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The future of peace support operations in Africa

Aligning the AU, UN, and EU for effective and legitimate interventions

Summary

Peace is always political. Yet the politics of peace support has never been more obvious than today. The United Nations (UN)'s peacekeeping and regular budget in existential crisis, and the Secretary-General warns against "imminent financial collapse" if member states do not pay unpaid arrears by July 2026 (Davies and Foulkes 2026). The European Union (EU)'s next Multi-Annual Financial Framework indicates that the future Global Europe instrument will be heavily member states guided and transactional in its allocation decisions (Jones 2026). And at the African Union (AU), a major review of the organisation's architecture for peace and security found that much of the success (and failure) of instruments hinged on "the voluntary acquiescence of its constituent member states" (Murithi 2025). In short, in times of crisis, institutional frameworks depend even more on the politics of those responsible for implementing them.

FES's networked multi-year project on peace support operations in Africa has sought integrative and locally adaptive answers to the questions posed by the current crisis in multilateral peace support operations. Driven by the conviction that multilateral approaches to peace and security should remain guided by the principle of collective security, FES staff and partners in workshops and conferences across Africa have articulated a synthesis of political realism and values-based multilateralism. This report summarises key diagnostic insights and recommendations for African states, the AU, the EU, and the UN. It complements the in-depth case studies featured in the report [Forces for peace: realities of peace support operations in Africa](#) (Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2025).

Diagnosing the challenges: The neglected politics of mandates, timeliness, and coordination

Nowadays, the term ‘peace (support) operations’ is used to cluster a wide range of external military interventions in conflict settings that deviate significantly from the traditional peacekeeping forces envisioned after the creation of the UN. While this context sensitivity is a welcome development per se, the mandates of peace operations have increasingly drifted away from supporting the implementation of a peace agreement. Recurring ambiguity between stabilization, regime protection, and conflict resolution produces mismatched expectations and politicised interpretations of who and what a mission is “for”, especially when there is no peace to keep. This dynamic directly affects the legitimacy of peace support operations, which can end up being blamed for problems far beyond its vague mandate.

The usefulness of military force wanes over time. The FES project has found that while military deployments can create forceful, temporary security effects, more durable outcomes must be embedded in a political process and coupled from the outset with civilian peacebuilding, governance, and development activities. This quest for sustainable peace outcomes also requires real local ownership. Proactive and structured civil society engagement across the mission life cycle helps to root peace support in the broader politics of a crisis.

Poor coordination fails the promises of multilateral collective security. Even among the instruments of a single donor, but especially among different missions and contributing countries, coordination begins with the alignment of the definitional power of mission goals and setting the narrative of intervention. In particular, a narrative of fighting terrorism often fails to capture the complexities of a crisis. Experiences from different African peace operations show that a minimal regional consensus on the rationale and modalities of intervention are crucial to keep missions legitimate.

Recommendations for African states and the African Union

African states should lead in generating a unified political strategy of those leading, contributing to, and complementing missions. While honesty about external actors’ agendas is important, only a regional consensus on the overall crisis approach can usefully guide a complex set of actors’ engagements. This also implies recognising the limits of military intervention. While some military forces carry out developmental activities in an attempt to “win hearts and minds”, they cannot substitute for comprehensive civilian-led development and peacebuilding interventions.

While recognising that troop contributors to peace operations will always be self-interested, the AU would benefit from careful analysis of troop-contributors’ interests and their implications for mission performance. Troop contributors should be assessed not just in terms of military performance, but also in terms of a mission’s legitimacy and political sustainability.

Political expediency has replaced the AU’s automatic involvement in the continent’s crisis. Institutionally, the AU should sharpen its narrative about its added value in conflict prevention and crisis governance to shape the concrete subsidiarity politics of a crisis. Against a backdrop of global multipolarity, non-traditional actors, such as Türkiye, China, and the UAE, may play growing roles in peace support on the continent, and the AU should develop a clearer strategic posture on the conditions under which it adds value alongside these new partners’ interventions.

On mandates, planning, and compliance instruments, the AU and its member states should:

- **Adopt a “political strategy first” requirement** for AU-endorsed PSOs. Mandate packages should include a political settlement strategy, a theory of change linking the use of force to political milestones, and explicit awareness of the intended political implications of intervention.
- **Standardise transparency minimums for ad-hoc and bilateral deployments** under AU political endorsement. Publish mission objectives, geographic scope, and core Status of Forces Agreement principles as a condition of AU endorsement to reduce contested narratives, and to make new deployment modalities less prone to external geopolitical influence. Mandate implementation should be reviewed against a clearly defined set of publicly reported indicators, including civilian harm trends, political transition milestones, and regional cooperation benchmarks.
- **Operationalise ‘positive conditionality’** in AU compliance: To reflect the varying degree of professionalisation among AU states, create incentive-based compliance packages for troop contributors on protection of civilians, discipline, and human rights instead of issuing withdrawal threats.

