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A Crowded and Fragmented Security Landscape in Africa: Identifying Three Trends and Their Consequences

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It has been more than a decade since the UN last authorized a multidimensional peacekeeping in Africa, in spite of the continent experiencing the highest number of state-based conflicts in the world. The continent has also seen an exponential proliferation of jihadist groups, resulting in a 300% increase in militant Islamist violence in the decade between 2012 and 2022, with lethality figures related to the violence further increasing between 2022 and 2025. At the same time, Africa has witnessed a new coup wave with 11 successful coups, and 19 coup attempts between 2020 and 2025, resulting in the establishment of new military governments and a strong authoritarian turn especially in the Sahel region. These developments have taken place as the continent has seen a spate of new types of regionalized ad hoc coalitions, mercenary groups, and PMCs, deployed to quell rebellions, counter extremists and stabilize regions, yet often destabilizing them instead.

In this policy brief we identify three trends in Africa's security landscape which have surfaced over the past decade: 1) the decline of multilateralism; 2) the increase of regional ad-hoc missions, and 3) the outsourcing of security to bilateral and private actors. We argue that the current trends are largely contributing to a fragmentation of security governance and an erosion of democracy, human rights and accountability norms which risk feeding into an uncontrolled cycle of violence between state security actors and non-state armed actors with civilians bearing the brunt of such a development. A continued rise of middle powers as security exporters, such as Turkey, Rwanda and the UAE and an increased use of private security actors are likely to define Africa's future security landscape for years to come.

TREND 1: THE DECLINE OF MULTILATERALISM

A first security trend is the decline of multilateralism in Africa, illustrated by the move away from the model of multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions with broad mandates. Indeed, since 2014, the UN has not dispatched any multidimensional peacekeeping mission in the African continent, despite the latter experiencing a grim record of state-based conflicts in 2024: 28 of the record-high global figures of 61 are taking place in Africa. However, the crisis of multilateralism goes beyond Africa and is prompted by a growing number of armed conflicts, re-emerging great power competition and the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which together have contributed to an erosion of legitimacy for international institutions such as the UN, which increasingly has been seen as ineffective or politicized.

Donald Trump's election as US president in 2016 and return to office in 2025 have further undermined multilateralism as the US has withdrawn from positions of global leadership in multilateral institutions. The two Trump administrations have particularly targeted the UN: cutting funding to several UN agencies and exiting the UN Human Rights Council twice, while pushing through a \$600 million cut from the annual peacekeeping budget in 2017 and proposing the elimination of funding for UN peacekeeping in 2025. At the same time, the rise of authoritarian leaders who resist international oversight and accountability, combined with the UN's limited tangible results on the ground, has further eroded host governments' willingness to grant consent – one of the three pillars for regulating UN peacekeeping, for UN engagement.

The crisis of consent in Africa has gone hand in hand with a new and uncompromising wave of Pan-Africanist discourse embracing a superficial sovereignty narrative. Superficial, as the sovereignty narrative mostly has been constructed and instrumentalized by authoritarian regimes who have expelled Western security partners. Yet, some African regimes have entered into new partnerships with non-Western autocratic states, such as Russia, while still often failing to maintain effective control over their territories.

The rejection of multilateral peacekeeping missions has taken multiple forms, from subtle to explicit obstruction of the implementation of peacekeeping mission mandates by host governments to abrupt expulsion of the whole operation. In Mali, the military junta, which seized power in a 2020 coup and later consolidated control through a second coup in 2021, systematically took measures to [obstruct the UN Mission](#) from fulfilling its mandate. It imposed no-fly zones, required 48–72 hours' advance authorization for drone use—often delaying or denying requests—and thereby made it increasingly dangerous for peacekeepers to conduct patrols without adequate reconnaissance. At one point, the Malian army [fired rockets 'close to' British blue helmets](#) of the UN peacekeeping force in the country, while in 2023, it abruptly asked for the [complete withdrawal](#) of the mission.

Yet, while the case of Mali illustrates the most explicit form of a crisis of consent, other recent examples can be found. These include the South Sudan government's actions in November 2025, where, after several years of obstruction, they [demanded that the UN withdraw 70% of its international peacekeeping forces](#), ground its helicopters and close its operating bases and civilian protection sites. In an unusually uncompromising response, in March 2026, the [UN defied calls by the government](#) to shut down one of its bases close to the Ethiopian border, to keep a protective presence for civilians. However, such a forceful response from the UN remains the exception that confirms the rule of a UN in decline.

TREND 2: REGIONALIZED AD HOC COALITIONS

The second trend is the sharp increase in regionalized ad-hoc missions with counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism mandates across the African continent. These newer ad hoc missions fall outside the international and regional frameworks set up for peacekeeping and peace operations but often use the interoperable forces and common culture developed within these frameworks in a type of [institutional exploitation](#). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), composed of troops from five countries: in West and Central Africa (Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria) mandated to fight Boko Haram and secure the Lake Chad Basin is one example of this trend. It was first established in 1994 but only received a counter-terrorism mandate in 2012. It was revived in 2014 with an AU authorization but not an AU mandate, thereby enjoying some legitimacy from the multilateral institution yet avoiding closer accountability mechanisms.

