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Towards a United Africa: The African Union: A Path to Continental Unity and Global Significance

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While regional organisations have proliferated worldwide, few have transcended their founding aspirations to deliver substantive results. The African Union (AU) presents a particularly complex case for regional integration, encompassing more countries than any other organisations and displaying remarkable diversity across historical, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. Managing the interests and expectations of over 50 member states, each with distinct national priorities and developmental trajectories, constitutes an extraordinary institutional challenge. Within this demanding context, the AU has emerged as the continent's primary vehicle for collective action and integration for peace and prosperity across the continent.

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The Path to Continental Integration

The collapse of colonial empires following the Second World War unleashed a transformative wave of independence movements across Africa, fundamentally reshaping the continent's political landscape. It was within this circumstance that regional organisations began to emerge as mechanisms for cooperation, stability, and collective development. This trend was particularly evident in Africa, where integration efforts were deeply influenced by the ideals of Pan-Africanism, rooted in unity and self-determination. Driven by shared aspirations and the urgent challenges facing post-colonial states, this spirit of solidarity led to the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. Building on the legacy of the OAU, the AU was established in 2002. The revamp is to enhance efficiency of the organisation. It was initially pushed forward by Muammar Gaddafi, the former leader of Libya, as part of his vision for a unified continent, the so-called United States of Africa, which envisioned a single African currency, passport, and military force.²

From OAU to AU, the organisation's goals have evolved in response to global transformations, with a continued commitment to deeper continental integration and an aim for shared African destiny. At the First Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly in 2002, member states affirmed that the Union's core objectives are to promote peace, security, stability, sustainable development, democracy, and human rights in the continent. These founding goals have been institutionalised within the AU's frameworks and have gradually developed into guiding principles that continue to shape the Union's development.

² Alex Perry, "Libyan Leader's Delusions of African Grandeur," *Time*, February 22, 2011, accessed July 7, 2025, https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2045328_2045333_2053164,00.html.

AU Mechanisms

Operating from its headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the AU has developed a sophisticated institutional architecture designed to address the continent's multifaceted challenges. The Union's principal decision-making body is the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. Supporting this central body are several specialised organs, each with distinct mandates that collectively embody the AU's comprehensive approach to continental governance such as the Peace and Security Council, the Pan-African Parliament, and the African Court of Justice and Human Rights.

The Peace and Security Architecture

Recognising that lasting peace and security are essential for creating a conducive environment for Africa's growth and prosperity, the AU established the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) as a comprehensive framework to promote peace and stability across the continent. The existence of APSA underscores the continent's strong commitment to conflict prevention as a cornerstone of its development agenda. Designed to support conflict prevention, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. The centerpiece of this architecture is the Peace and Security Council (PSC), which possesses extraordinary powers including the authority to recommend military intervention and deploy peacekeeping forces when grave threats to continental security emerge. This capacity for decisive action is complemented by the AU Panel of the Wise, which leverages the experience and moral authority of respected continental leaders to facilitate dialogue and mediation. The framework is operationalised through the African Standby Force, organised

into five sub-regional brigades capable of conducting comprehensive peace support operations across diverse conflict.³

Democratic Governance and Human Rights

The AU's institutional vision extends beyond security to encompass democratic transformation and rights protection. As one of the key architects of the AU, former South African President Thabo Mbeki emphasised in his 2004 speech at the inauguration of the Pan-African Parliament the importance of building Africa as “a democratic continent”⁴: “one where Africans govern themselves equally”.⁵ This vision could be realised through the Pan-African Parliament, which, with representatives from all AU member states, would serve as a platform to amplify the voices of the African people in the decision making process of the continent’s development and challenges.

Complementing these democratic aspirations is the African Court of Justice and Human Rights (AfCHPR), which institutionalises the AU's commitment to rights protection. The Court serves as a critical mechanism for addressing cases of abuse of power that may be beyond the capacity or willingness of national courts to resolve. Notably, one of its unique features is that individuals can bring cases directly before the Court. Furthermore, its decisions are legally binding on the states concerned.⁶

³ John S. Moolakkattu, “The Role of the African Union in Continental Peace and Security Governance,” *India Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2010): 151–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006600202>.

⁴ *The Economist*, “The African Union Is Less Effective at 20 Than It Was at Two,” *The Economist*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/02/12/the-african-union-is-less-effective-at-20-than-it-was-at-two>.

⁵ Thabo Mbeki, “Speech by President Thabo Mbeki at the Inauguration of the Pan-African Parliament, 14 March 2004,” Department of International Relations and Cooperation, South Africa, accessed July 7, 2025, https://dirco1.azurewebsites.net/docs/speeches/2004/mbek0917.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶ Sègnonna Horace Adjolohoun and Paul Nantulya, “Why the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights Matters,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, July 8, 2024, updated February 10, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/why-the-african-court-on-human-and-peoples-rights-matters/>.

