op. cit., Section III.B.

ing seasoned observers to flag growing connections between dissidents from Katanga and armed groups in the east.³⁵

Acrimony with foreign countries is another cause for concern, particularly as concerns the DRC and Rwanda. Tensions between the two, which have been simmering for years, heated up in 2021 with the resurgence of M23 attacks on Congolese soldiers in the east – after eight years of dormancy brought about by a 2013 peace deal. The group has since seized much of North Kivu and is moving on Goma, the provincial capital. The UN has collected credible evidence that Rwanda is equipping the M23 with sophisticated weaponry, though Kigali consistently rejects such allegations. Among Congolese, anti-Rwandan sentiment has reached fever pitch. During the election campaign, Tshisekedi drew cheers from a crowd in Kinshasa by vowing to “march on Kigali” if re-elected.³⁶

Relations between the DRC and Kenya have also soured. In November, Tshisekedi said he would not renew the East African force’s mandate, deeming it ineffective. His criticism irked Nairobi, which was the operation’s driving force.³⁷ The mood in Kinshasa worsened in mid-December, when the DRC’s former electoral commission chief, Corneille Nangaa, announced in the Kenyan capital that he was forming a political-military alliance with the M23 and other insurgents. Claiming that he seeks to restore peace, Nangaa was flanked by the M23’s political chief, Bertrand Bisimwa. Kinshasa immediately asked Nairobi to arrest Nangaa, but Kenyan President William Ruto said he did not want to get involved in the DRC’s internal affairs, leading Kinshasa to withdraw its ambassador.

Meanwhile, amid the growing insecurity in the eastern DRC, the unpopular UN peacekeeping mission is slated to close down by the end of 2024 after more than a decade on the ground. Although most Congolese view the mission as feckless, the AU and UN worry that its departure could leave already vulnerable civilians even more exposed to violence.³⁸ Tshisekedi has now pinned his hopes on support from the SADC regional bloc. In May 2023, SADC agreed to send a force comprising South African, Malawian and Tanzanian troops. The first soldiers deployed in December, but it is unclear if they can do a better job than the UN peacekeepers or the East African force.³⁹

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Kinshasa, December 2023. See also Vincent Duhem, “Numbi issues threat to Tshisekedi saying the people of the DRC ‘will take back power’”, *Africa Report*, 12 October 2023.

³⁶ “Could DR Congo’s Tshisekedi declare war on Rwanda if re-elected?”, Al Jazeera, 21 December 2023.

³⁷ The East African deployment had several problems, including lack of coordination. Crisis Group had warned it might face such challenges. See Nelleke van de Walle, “East Africa’s DR Congo Force: A Case for Caution”, Crisis Group Commentary, 25 August 2022.

³⁸ “Joint Communiqué of the 17th Annual Joint Consultative Meeting between the AU Peace and Security Council and Members of the UN Security Council”, 6 October 2023.

³⁹ A source told Crisis Group that the twelve-month mission may comprise 4,000-5,000 troops. Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2024. A first contingent of 200 South African soldiers arrived in Goma on 27 December 2023. The force is mandated to “eradicate the illegal forces and armed groups that continue to disrupt peace and security in the DRC”. Press release, SADC, 18 January 2024.

Although some are just arriving and others are wrapping up, the overlapping force deployments risk being counterproductive. Already, an array of foreign troops are operating in the eastern DRC, some of them battling the M23, but others fighting rebel forces based in the region that are of greater interest to their own governments. The degree of success they are having varies. Most struggle to coordinate their activities with the Congolese army and among themselves, given the difficult terrain and the M23's superior firepower and battlefield experience. Meanwhile, authorities have recruited Eastern European mercenaries. They are also giving guns to civilians, telling them to form self-defence groups.⁴⁰ SADC sources say it will be impossible for the bloc's troops to fight alongside armed civilians, making this deployment more complex still.⁴¹

The AU has urged African countries involved in diplomatic efforts and military deployments in the DRC to align their efforts. In June 2023, the organisation launched what it called a quadripartite process involving four regional blocs – SADC, the East African Community, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR).⁴² The blocs' defence chiefs met later in the year in Addis Ababa. While the AU initiative makes sense given the proliferation of players, it lacks sufficient political support from member states.⁴³ As elsewhere on the continent, regional blocs prefer to manage their own military deployments rather than defer to the AU.

