

## **The Crisis of African Agency and the Rising Role of External Actors in African Conflict Mediation**

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**Nicodemus Minde**

African international relations posits that Africa's peripheral status necessitates a more proactive approach to global issues, a concept known as African agency. There is, however, an erosion of African agency in conflict mediation, with external actors increasingly being involved in peace and security issues on the African continent. The African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), under the slogan "African solutions to African problems," became the main principle that encapsulated African agency. However, they now face operational and institutional weaknesses, funding constraints, and limited enforcement capacity - a gap that has been filled by external actors. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have emerged as key mediators in African conflicts. They are primarily driven by geopolitical ambitions, security concerns, and economic interests, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. The crisis of multilateralism, marked by a decline in global cooperation and shifting power dynamics, has led middle powers to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of Western engagement. To reclaim African agency, it is important to strengthen the AU and African RECs and enhance coordination mechanisms to avoid duplication of peace efforts. Africa must reassert control of its peace agenda by engaging external partners on equal terms. Africa's growing geopolitical importance presents both a challenge and an opportunity to redefine its agency and renew solidarity in a multipolar world.

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### **The Lack of African Agency in African Peace Processes**

The African Union (AU) is the main organization responsible for peace and security in Africa. However, recent developments in conflict mediation in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region indicate a worrying trend. The continent's ability to set its own peace and security agenda and priorities has been weakened by the increasing involvement of external actors in conflict mediation. Additionally, structural and institutional shortcomings exacerbate the limitations of both the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in conflict mediation.

On September 12, 2025, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced that they had agreed to a joint roadmap to end Sudan's civil war, which has been raging since April 2023. On June 27, a peace agreement between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda was reached in Washington. The agreement aims to end one of Africa's deadliest conflicts. Qatar hosted a high-level meeting between the DRC and the Rwandan-backed rebel group, the March 23 Movement (M23), making it one of the key external mediators in the process. While the AU has been involved and participates in these external efforts, there are concerns about its secondary role and its

inability to effectively coordinate mediation efforts in many African conflicts.

While the AU remains a key organization, the rise of external actors, limited enforcement capacity, operational constraints, and complex dynamics within regional economic communities are threatening its core principle of African solutions to African problems, which encapsulates African agency. The mantra “African solutions to African problems” has been challenged, and it is now mockingly referred to as “African solutions with Arab money” following the emergent role of Gulf countries. But what truly explains the emerging external influence of actors, especially from the Gulf, in mediating African conflicts?

The transition of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the AU in 2002 represented a notable shift from previous norms. The new organization embraced a more proactive approach, acknowledging the “right to intervene” in situations involving war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity – which has become an international norm under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. This principle, incorporated into the AU Constitutive Act, embodied Africa’s commitment to take charge of its own peace and security issues. The creation of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the African Standby Force (ASF), and the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) demonstrated this shift.

Despite the advancement of the AU’s normative framework, its operational capabilities have consistently been weak. Reliance on foreign funding, internal political rifts, and restricted logistical resources have all diminished Africa’s capacity to address emerging crises effectively. Consequently, external players - who were previously marginal to African mediation - have increasingly taken on central roles.

Over the years, the AU and RECs, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and regional mechanisms like the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), have mediated in African conflicts through the principle of “African solutions to African Problems “. But this has been challenged as mere rhetoric which lacks tangible results.

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### The Crisis of Multilateralism

Recent global trends point to a situation that has come to be called the “crisis of multilateralism“. This crisis is characterized by a decline in international cooperation and a disregard for agreed-upon normative international foundations. It is also marked by global institutional decay and the rise of nationalist rhetoric, which has effectively led to increased geo-

political and geostrategic competition.

Once at the forefront of international multilateralism, the United Nations (UN) is facing more and more opposition. Other international players, like the European Union (EU), now concentrate on regional issues like the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the geopolitical struggle with the US over NATO. Donald Trump’s return as US president has made this even worse. Particularly in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Trump has frequently questioned the EU and other European nations regarding their contributions to NATO. These factors have shifted the global attention away from Africa’s conflicts and political crises.

One notable example of this decline is the UN’s flagship peacekeeping mission in the DRC, MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo), which is currently coming to an end after almost thirty years of operation. Throughout the years, UN missions have either encountered opposition from the DRC government due to claims of sovereignty violations or been entangled in great power rivalries. The rise of new actors has further fragmented spaces for conflict mediation.

The EU, which has also been involved in the crisis in eastern DRC and promoted international norms such as human rights, good governance, and conflict prevention, is now preoccupied with its own security issues. Furthermore, it is increasingly facing competition from China and Russia, which are asserting their influence on the continent.

The US, on the other hand, has also engaged in the Great Lakes Region and the conflict in eastern DRC. Its involvement has traditionally focused on security and diplomacy, but under Donald Trump, it is increasingly becoming interested in Congo’s critical minerals and resources. The US’s involvement in the agreement between the DRC and Rwanda points to this assertion.

The crisis of multilateralism has also led to the diffusion of global power and the rise of middle powers. In what is now called multipolarity, we see the emergence of Middle powers like Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. These actors are leveraging their wealth as they seek to expand their global reach and influence. Middle powers are using the sentimental narrative of South-South cooperation to engage with countries in Africa. They have done this through investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and energy, among other areas. They are taking advantage of the crisis of multilateralism to strengthen their engagement with Africa.

