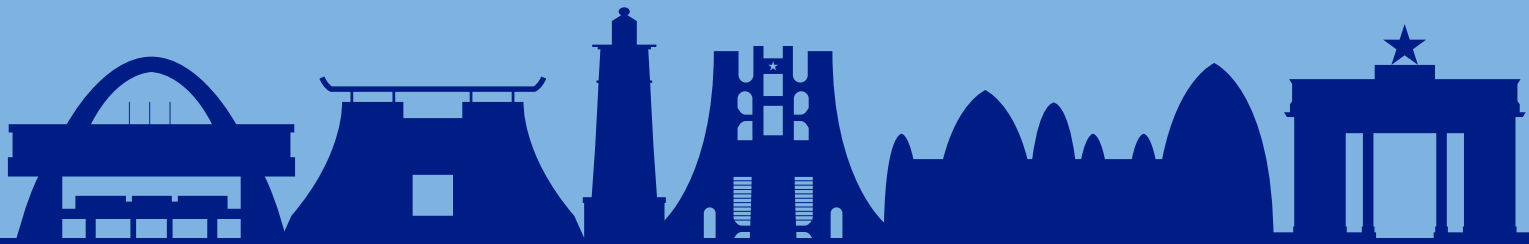


BACKGROUND PAPER

Strengthening the role of regional organizations in addressing armed conflicts and regional instability



ABOUT THE EVENT

The 2025 Challenges Annual Forum (#CAF25Accra) will contribute to the United Nation's Secretary General's Review of the Future of all Forms of Peace Operations by examining how conflict and instability are evolving, define key political and operational prerequisites for success, and generate concrete, innovative proposals to adapt and strengthen peace operations, with a particular focus on West Africa and the Sahel. The event is co-hosted by the Challenges Forum's Ghanaian partner, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC), in Accra on 14–15 October. Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

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The African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are central to conflict prevention and management across Africa. Yet, their capacity to respond to crises is increasingly strained by shifting security dynamics and democratic backsliding, particularly in the Sahel.

This paper serves to highlight the role of partnerships between the United Nations (UN) and African regional organizations in an evolving security landscape and shifting policy discourse on the future of peace operations. The ongoing UN Review of the Future of All Forms of Peace Operations (the Review) provides an opportunity to integrate new thinking on how partnership with regional organizations can be further leveraged to employ flexible and adaptable models of peace operations to better respond to current and emerging threats.

The role of regional organizations in peace operations

The AU emerged in the early 2000s as a central actor in conflict mediation and peace operations. Through the establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which integrates Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms, the AU has developed norms and institutional frameworks to advance the continent's peace and security agenda. However, key pillars of APSA, most notably the African Standby Force (ASF), are not fully operational.

Meanwhile, through some of the UN's longest-standing multidimensional peacekeeping missions, the AU–UN partnership has progressively deepened, both in policy formulation and operational practice. However, the rising frequency and intensity of conflicts across the continent expose critical gaps.

Too often, neither the UN, the AU, nor subregional organizations are able to respond decisively, leaving space for ad hoc coalitions that tend to prioritise militarised short-term stabilisation over addressing the drivers of conflict.

The proliferation of terrorism has increased reliance on militarised responses and counter-

terrorism operations, particularly in West Africa and the Sahel. UN peacekeeping operations are constrained by principles, mandates and operational limitations that limit their ability to conduct such kinetic operations, while the AU currently lacks the capacity to deploy a comparable mission.

The ongoing UN Review presents an opportunity to explore ways to strengthen complementarity among multilateral organizations through more modular, flexible and cross-institutional approaches involving the UN, AU and RECs.

Recent trends and challenges in peace operation partnerships

In its first decade, the AU took bold steps by deploying forces in contexts where there was often little peace to keep, as seen in Sudan and Somalia. AU missions were also later rehat-tered into UN operations in the Central African Republic and Mali and the UN–AU hybrid mission in Darfur marked another milestone in the partnership. However, neither the AU nor the UN has launched a new peace mission in more than a decade. The Sahel, now responsible for over half of global terrorism-related deaths¹, illustrates the constraints facing peace operations at the regional, continental and global levels. Unconstitutional changes of govern-

1. Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism (IEP: Sydney, Mar. 2025).

ment have further destabilised the region, with three countries withdrawing from Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish their own Alliance of Sahel States (AES), while remaining suspended from the AU. Their departure from ECOWAS represents a significant reversal of decades of regional integration efforts. At the same time, Mali's demand in 2023 for the expedited withdrawal of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) highlights the growing dissatisfaction of host states over the inability of missions to undertake more robust counter-terrorism offensives and lack of shared priorities by the mission and the government.