Doctrine of Non-Indifference

Among the most significant normative innovations of the African Union is its revolutionary departure from the strict non-interference principle that defined the Organization of African Unity. The OAU's founding commitment to non-interference, while essential for protecting newly independent states from external manipulation during the Cold War era, proved tragically inadequate when confronted with mass atrocities and systematic human rights violations across the continent. A watershed moment prompting this shift was the recognition of the tragic consequences of rigid non-interference, particularly in the face of mass atrocities and human rights violations.

This shift reflects a growing commitment to humanitarian intervention and collective responsibility in addressing human security crises within member states, moving beyond a strict adherence to sovereignty. Enshrined in the AU's Constitutive Act is the organisation's right to intervene in the internal affairs of member states in cases of gross human rights violations.⁷ This provision makes the AU unique among regional organisations, most of which continue to prioritise non-interference and state sovereignty above all else. The establishment of the PSC, the ASF, and the AfCHPR illustrates the institutionalisation of the doctrine of non-indifference. These mechanisms show that the principle has been translated into concrete action, reflecting a regional consensus that, in order to preserve peace and stability, humanitarian intervention, when necessary, must take precedence over absolute sovereignty.

⁷ Matthias Dembinski and Theresa Reinold, "The AU and R2P – From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference?" in *Libya and the Future of the Responsibility to Protect – African and European Perspectives* (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14497.5>.

Continental Powerhouses: The Big Five

The effectiveness of any multilateral organisation fundamentally depends on the commitment and capacity of its most influential members to assume leadership responsibilities and drive collective action. This principle proves especially critical in regional contexts, where powerful states must view continental engagement not merely as diplomatic courtesy but as essential to their own strategic interests. For these nations, active continental engagement represents both a strategic imperative and a reflection of their national interests, as regional developments inevitably influence their own prosperity and security. Within the African context, five nations stand out as continental powerhouses due to their economic strength, political influence, and military capacity, each bringing distinct strengths and contributions to the AU framework.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, consistently supports continental peacekeeping missions including recent efforts in Sudan. South Africa, one of Africa's most industrialised nations and a G20/BRICS member, positions itself as a voice for African interests in global affairs.⁸ Egypt leverages its strategic geographic position linking Africa and the Middle East, along with substantial economic and political influence, to actively shape AU policies on regional peace and security. Kenya plays a crucial role through significant peacekeeping contributions, notably AMISOM in Somalia. Ethiopia serves as the organisation's political and diplomatic center while actively contributing to peacekeeping missions in Sudan and Somalia.

⁸ Stanford University, German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, *Emerging Power or Fading Star? South Africa's Role on the African Continent and Beyond*, conference, Cape Town, July 12–14, 2016.

These continental powerhouses do not operate in isolation but rather work through and alongside a comprehensive network of sub-regional organisations that facilitate deeper integration and cooperation at the regional level. Their influence extends beyond continental-wide initiatives to encompass leadership roles within their respective regional blocs, where they can more effectively coordinate policies and resources with neighboring states.

The Sub-Regional Organisations

In addition to the AU, Africa hosts a network of sub-regional integration and cooperation frameworks that span the entire continent. These include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the West, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in Central Africa, the East African Community (EAC) in the East, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in the North, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the South. Each of these organisations plays an important role in fostering economic integration, advancing political cooperation, and promoting regional stability in ways that reflect the unique characteristics of their respective regions. They serve as crucial platforms for member states to coordinate policies, resolve conflicts, and pursue shared development goals. However, these organisations demonstrate significant variation in effectiveness and institutional capacity. SADC and ECOWAS have achieved notable success in fostering regional integration and managing conflicts, establishing themselves as models of functional regionalism. In contrast, ECCAS and AMU have struggled with institutional weakness, political divisions, and persistent instability that undermines their capacity for meaningful collective action.

The relationship between continental powerhouses and sub-regional organisations creates a multi-layered governance structure where influence flows both upward to the AU level and downward to regional communities. This architecture enables more nuanced approaches to

integration that can accommodate diverse regional priorities while maintaining continental coherence.

Global Significance

The African Union's most profound achievement lies not merely in institutional development but in fundamentally transforming Africa's relationship with the global order. Through a series of landmark initiatives, the AU has evolved from a recipient of externally designed development programmes to an architect of continent-driven solutions that increasingly influence international development discourse and reshape global economic relationships.

New Partnership for Africa's Development

One of the most notable is the adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001, which serves as a strategic framework and technical body to guide Africa's development. The framework's ambitious goals, eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable growth, ending Africa's marginalisation in globalisation, empowering women, and achieving full integration into the global economy, reflected a new continental confidence in defining its own priorities and strategies.