On funding peace operations, the AU and its member states should:

- **Expand limited but predictable African financing** for PSOs as a strategic autonomy instrument. Even partial African co-financing, including through the AU Peace Fund, can reduce perceptions of African opportunism and strengthen ownership, while also improving credibility of AU instruments towards member states.

→ **Enhance funding transparency** in AU-endorsed missions by including public communication plans that explain who pays, for what, and for how long, thereby reducing speculation and mitigating legitimacy risks.

To enhance ownership and accountability instruments, the AU and its member states should:

→ **Institutionalise a “Responsibility to Incorporate” civil society.** Require structured civil society engagement in mandates or rules of engagement, including, where feasible, pre-deployment consultations and a standing local liaison and feedback mechanism during deployment.

→ **Create local oversight mechanisms,** such as mission community advisory boards, grievance channels with response timelines, and periodic public briefings, to shift civil society engagement from reactive to preventive. These mechanisms should leave room for genuine contestation, such as critiques of the AU’s tendency toward regime-protective deployments rather than popular aspirations.

With a view to exit strategies and post-intervention modalities, the AU and its member states should:

→ **Treat mission exit as a dynamic event in transition politics.** Mandate renewals should be tied to transition benchmarks such as Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), governance reforms, service restoration and post-conflict reconstruction, rather than calendar dates, while acknowledging that missions often evolve in size and name rather than end cleanly.

→ **Hardwire SSR and DDR into mission design** as co-equal lines of effort, treated politically by building coalitions, incentives, and legitimacy, and not only as a technical challenge.

Recommendations for the European Union

The EU’s desire for a strategic posture oriented toward hard security reshapes how it acts on the continent. But even as the EU shifts toward the use of lethal force through the European Peace Facility, its two-decade investments in civilian and non-lethal peace support needs to be protected. In so doing, the EU should align security sector reform and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration with the missions of different organisations to ensure host states’ capacity to (re)assume sole responsibility for their citizens’ security upon the mission’s withdrawal.

The EU should also not overlook the role its missions and support modalities may play as pawns in national

and sub-national politics of African countries. Fine-grained analysis and extensive consultations outside the EU’s own complex inter-institutional decision-making processes is required to render the EU’s intelligence and political understanding of intervention contexts better.

To fully hone its ambition of becoming a more strategic security actor, the EU should:

→ **Align training with equipping** where enforcement is foreseen. EU training without adequate equipment is perceived as lacking credibility, and support packages should fully align with the mission type. At the same time, maintaining distinctions between peace enforcement, counterinsurgency, and stabilisation to avoid mission creep by design is central even in training missions.

→ **Invest in unbiased data provision and transparency.** Support independent information and monitoring capacities, and resist incentives to suppress negative data for intra-European political reasons.

On instrument coherence and division of labour, the EU should:

→ **Enhance cross-instrumental coherence in a theatre.** An internal EU coherence mechanism should align training missions, equipment support, political engagement, sanctions, development, and humanitarian action with a single joint political strategy that actually shapes EU-internal coordination work across institutions and instruments.

→ **Systematise the use of contact groups alongside formal coordination.** Complement institutional coordination with informal political coordination spaces to manage convergences among actors whose interests are not congruent but compatible.

In thinking long-term about intervention and conditionality, the EU should:

→ **Shift from punitive to incentive-based conditionality for troop-contributing countries.** Expanding ‘positive conditionality’ toolkits linked to the protection of civilians, accountability, and the mitigation of civilian harm can help incentivise troop contributions.

→ **Integrate security support with governance and economic recovery activities** from day one. Safeguarding the EU’s long-term investments beyond crisis intervention and sustaining gains requires coordinated support for institutions that will continue to provide security after drawdown.

Recommendations for the United Nations

As close observers of the UN's finances argue, there is leeway to better manage the limited rules and the limited resources that member states provide (Chen 2026). In rekindling its role in African security, the UN needs to deal with diminished political will and smaller budgets. Just like on the African continent, the contentious politics of peace support also need to be embraced in New York.