In contrast, Russia has taken a more direct approach, established military alliances, and provided security support to African nations, especially in Central and West Africa, in exchange for strategic

military cooperation and markets for their military equipment. One example of a new type of interventionism that eschews conventional diplomacy in favor of transactional relationships is the expanding presence of Russian private military contractors in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and the Central African Republic.

The new actors, especially the Gulf ones, are driven by security concerns and common threats like terrorism, which is exemplified by Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Sahel region, as well as forced migration to Gulf countries. The economies of Gulf states depend on important maritime routes like the Red Sea, which are impacted by instability in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. Another motivation is economic incentives, particularly the desire to access Africa's natural resources, such as minerals in the DRC. Furthermore, Gulf states are motivated by geopolitical objectives to balance out established powers like the US and China and expand their worldwide influence. Qatar's reputation on the world stage is improved by its function as an impartial mediator in international conflicts, including those involving Africa.

Gulf states offer significant humanitarian and developmental assistance in addition to their mediation efforts. Saudi Arabia has invested more than \$45 billion in African regions impacted by conflict. With an emphasis on countries like South Sudan and Somalia, Qatar is active in a number of projects through the Qatar Fund for Development, Qatar Charity, and the Qatar Red Crescent Society.

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### What should Africa do?

The diminishing role of Western powers or the conceptual West has left a vacuum that is now being filled by middle powers. This is now being seen in African mediations, which challenge the idea of African agency. African agency has been critical in African international relations. African agency aspires for African states and institutions to engage meaningfully in global affairs, not as pawns but as real actors. The question now is how African agency can be maintained amid the growing influence of external actors. I propose five strategies that can be used to balance African agency with the rise of external actors.

The first is by making a fresh attempt to strengthen the African Union's and African RECs like the SADC, IGAD, and EAC's capabilities. The peace and security architectures of African RECs must be revamped to march new conflict dynamics. Efforts to establish peace funds can help in resolving the funding crisis, even though their institutional capacities have been hindered by resource limitations.

Second, the AU and the RECs should own processes even as they seek to collaborate with external actors. The majority of RECs in Africa have early warning systems in place to promptly notify members of threats such as violence and political instability. These mechanisms ought to be central in every REC in order to handle conflicts effectively.

Thirdly, if the AU and RECs wish to coordinate with external parties, a mediation coordination unit should be established to guarantee that the engagement is significant and that its objectives are in line with African interests and results. This can be accomplished by working with research centers and think tanks in Africa, which can open up avenues for research-oriented solutions and generate synergies.

Fourth, African institutions should avoid duplicating peace efforts, which often complicates peace processes. With the AU, SADC, and EAC all involved, the conflict in the eastern DRC was a classic example of effort duplication. Maintaining African influence in the face of new external mediation requires regional coordination among African RECs and states.

Finally, local organizations and community actors involved in conflict management should be empowered. These include grassroots movements, civil society organizations, and local organizations aware of the conflict's local dynamics. The country in conflict should also be in charge of empowering local actors rather than depending entirely on external players.

Africa's crisis of agency should be viewed as a chance for renewal rather than just a tale of decline. The rise of external actors on the continent reflects Africa's increasing geopolitical significance. Africa is now crucial to the balance of power in the world because of its abundant natural resources, young population, and strategic location. If this is handled carefully, especially now that the AU is part of the G20, then this can be used to leverage Africa's global bargain.

Therefore, Africa has two tasks: strengthening internal cohesion and engaging external partners on its own terms – a key tenet of African agency. Mutual respect and reciprocity, not reliance, should be the guiding principles of external engagement. If African institutions set the agenda and take responsibility for the results, strategic alliances with Western countries, China, and Gulf states can be advantageous.

The AU must simultaneously revive its original principles. The idea of Pan-African solidarity, which was once the moral compass of continental politics, needs to be updated for the contemporary world. African institutions can rebuild trust in their leadership abilities by embracing innovation, openness, and inclusivity. The idea of „African solutions to African problems“ ought to develop into a workable framework based on responsibility rather than a justification for inaction.

## Conclusion

The notable shift in peacebuilding initiatives is an indication of the increasing role of external players, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, in mediating disputes in Africa's Great Lakes region. This change reflects both the changing role of African participation and more general shifts in global governance. Under the tenet of „African solutions to African problems“, African institutions such as the AU and RECs, which have traditionally led peace initiatives, should translate this into tangible results. However, the complexity of the conflicts, political unrest, and a lack of funding have all limited their efficacy. A new element to the situation is the rise of external players as mediators, motivated by geopolitical aspirations, economic interests, and humanitarian diplomacy. While Africa's engagement with external actors has its advantages, it must not come at the detriment of African ownership of African peace processes.

## Author

Dr Nicodemus Minde is a researcher at the East Africa Peace and Security and Governance Programme (EAPSG) at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in Nairobi. He is also an adjunct lecturer in International Relations at the United States International University-Africa (USIU-Africa). His research covers major powers in Africa, foreign policy, peace and conflict in the Great Lakes Region, political parties, and democratization.

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