While the AU is not well positioned to address all of the DRC's overlapping challenges, the organisation and member states can help manage some of the most dangerous ones, starting with the highly combustible dynamic between Kinshasa and Kigali. Some are already focused on this task: in February 2023, when the two countries came close to outright confrontation after Rwanda shot at a Congolese fighter jet, members of the AU PSC, meeting in Addis Ababa ahead of the annual AU summit, chaired by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, intervened to ease tensions.⁴⁴ But a more durable solution is required.

As Crisis Group has previously noted, the overall goal should be to achieve a ceasefire between Congolese forces and the M23, with Rwanda's blessing, in hopes of opening the door to a new regional stability pact.⁴⁵ AU and member state leaders

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Elections in DR Congo: Reducing the Risk of Violence*, op. cit., Section III.A.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, February 2024.

⁴² A Framework for the Coordination and Harmonisation of Peace Efforts in the Eastern DRC was adopted at this meeting. It stipulates the creation of working groups to make sure the agreement is carried out. These have held several meetings in 2023. "Communiqué of the Quadripartite Summit between the EAC, ECCAS, ICGLR and SADC, under the Auspices of the AU", 27 June 2023. Crisis Group telephone interview, AU expert involved in the process, January 2024.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Addis Ababa, November 2023. Crisis Group telephone interview, AU official, December 2023. See also "Communiqué of the Quadripartite Meeting of the Chiefs of Defense on Coordination and Harmonisation of Regional Initiatives in Eastern DRC", 6 October 2023.

⁴⁴ "Communiqué of the 1140th Meeting of the PSC Held at the Level of Heads of State and Government on 17 February 2023 on the Situation in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC and the Region and the Deployment of the East African Community Regional Force", African Union, 18 February 2023.

⁴⁵ Richard Moncrieff and Onesphore Sematumba, "DR Congo: A Full Plate of Challenges after a Turbulent Vote", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 January 2024.

with influence over the parties should press them toward that goal, collaborating with the U.S., which is both engaged in trying to resolve the dispute and cognisant of the need to work closely with African powers.⁴⁶

All concerned should also press Tshisekedi to make amends with his East African counterparts, starting with Kenyan President Ruto (who in a positive sign was at Tshisekedi's inauguration) and avoid playing regional blocs against each other, so that they work more effectively together in the interests of regional peace and security. Equally, AU heads of state should press Kigali to withdraw its troops from North Kivu, end its backing for the M23 and share (publicly or privately) what it would consider appropriate contours for a deal that would quiet the neighbourhood without compromising Kinshasa's sovereignty over its troubled east. The PSC should also put stability in the Great Lakes on its agenda. It should urge the leaders in the region to make all possible efforts to avert full-scale war.

5. Reinvigorating Diplomacy in the Central Sahel

The countries of the central Sahel – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – have entered a tumultuous period. Armed conflict took over 12,000 lives, most of them civilian, in the three countries in 2023, making it the deadliest year since militants overran much of northern Mali in 2012.⁴⁷ Political upheaval is a big part of the picture. A succession of coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) has brought officers to power who have dismantled longstanding alliances, leaving people in the countryside exposed to attacks by jihadists and other armed groups. Geopolitical competition for influence and resources is another key dimension: France – the former colonial power whose troop deployments have undergirded the region's security architecture – is being replaced by Russia. The AU has struggled to find its footing in this fraught landscape. While hewing to its support for democratic principles, it should also keep channels open to local authorities and look for openings to help de-escalate rising regional tensions. Appointing a new chief for its Bamako-based Sahel mission would serve this agenda.

Coups have upended longstanding security arrangements in the central Sahel. In June 2023, Mali asked the UN peacekeeping mission to pull out by the end of the year. French soldiers had already left the country. The next month, officers deposed President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger, taking Paris and Washington by surprise and heralding a further blow to France's position in the region. In September, Burkina Faso foiled a coup plot against junta leader Ibrahim Traoré, prompting yet another army shakeup. The same month, the three countries launched the Alliance of Sahel States, joining forces in a seeming attempt to deter action by ECOWAS, the West African regional bloc, which has pressed Niamey to reinstate Bazoum using both sanctions and the threat of military intervention.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ "Blinken lauds regional diplomacy in efforts to calm DRC conflict", Voice of America, 25 January 2024.

⁴⁷ "The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-long Conflict", Armed Conflict and Location Data Project (ACLED), 17 January 2024.

⁴⁸ Obasi, "ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate", op. cit.

The new tripartite Alliance is primarily a defence pact, but it also underpins tighter political collaboration among the parties, who find common ground in their hostility to France, which until recently was driving the international effort to fight jihadists in the Sahel. All three of the pact's members are courting Russia, which has fighters on the ground in Mali and has offered similar assistance to Burkina Faso and Niger. In January, the three regimes said their countries are leaving ECOWAS.⁴⁹ Though the broader implications are still unclear, the announcement will set back West African efforts to quell jihadist insurgencies, which involve military cooperation and intelligence sharing among the Sahelian states and their coastal neighbours.