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The increasing gap over the years has led to ad-hoc coalitions and security arrangements, often established outside formal regional or continental frameworks. While intended to address urgent security threats, these fragmented responses have weakened multilateral coordination and undermined the development of coherent, long-term strategies to address the root causes of insecurity.

In an effort to revitalise multilateral partnerships in peacekeeping and in response to Africa's long-standing call for African-led missions to benefit from UN-assessed contributions, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 in December 2023 represented a significant milestone. It established a framework for predictable and sustainable financing of AU-led peace support operations. While technical progress has been made towards operationalising the resolution, most notably through the development of an AU-UN joint roadmap and workstreams, the political dimension remains

unresolved, with limited consensus on when and how the resolution should be applied.

The first test case brought to the Council, strongly backed by the AU, concerned the African Union Stabilization Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Despite host government support for the mission and the AU's push for authorisation under Resolution 2719, the Council failed to reach agreement. The United States opposed applying 2719 in Somalia, arguing that it is not the appropriate context and urging broader donor burden-sharing. In contrast, as the EU is the largest funder of the AU mission in Somalia, European Council members viewed Resolution 2719 as a tool to ease their financial contribution, leading them to advocate strongly for its implementation.

From the AU and A3's perspective², Somalia represents a particularly compelling case: it benefits from long-standing AU-UN coordination structures and substantial political and financial investments from both organizations. In this context, applying Resolution 2719 would be far more straightforward in Somalia than applying it to a completely new mission; this is also an actual context where there is an urgent need for financial support.

The future of peace operations partnerships

As security conditions deteriorate in contexts where peace operations are most needed, multilateral organizations are simultaneously grappling with internal crises and struggles for credibility and relevance. The future of peace operations and that of UN-AU partnerships in peace operations, cannot be separated from these broader political impediments. Amid these challenges, the ongoing review of peace operations offers an opportunity to chart more adaptive approaches, including by considering the following areas.

Complementary and modular approaches. The first area concerns modular approaches. The UN independent study, *The Future of Peacekeeping: New Models and Related Capabilities*, highlights the growing call for the UN to adopt more modular models, with partnerships involving non-UN missions playing a significant role. Given the complexity of today's security land-

2. The A3 is the bloc of three elected members to the United Nations Security Council.

scape, complementarity between the UN and regional actors is essential, as no single institution can provide comprehensive solutions. The shift from multidimensional operations toward more modular frameworks, focused on core mandated tasks, has become increasingly important in light of the difficulties UN missions face with cumbersome mandates and unmatched resources.

Adequate capabilities. The second element is around capability. The evolution of conflicts necessitates corresponding adaptations in operational capabilities. The use of new technologies in certain contexts, has outpaced UN operational capacity. Peace operations, including those led by regional organizations, now require more specialised capabilities. Troops must possess advanced skill sets to operate and manage emerging technologies and equipment, going beyond traditional capacities, as the frontiers of warfare by non-state armed groups continue to evolve.

"there is a critical need for a scaling up diplomatic efforts and developing a coordinated political strategy to sustain continuous dialogue."

Host-country engagement. The third element, particularly as it relates to the Sahel context is on the importance of managing relationships with host states including after mission transition. It's critical to recalibrate diplomatic engagements by multilateral organization with countries that are undergoing a protracted political transition and are also experiencing high level of insecurity. In the Sahel-where terrorism continues to escalate and poses a significant threat to international peace and security; the UN, AU and ECOWAS continue to face challenges in engaging effectively with the military authorities. In such contexts, there is a critical need for a scaling up diplomatic efforts and

developing a coordinated political strategy to sustain continuous dialogue.

Way forward

The peace operations review must be firmly grounded in the broader context, including the declining budget and liquidity challenges confronting the UN, while identifying strategies to navigate these pressures amid a turbulent period for multilateral cooperation. Beyond functioning as a technical exercise, the review should also consider critical political factors essential for strengthening peace operations, enhancing their adaptability to complex political and security environments and defining the role of partnerships in this process.

Moreover, with the ongoing UN reform process, the review will be an opportunity to advance the long-standing call, including by the HIP-PO report³, for the use of the full spectrum of peace operations by addressing departmental divisions within the UN Secretariat. In this context, Resolution 2719 should be seen as a strategic framework for partnership that can be leveraged across the broader peace continuum.

Guiding Questions

- 2035 Vision → If regional organizations and the UN are fully aligned and effective by 2035, what does success look like?
- Near-Term Actions → What decisions must be taken between 2025 and 2027 to make that success possible?
- Partnerships and Capabilities → Which capacities or partnerships must be in place by 2030 to deliver on that vision?

3. Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (2015).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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