The international community's response validated this African leadership. When the United Nations General Assembly officially endorsed NEPAD in 2002 as the primary framework for Africa's development, it signaled a fundamental change in global development partnerships. Subsequent annual UN resolutions supporting NEPAD have created a sustained platform for monitoring progress and maintaining international commitment, demonstrating the AU's growing influence in shaping global policy priorities and development discourse.

Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want

Currently, NEPAD serves as the implementing agency for the AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, which was adopted in 2015 as a 50-year continental development blueprint. Guided by seven aspirations, Agenda 2063 envisions a prosperous, united, peaceful, and people-centred Africa with strong governance and global influence. It prioritises inclusive growth, cultural identity, and the empowerment of youth and women. Key flagship projects include the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Pan-African e-passport, a high-speed rail network, and the Silencing the Guns initiative by 2030. NEPAD plays a critical role in translating these broad aspirations into concrete programmes and actions across the continent. Moreover, it also serves as an inspiration for other developing countries to look up to Africa's efforts in advancing a comprehensive development agenda.

African Continental Free Trade Area

The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area in 2019 constitutes perhaps the AU's most tangible achievement in reshaping global economic relationships. By creating the world's largest free trade area by participating countries since the World Trade Organisation's founding, the AfCFTA has positioned Africa as a major force in international trade architecture. Encompassing over 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately \$3.4 trillion, the agreement represents more than economic integration, it embodies Africa's determination to leverage collective strength for global competitiveness. Once fully implemented, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could serve as a powerful engine for economic growth across the continent, boosting both intra-African and international trade, while unlocking the full potential of Africa's human and natural resources.

These initiatives collectively reflect the AU's embrace of the principle of "African solutions to African problems", and more broadly, Africa's ownership of its global engagement. These efforts aim to ensure that Africa remains relevant in international affairs. One of the key benefits of the AU is its ability to empower the continent to shape its own destiny and advance its priorities on the global stage. Initiatives like Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and AfCFTA are central to this vision, promoting self-reliance, regional integration, and sustainable development.

Challenges and What Lies Ahead

While regional organisations already demand a significant degree of political will to function effectively, a continental organisation like the AU requires even greater commitment. The AU and the broader integration framework do not exist without challenges. It is often criticised as a "paper tiger": an institution with lofty ambitions but limited practical impact. Enhancing its effectiveness will necessitate not only strong political will but also tangible actions and deeper cooperation among member states. This is particularly difficult given the political realities in several countries.

The Governance Paradox

Perhaps the AU's most fundamental challenge lies in the contradiction between its normative aspirations and the political realities of its membership. While the organisation positions democracy and good governance as central to its mission, a significant portion of African states continue to operate under authoritarian systems characterised by political instability, systematic violence, and armed conflict. This creates a paradox where the AU must promote democratic values through institutions led by governments that may themselves embody the problems the

organisation seeks to address. The absence of legitimate governance at the national level erodes the foundation upon which meaningful continental cooperation must be built.

Underperformance in Conflict Management

Despite adopting ambitious frameworks for conflict resolution and embracing the principle of non-indifference, the AU has consistently underperformed in its core mission of maintaining continental peace and security. While the organisation can point to isolated successes; such as the mediation efforts during Kenya's contested 2007 presidential election; these achievements represent exceptions rather than the norm in AU crisis management. Nevertheless, AU peacekeeping operations have drawn significant criticism for their limited effectiveness. Despite adopting the principle of non-indifference, the organisation struggled to address the Ethiopian conflict and failed to contain the insurgency in the northern part of Mozambique, highlighting persistent gaps in operational capacity and intervention strategies.⁹

Economic Integration as Strategic Imperative

A practical and strategic way to help Africa realise its full potential and sustain its global relevance is through fully utilising the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Africa's demographic dividend, abundant natural resources, and expanding consumer base create unprecedented opportunities for economic transformation. However, realising this potential requires moving beyond the current pattern where African countries remain primarily exporters of raw materials to global markets while importing finished goods. The AfCFTA's success in promoting intra-African trade, fostering industrialisation, and attracting investment will largely

⁹ GIS Reports, "The African Union's 20 Years: The Record and New Challenges," *GIS Reports Online*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/the-african-unions-20-years-the-record-and-new-challenges/>.

determine whether the continent can leverage its advantages for sustained development or remain trapped in dependent relationships with external partners.¹⁰

¹⁰ ALN, “Africa’s Key Priorities for 2025 and Beyond: Charting a Sustainable and Dynamic Future,” *Africa Legal Network (ALN)*, January 23, 2024, <https://aln.africa/news/africas-key-priorities-for-2025-and-beyond-charting-a-sustainable-and-dynamic-future/>.