Meanwhile, a grim picture is emerging as the juntas consolidate their grip on power. The new military regimes show little inclination to organise elections or include civilians in their war-focused governance projects. All three are imposing increasingly tight restrictions on freedom of speech, trying to silence journalists and civil society groups critical of military rule. Jihadists, government troops and armed groups of all stripes are increasingly committing abuses against civilians.⁵⁰ Mass killings occur with alarming frequency in rural areas. The crisis has deprived some of the world's poorest people of their livelihoods and hundreds of thousands of children of an education. The humanitarian situation is particularly dire in Burkina Faso, where jihadists control at least 50 per cent of territory and more than two million people are displaced.⁵¹

The AU and its Western partners can only go so far in working with the central Sahelian regimes to address these challenges, given their turn away from democratic governance and toward militarisation, but it is important to engage where possible and appropriate. The AU has correctly suspended all three in accordance with Lomé principles. Previous ideas about mustering an AU force of 3,000 African troops to help Mali to counter the jihadist threat – always a stretch – also seem out of reach given likely objections from the reigning officers.⁵² But none of these constraints require the AU to cut off engagement altogether. Indeed, given that Mali has expelled the UN mission, Niger is sparring with ECOWAS over its heavy-handed coup response and much of the region is at odds with France, the AU may be better positioned than most outside actors to conduct high-level diplomacy.

In Mali, for example, the AU could offer support for urgently needed mediation.⁵³ In late 2023, Mali's leaders sent the army into Kidal, a northern town, to take over bases vacated by UN troops. The move was highly symbolic, given that Kidal also hosts the headquarters of the coalition of (mostly Tuareg) rebel groups that signed the 2015 Algiers Accord, which brought three years of conflict between them and Bamako to a close. The town's capture signalled the accord's collapse, putting the groups on a war footing.⁵⁴ Mali's relations with neighbouring Algeria have also deteriorated, partly

⁴⁹ "Three West African junta-led states quit ECOWAS regional bloc", Reuters, 28 January 2024.

⁵⁰ "Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates across the Sahel", ACLED, 21 September 2023.

⁵¹ "Burkina Faso Appeal – Humanitarian Action for Children", UNICEF, 11 December 2023.

⁵² Speech by Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairperson of the AU Commission at the 16th Extraordinary summit of the AU on terrorism and unconstitutional changes of government in Malabo, 28 May 2022.

⁵³ Ibrahim Maïga and Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, "Northern Mali: A Conflict with No Victors", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 October 2023.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

because Bamako objects to Algiers' efforts to work with Tuareg figures to revive the 2015 pact. Bamako also accused Algiers of encouraging Malian dissidents after it hosted Mahmoud Dicko, a prominent Malian religious leader who is outspoken about politics.

Given the potential for escalation, all three main actors – Mali, Algeria and the separatist groups – need to be talking. The AU Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department could try to encourage discussions by broaching the topic with Mali's representatives in Addis Ababa, and offering to be the go-between with the other parties, perhaps relying on the AU's Sahel office, if it is properly staffed and funded.

With respect to Niger, the AU's main goal now should be to make its good offices available to smooth over rifts with its neighbours. Though the AU often takes its cues from ECOWAS on West African matters, the organisations disagreed on Niger.⁵⁵ While the AU suspended Niger's membership, treating the coup as a *fait accompli*, influential ECOWAS states hoped it could be reversed. The bloc tried using coercive methods – including sanctions and the threat of military intervention – to that end. But the pressure did not move Niamey as intended. It led instead to fractiousness in the region, interfered with cooperation to counter jihadist threats around Lake Chad and further immiserated Niger's population.⁵⁶ By encouraging ECOWAS to adopt a tailored approach to sanctions (eg, lifting those that harm ordinary people, such as a ban on electricity exports) the AU can ease humanitarian needs in Niger, improve regional relations and deepen its own ties to Niamey.⁵⁷ The AU should also look for chances to be an interlocutor between ECOWAS and the three Alliance states, in case a rapprochement is feasible.