In streamlining mandate drafting practices, the UN should:

- **Reduce mandate contestation by clarifying definitional power.** Building procedures that incorporate regional 'penholders' on UN Security Council resolutions and AU positions earlier in mandate drafting is urgent to implement the aims of the Pact for the Future, especially in contexts where mission objectives are politically contested.
- **Design mandates to enable political settlement, not only to define force posture.** Particularly when there is no peace agreement in place that UN intervention supports, mandates should still specify the political pathway and the complementary civilian components needed to translate security effects into sustainable outcomes.

To enhance sequencing and transition with local ownership, the UN should:

- **Anchor the use of force in a legitimate and genuine regional consensus.** UN and AU authorisations have distinct normative effects, but cannot operate on their own. The UN should seek to amplify achieved regional consensus rather than overwrite it from New York.
- **Hard-wire political transitions into mandating.** Planning early for governance reforms, SSR, and DDR is essential. Transitions should be treated as political projects that must run in parallel with mission activity.
- **Mandate structured civil society engagement across a mission life cycle.** Incorporate proactive consultation and oversight mechanisms into mission planning to reduce later legitimacy crises and scapegoating dynamics that undermine core military and broader political goals.

Joint recommendations for the AU, UN, and EU

Effective peace support requires clearer alignment and division of labour among regional actors and between the AU, EU, and UN, with each contributing according to its comparative strengths. Formal coordination mechanisms

should be complemented by informal political spaces, such as contact groups, that facilitate pragmatic coordination. Since interests rarely fully align, coordination should focus on identifying narrow areas of convergence that can sustain diplomatic initiatives without creating distracting competition.

The AU, UN, and EU have a shared responsibility to anchor peace missions in a unified political strategy shared by those leading, contributing to, and supporting the operation. Military deployments should be explicitly time-bound and designed to support longer-term political engagement. Sustainable peace requires addressing the full conflict ecosystem, including regional dynamics and external spoilers, rather than focusing narrowly on domestic actors.

To address the paramount challenge of coordination better, actors should:

- **Work towards a shared 'ends, ways, means' methodology** for any AU-endorsed or authorised peace operation, used jointly for planning, authorisation, and renewal, to avoid mandate drift and mismatched expectations. While UN Security Council Resolution 2719 provides a blueprint for joint UN-AU planning, its mandating provisions do not reflect the AU's continued dependence on external funding for the foreseeable future.
- **Introduce a theatre-level coordination compact** that integrates political engagement, force posture, sanctions, and civilian programming into a single sequence, while specifying the division of labour and handoffs. Managing existing coordination efforts such as the UN's Resident Coordinator system and the EU's Team Europe Initiatives should be fully incorporated into this theatre-level coordination compact. Demonstrated coordination at the theatre level could be incentivised with internal budgetary and staffing incentives to reward cross-institutional cooperation. Progress on coordination could be assessed through regular theatre-level coordination reviews that document alignment across mandates, funding streams, and operational timelines.
- **Strive for shared understandings on legitimacy and transparency.** By stipulating minimum disclosure on objectives, funding modalities, and core legal parameters (especially for bilateral and ad-hoc forces), plus a standing public communication plan to manage public and media expectations over time. This should also include mission community advisory structures, grievance and response systems, and proactive civil society engagement written into mandates and operational plans.
- **A shared AU-UN-EU transition package centred on SSR and DDR as political transition work.** With jointly funded and jointly monitored efforts, and milestones tied to drawdown decisions.

Implementation in difficult times

Self-sufficiency in African peace operations must remain the goal long-term. Getting there is not about reinventing the principles of peace operations, but implementing what has already been agreed. In a disorderly world, rules are even more necessary, but they need power to support their implementation. The FES project converges on a simple but demanding finding: Peace support operations in Africa fail when political purpose, instruments, and actors are misaligned. As long as mandates are vague on politics and coordination remains fragmented, the most tactically powerful deployments risk eroding the legitimacy of multilateral collective security.

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The AU, UN, and EU do not need to reinvent the wheel. The project's recommendations can be implemented using existing decision-making bodies and instruments, without requiring treaty change or the creation of new permanent institutions. Yet instruments lose effectiveness when legitimacy, sequencing, and regional consent are treated as operational afterthoughts. The future of multilateral peace support therefore hinges on disciplined implementation of what is already known. The future of peace support in Africa lies in clear political purpose, aligned different instruments, and early investment in transitions that link security, governance, and ownership.

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