Finally, one step the AU should take that could give a boost to all of its diplomatic efforts in the region is to invest in its Sahel office, known as MISAHHEL, which is based in Bamako. The office is well situated to facilitate high-level shuttle diplomacy among Addis Ababa, the Sahelian capitals and other regional hubs from Abuja to Algiers in service of the objectives described above. It has been rudderless since August 2023, when Maman Sidikou, the former Nigerien foreign minister who had been running it, resigned. The AU should fill this vacancy with a skilled statesperson of appropriate seniority, while ensuring a budget that will enable pursuit of a robust diplomatic agenda.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, AU ambassador, August 2023. See "Communiqué of the 1168th meeting of the PSC held on 14 August 2023: Updated briefing on Niger", African Union, 22 August 2023.

⁵⁶ Obasi, "ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate", op. cit.

⁵⁷ A PSC diplomat said the issue of sanctions was a "compromise" between the members of the PSC who wanted to adopt their own strategy toward Niger, including suspension, and those (from West Africa) that wanted the whole council to follow ECOWAS decisions. Therefore, the final statement of the PSC "endorses" the ECOWAS decision to adopt punitive measures, though the PSC cautions that they should be put in place gradually and should not disproportionately affect ordinary people. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, September 2023. See also "Communiqué of the 1168th meeting of the PSC held on 14 August 2023: Updated briefing on Niger", op. cit.

6. Putting Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict on the Peace and Security Agenda

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon is entering its eighth year with no resolution in sight. Insurgents in the North West and South West – the country's two Anglophone regions – are still attacking government soldiers but increasingly one another as well. Civilians bear the brunt of the fighting. Killings, abductions and sexual violence are almost an everyday occurrence, while almost half the area's schools have stopped functioning. Pro-government militias have sprung up in the Anglophone regions, spreading more chaos. Meanwhile, in the capital Yaoundé, observers worry about the country's future. President Paul Biya, who turns 91 in February, appears to have left daily affairs to a handful of loyalists in government. As Cameroonians turn their attention to the post-Biya era, many fear a power vacuum amid the jostling over the presidential succession. The AU should put the Anglophone crisis on its peace and security agenda, throwing its weight behind efforts to reach a settlement, before political intrigue in Yaoundé makes negotiations even more difficult.

The Anglophone crisis is rooted in longstanding grievances about the dominance of Cameroon's mostly Francophone governing apparatus. The conflict was set off by protests by lawyers, teachers and students in 2016, who pushed back against the encroachment of the Francophone legal and educational systems on their regions. On 1 October 2017, secessionists proclaimed an independent Federal Republic of Ambazonia, as they called the North West and South West regions, which had been known during the colonial era as the British Southern Cameroons. Yaoundé responded with a heavy-handed crackdown, arresting hundreds of protesters and others suspected of sympathising with the secessionists.

These events motivated Anglophone activists to form militias. Today, a loose network of armed groups operates in the area, forcing locals to comply with school boycotts and lockdowns via the barrel of a gun. Yaoundé is trying to quell the insurgency by military means, but the army has proven unable to stop the attacks. Hundreds of thousands have fled the violence, with many crammed into makeshift housing in Francophone Cameroon.

As infighting among militias worsens, Anglophone groups are seeking outside allies. In November 2023, one such militia, the Ambazonia Governing Council, signed an agreement with a separatist group in eastern Nigeria, the Independent People's Organisation of Biafra. Signed in Finland, the alliance could see the two movements sharing safe havens in parts of eastern and south-western Cameroon under their control, threatening regional stability.

The Cameroonian government's attempts to mollify separatist Anglophone groups have thus far struggled to gain traction. In 2018, Yaoundé launched a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration program to coax militants away from the insurgency, but to date this initiative has had little success.⁵⁸ In 2019, the government granted the two regions special status under Cameroon's decentralisation law, devolving some powers to regional authorities.⁵⁹ Though this measure could be a good starting point

⁵⁸ Separatists say they mistrust the military and fear for their safety if they disarm. A government-built DDR centre remains largely empty.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°188, *A Second Look at Cameroon's Special Status*, 31 March 2023.

for broader political talks, separatists say the reforms do not sufficiently address their concerns.⁶⁰ Mediation has largely stalled, meanwhile. Most efforts to orchestrate talks between the government and armed Anglophone groups, including a Swiss initiative, quickly petered out. A more recent effort led by Canada showed promise when Yaoundé committed to engaging in late 2022. Yet the government withdrew after months of secret pre-talks, saying it did not want foreigners facilitating dialogue about what it considers a domestic problem.⁶¹

While AU-led efforts might be productive, particularly in urging a reinvigoration of stalled diplomacy, Yaoundé does not want the AU's involvement and has managed to fend it off for years. Its attitude does not sit well with many AU Commission officials and member state representatives. Some see the PSC's inattention to the Anglophone conflict as misguided, given the council's peace and security mandate. Indeed, Crisis Group has previously recommended that the PSC table Cameroon as part of a strategy of public pressure aimed at pushing the parties toward talks.⁶²

The 2024 summit will bring another chance for the AU to pay serious attention to Cameroon, with a very measured first step. As it does every year, the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department will offer the AU Assembly an update about the state of peace and security throughout Africa. Cameroon's Anglophone crisis is likely to be included in the report, as has been the case in prior years. The department routinely stresses the urgent need to address the crisis, as well as the importance of stability in Cameroon for Central Africa.⁶³ This time around, the Assembly should not gloss over this part of the report, but rather use it to frame a meaningful discussion of Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, and include the results in the summit outcome documents so that they can be used as a springboard for further diplomacy.⁶⁴

The AU PSC should keep focus on the crisis, with the objective of creating new momentum for a diplomatic initiative. One way forward would be to table the Anglophone conflict as an agenda item for periodic PSC discussion. It should anticipate efforts by Yaoundé to discourage this debate, but PSC diplomats should not veer away from their mandated role of ensuring peace and security on the continent. Additionally, thematic PSC discussions about women, peace and security or the proliferation of small arms, which regularly come up on its agenda, present useful opportunities to address the situation in Cameroon.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Crisis Group Statement, "Canada Initiative Offers Opportunity for Cameroon Peace Process", 9 February 2023.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, AU officials and ambassadors, September–November 2023. See also Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°151, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, 7 February 2020.

⁶³ In its February 2023 report, the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department noted that attacks in the Anglophone regions have intensified. Yet African leaders did not discuss this issue at their summit and it was not noted in the final decisions. See "Assembly of the Union 36th Ordinary Session: Report on the Activities of the Peace and Security Council and the State of Peace and Security in Africa", 18–19 February 2023.

⁶⁴ In February 2022, the Assembly called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, urged separatists to enter dialogue with the government and asked the AU Commission chairperson, as well as others, to "continue engaging with the government of Cameroon with a view to mobilise support for effectively addressing the security situation". See "Assembly of the Union, 35th Ordinary Session, Decisions, Declarations, Resolution and Motion", 5–6 February 2022.

In its expanded discussions, and in consultation with Cameroonian authorities, the PSC could explore avenues for starting an effective dialogue about the Anglophone regions. The Canada-led initiative, which showed significant promise in its early stages, but seems to have stalled, is at present the most viable diplomatic track. The PSC should urge Yaoundé to resume these talks. It could also consider the option of asking the AU Commission chairperson to name an envoy for Cameroon to facilitate the process. It should ask for regular updates from the Commission chairperson about the situation, thereby sending a useful signal to Commission staff to put time and resources into monitoring the conflict. Unless and until the situation changes, all these efforts should be undertaken with the overarching goal of rekindling talks that could improve the country's image abroad and end a conflict that has gone on far too long.

7. Refreshing a Key Partnership with Somalia

The Somali government's offensive against Al-Shabaab, the Islamist insurgency roiling the country for sixteen years, has stalled after making major advances in the second half of 2022.⁶⁵ The government has managed to hold most of the towns it recaptured in central Somalia, but it is far from reaching its objective of eliminating the insurgency. Meanwhile, the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), which has played a key support role in the campaign, is due to pull out in December, and discussions about a follow-on force are just getting started. In December 2023, the government proposed that the AU lead a successor force, which would focus on protecting strategic towns and infrastructure such as ports and airports to free up local troops to fight Al-Shabaab. The new mission would also provide air and ground logistics. Over the next few months, the AU should keep engaging with Mogadishu, potential troop-contributing countries and the UN to work out what such a force could look like, as well as to seek funding, probably through the new mechanism created by the Security Council to support AU missions.

ATMIS and its predecessor AU-led missions in Somalia have long been subject to criticism, particularly from the country's previous administration led by Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, or "Farmajo". Farmajo insisted that Somali forces assume security responsibility when they were manifestly unequipped to do so, often straining relations with the AU. By contrast, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud worked from the time he assumed office in 2022 to smooth relations with external partners. Complications have arisen at times, for instance in September 2023, when the government informed ATMIS only two weeks before it was to withdraw 3,000 troops that local forces were not ready to take over. But now the message coming from Mogadishu is clear. Notwithstanding the offensive's 2022 gains, and the ATMIS drawdown that is already in progress, Somalia would like AU assistance to continue for the foreseeable future.

⁶⁵ "Somalia's Stalling Fight against Al-Shabaab and America's Wobbly Strategy", The Horn (Crisis Group podcast), 6 November 2023.

Somalia's needs are simply too big for Mogadishu to handle on its own. While ATMIS has left the conduct of the offensive to Somali forces and allied clan militias, it continues to hold key towns and (in conjunction with the UN Support Office in Somalia, or UNSOS) offer logistics support. The government cannot yet step into this role, particularly as it needs more time to build up and equip its security apparatus, and Al-Shabaab is tightening its grip on remote parts of the countryside. Other challenges also weigh on the government. Authorities are slow to deliver basic services and provide security in the areas they have retaken from the insurgents. The offensive's second phase, aimed at pushing Al-Shabaab out of southern Somalia, keeps getting postponed, due partly to rains and flooding. Plagued by extreme weather, Somalia is also trying to cope with a humanitarian crisis brought on by a drought that killed as many as 43,000 people. Torrential rains in November caused more deaths, while floods washed out roads and bridges. As it tries to guide the country toward peace, the government needs more help and more time.

Who will pay for a new AU mission is a big question. ATMIS and its predecessor relied heavily on the EU, which sent the troop-contributing countries money for the soldiers' stipends.⁶⁶ But finding fresh financing may be difficult.⁶⁷ One source might be the UN. The UN and AU struck a framework deal in late 2023, by which the global body is to pay for up to 75 per cent of certain AU-led peace operations with assessed contributions. Talks about bringing this arrangement online are in early stages, however, and applying it to a new Somalia mission would be no small task. Part of the challenge will be working out mission particulars. Somalia's planning provides a framework for discussion, but many details, including the force's size, composition and duration, remain to be worked out with the AU's Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department. If the UN decides to help fund the mission, the AU will have to raise at least 25 per cent of expenses from alternative sources to plug the gap. Money for UNSOS – which would assist with logistics as it has been doing for both ATMIS and Somali forces – would also have to be found.

Given the uncertainty surrounding UN assessed funding, the AU should explore alternative options, including by asking the EU what it could contribute. The AU should also lobby other outside powers with interests in the region such as China, certain Gulf states and Türkiye. Some of these prefer to support Somalia bilaterally but are keen to maintain an AU mission as they do not want the government to collapse under insurgent pressure. The AU should also explore how it can mobilise resources from its own Peace Fund, which has \$381 million in its coffers (close to its \$400 million target) but cannot be tapped without agreement among member states. Depending on funding options and the follow-on mission's mandate, the AU could then solicit troop contingents from outside Somalia's immediate neighbourhood to bring new energy to the force.

The AU should continue to supplement its security support with political guidance to keep Somalia moving in the direction of better governance and greater stability. Though Hassan Sheikh's administration's priority is to wage war on Al-Shabaab until

⁶⁶ Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda contribute troops to ATMIS.

⁶⁷ The EU made €270 million available for ATMIS through 2024 and €45 million for the Somali army. By contrast, the AU set aside a meagre \$5 million from its Peace Fund in 2023. Still, the AU saw this contribution as important for showing its commitment to peace enforcement in Africa.

the group is defeated, it is simultaneously trying to curb the group's ideological reach through an ambitious state-building project that includes political, fiscal and judicial reforms. Over the years, the AU has offered advice on these topics in the form of workshops, consultations, technical expertise and the like, including by the AU envoy; this assistance should continue.⁶⁸ Given that some kind of dialogue with the insurgents is likely to be needed down the road to bring peace to Somalia, the AU should also prepare to support the government in these efforts when Mogadishu deems the time ripe.⁶⁹

8. Helping South Sudan Steer Safely Toward Elections

South Sudan is scheduled to hold elections in December 2024, the first since it gained independence in 2011. The polls have been postponed several times, and most observers expect yet another delay. South Sudanese authorities have not made proper preparations or secured the funding they will need. Neither have they struck the political deals necessary to organise polls. Conflict rumbles on in many parts of the country, although a 2018 deal that ended fighting between forces aligned with President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar largely holds. Climate catastrophes and the war in neighbouring Sudan worsen the situation.⁷⁰ The AU's involvement in South Sudan has wavered since the 2013-2018 civil war, but the moment for sustained engagement has arrived. The organisation – working with the IGAD regional bloc and the UN – should use its influence with South Sudan's main political figures to help broker consensus about the timing of the next presidential polls and ensure that conditions in the country are conducive to fair and credible elections, whenever they take place.

There are many reasons to be concerned about South Sudan's trajectory in its putative election year. Its factious elite never reconciled after the civil war and readily wields violence for political gain. Deadly clashes continue in many areas of the country, including Jonglei, Unity, Warrap and the disputed district of Abyei, often between communal militias backed by their respective elites. They exact a heavy toll on civilians, especially women and children. South Sudan's seemingly chronic humanitarian catastrophe persists, with sky-high levels of hunger, widespread displacement due to conflict and years of cataclysmic flooding, a weak economy, and a government that seems uninterested in using the country's oil wealth to improve the lives of its impoverished citizens.⁷¹

The war in Sudan, meanwhile, makes the situation all the more precarious. The Sudanese conflict has driven over 600,000 into South Sudan, according to the UN, worsening the already heavy humanitarian burden and further depleting donor budg-

⁶⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°309, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 21 June 2022.

⁶⁹ For recommendations relating to Somalia's dispute with Ethiopia over the latter's efforts to gain access to a port on the Somaliland coast, see the section on Ethiopia above.

⁷⁰ See Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Floods, Displacement and Violence in South Sudan".

⁷¹ Crisis Group Africa Report N°305, *Oil or Nothing: Dealing with South Sudan's Bleeding Finances*, 6 October 2021.

ets.⁷² The conflict poses grave threats to South Sudan's stability. South Sudan relies on a pipeline through Sudan to move its oil to the sea for export; Sudanese belligerents could disrupt this crucial route. Another worry is that South Sudanese armed groups could find sanctuary, guns and allies across the northern border. South Sudan looks especially ill equipped to handle any election crisis peacefully.

South Sudan must overcome myriad obstacles before it can hold elections. Authorities still need to agree on the polls' format and the delimitation of voting districts, which is a sensitive issue due to local boundary disputes. There is no voter list nor is any evident effort under way to compile one. Funds are sorely lacking, with South Sudan's top elections official estimating that the ballot will cost \$250 million. The government is unlikely to attract sufficient financing, in part because many donors accuse it of diverting the country's substantial oil revenues.⁷³ Further, the insecurity in the country will make holding a contentious vote a dangerous affair in many areas, especially where it is likely to exacerbate boundary disputes, inter-communal tensions or local power struggles.

Beyond technical and security concerns lie political hurdles. Key commitments in the 2018 peace deal that were to precede elections have not been fulfilled, including negotiating a new constitution, conducting a census and merging the troops who fought on rival sides in the civil war into a single army. Opposition politicians including Machar are likely to object to ramshackle elections and will have many grounds for doing so. The opposition, taking note of its own apparent weak political standing, will also be motivated to prevent Kiir from achieving a clear winner-take-all victory and getting the mandate that would come with it. While Machar and others might be in no position militarily to kick off a new rebellion and plunge the country into renewed civil war, any attempt by Kiir to steamroll forward with an election without requisite political consensus will be certain to cause turmoil and at least some violence.

South Sudan will need outside help to navigate these treacherous waters. This duty will fall primarily on the UN mission in South Sudan, given its mandate, longstanding presence in the country and resources. But the AU also has a role to play, working with IGAD, which brokered the 2018 peace deal.

First, the AU should use its political muscle to help forge consensus among elites about how to proceed, stressing that it is vital to a peaceful, credible vote and potentially to the continuation of outside support. The AU has played such a role in the past. In 2019, the AU, through South Africa (which chairs the AU C5 group of countries) worked closely with the UN and IGAD to convince South Sudan's most powerful figures – Kiir and Machar – to form a unity government in early 2020.⁷⁴ South Africa, in particular, has been trying to keep the 2018 peace deal on track. It should help forge agreement relating to elections, for example by helping resolve disputes about whether or not to delay the vote and other sticky issues that may emerge, while coordinating with IGAD, the UN and other C5 countries (Nigeria, Rwanda, Algeria and Chad) that

⁷² "External Update no. 36: Sudan", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 24-31 January 2024.

⁷³ Ambassador Charles Tai Gituai, interim chairperson of the monitoring and evaluation mission for the implementation of the 2018 agreement, urged stakeholders to find funding for the elections during a meeting in Juba on 7 December.

⁷⁴ The revitalised transitional government of national unity was formed in 2020. It came after intense diplomacy to get the parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Conflict in South Sudan to commit to a coalition government.

should stand ready to assist.⁷⁵ These sensitive negotiations should involve formal dialogue among South Sudan's major political parties, as well as more informal talks between key elites. Should the parties agree on a delay, the AU and member states should stress the imperative of making progress during the new allotted time, especially on the constitution.

Secondly, as the PSC has requested, the AU Commission should provide technical assistance to South Sudan with regard to electoral management, in coordination with the UN, once South Sudan meets the prerequisites of broad political consensus on how to move ahead with polls, including the electoral timetable. Should elections proceed, the council should dispatch a long-term election observation mission to ensure that authorities adhere to the AU's election guidelines.⁷⁶

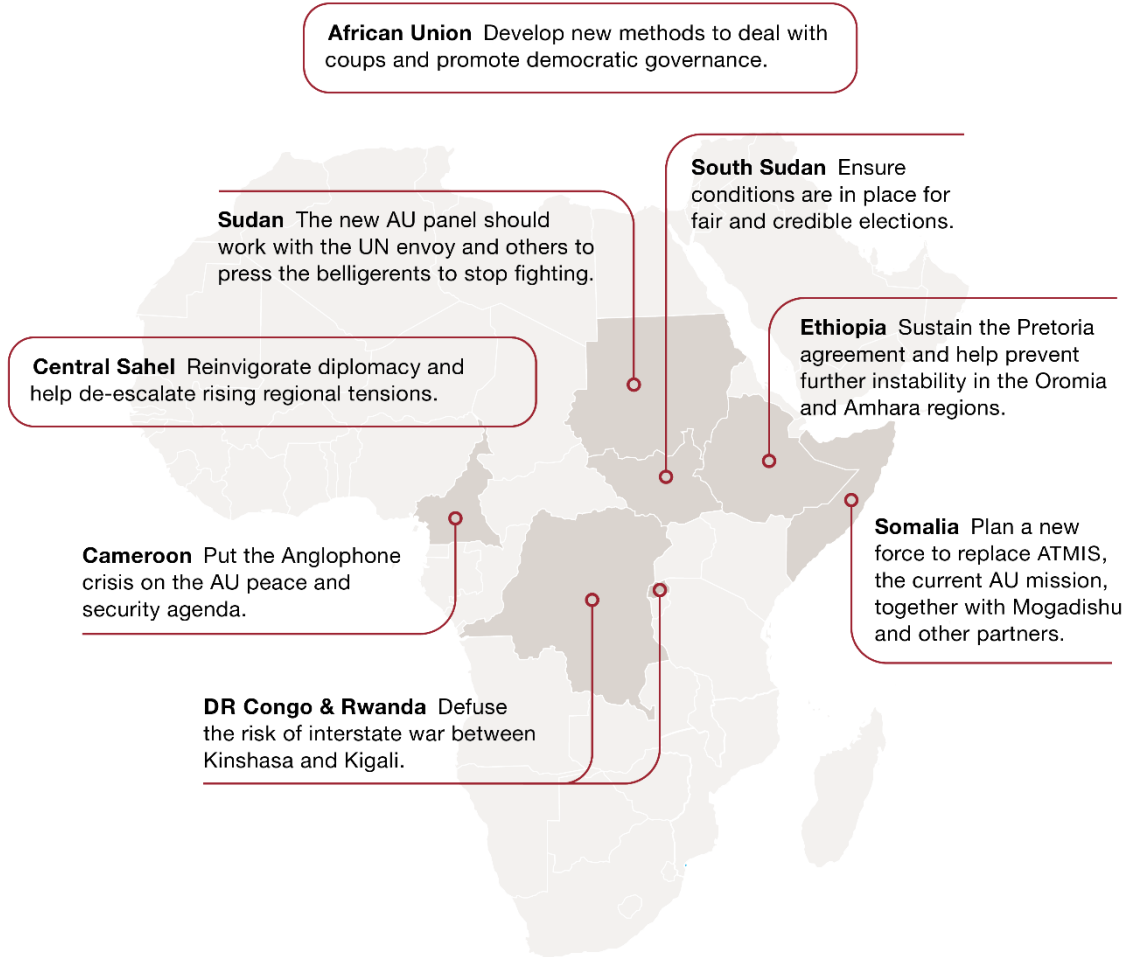
Finally, the AU should offer technical support for the all-important process of drafting a constitution. If done well, the charter could be a landmark moment of nation-building for the new country. But if done poorly or not at all, it could become another source of inter-communal grievances, exacerbating tensions and conflict in a country that has already seen too much of these since its independence short years ago.

Nairobi/Brussels, 14 February 2024

⁷⁵ See Crisis Group Statement, "A Major Step Toward Ending South Sudan's Civil War", 25 February 2020.

⁷⁶ These guidelines appear in the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, *op. cit.*

Appendix A: The African Union's Priorities in 2024



Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2021

Special Reports and Briefings

Nineteen Conflict Prevention Tips for the Biden Administration, United States Briefing N°2, 28 January 2021.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

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