The now defunct G5 Joint Sahel Force,¹ heavily supported by France, is another example of a regional ad hoc counter-terrorism force which was authorized by the AU in 2017 yet did not secure a formal mandate. The Joint Force [dissolved following the coup wave](#) in the Sahel and the subsequent exit by the three Alliance des États Sahélien (AES) states Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. The three latter states declared the [creation of a new joint counter-terrorist force](#) in March 2024 which was launched in December 2025. The force is supposed to be financed by national patriotic funds, while supported with [equipment and weapons from Russia, Turkey, Iran and China](#), none of which are known to be particularly concerned with accountability, civilian oversight or protection of civilians.

The Great Lakes is another region which has seen a proliferation of regionalized ad hoc coalitions in recent years, driven to a certain extent by the notion of ['forum shopping'](#). Forum shopping refers to how a range of African states take up membership of multiple, overlapping Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in negotiating their regional and national identities, but more importantly in this context,

¹ Member states included Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

pursuing different policy goals. The DRC's central position in Africa has made it a champion of forum-shopping with memberships [in seven regional organizations](#),² in addition to the continental membership in the AU.

The DRC has leveraged its membership in the regional organizations to ask for regionalized ad hoc coalitions to assist in quelling rebels. In 2022, just after becoming a member, the DRC asked the East African Community (EAC) to deploy a force to Eastern DRC to neutralize armed groups and stabilize the region. The East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) was [deployed in November the same year](#) under an EAC mandate, yet was only endorsed, not authorized, by the AU. It thereby bypassed the AU's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) framework. Yet, only a year after its deployment, the DRC government - disappointed with the force's progress and lack of offensive operations - [asked for it to leave](#).

Instead, the Congolese government used its membership in the South African Development Community (SADC) to call for the deployment of a new, more offensive force. SAMIDRC was deployed in December 2023 as a regional intervention force under the [principle of collective self-defence](#) from the SADC Mutual Defence Pact in 2003, yet was only [endorsed by the AU in March](#) 2024, thus avoiding a broader regional multilateral framework. In March 2025, after failing to protect two major cities, Goma and Sake, against rebel takeover in the East of the DRC, [the regional force commenced its withdrawal](#).

The proliferation of these types of regionalised, ad hoc coalitions contributes to a more fragmented security landscape. Their focus on kinetic counter-terrorism objectives in line with the demands from the host government, rather than peacekeeping or peacebuilding also means that there is no explicit attempt for a political solution to the situation. If successful in quelling rebels or terrorists, which none of these missions could be said to have been so far, the effect is likely to be short

2 Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (ECGLC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (ECCAS), the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), Eastern African Community (EAC).

term, given that the underlying causes of conflict remain unaddressed. The fact that they bypass institutional oversight, regulations and frameworks by not deploying through a multilateral organisation also means that the operations avoid demands for accountability and transparency. Coming back to the case of the DRC, after the departure of two regional forces within two years, Congolese president Felix Tshisekedi decided to turn to private actors instead, illustrating the third security trend on the African continent: security outsourcing.

TREND 3: SECURITY OUTSOURCING

The last decade has seen an upsurge of private military contractors (PMCs) and mercenary activities on the African continent, the most visible being those of the Russian Wagner group. Alongside these private security actors are states that conclude bilateral counter-terrorism or security provision deals with regional neighbors, such as Rwanda, surnamed [‘the gendarme of Africa’](#), because of its diverse deployments abroad. What bilateral security providers such as Rwanda have in common with private security providers are their propensity to propose and accept offers from governments in need of security assistance without imposing any specific conditionalities related to international rules of armed conflict, nor asking any difficult questions about the legitimacy and legality of the regime in charge, or of the operation itself. Yet, whereas [Rwanda has a track record as one of the UN's top peacekeeping](#) providers and a good reputation in that domain (in contrast to its military involvement in the DRC), the private security actors are often associated with human rights abuses, torture and civilian targeting.

The Wagner group has made [the rounds in Africa](#) since 2017-2018, when it became involved in [gold mining](#) and security training in Sudan, intervening in [Libya's civil war](#) in 2019, while making the Central African Republic (CAR) its flagship comprehensive deployment through [military, political and economic cooperation](#), after a short, failed stunt in Mozambique in 2018. Indeed, while in Sudan it has been relatively discreet, in CAR the combination of military services, including bodyguard protection of the President, exploitation of natural resources such as

timber and diamond, and the political interference in the re-election of the latter at the same time as it has started Russian language courses in Bangui, has made it [the epicenter and example](#) of the bandwidth of the group. Absent from that description are the many human rights abuses that the group has made itself guilty of in CAR, including [“excessive use of force, indiscriminate killings, the occupation of schools and looting on a large scale”](#), according to the UN Panel of Expert.

However, it is in Mali that the Wagner group has cemented its reputation as a perpetrator rather than a protector. The massacre in the Malian town of Moura in March 2022, when nearly 500 civilians were killed is one of the more publicized events. Yet the Wagner group has been involved in attacks [targeting civilians in several other locations](#) in the country, and also accused of [transforming military bases to torture centers](#), while kidnappings, arbitrary arrests and systematic torture are part of the brutal counter terrorist approach applied by the Russians. More broadly, the Wagner group – which in May 2025 was substituted by its successor, the Africa Corps, an entity more closely linked to the Russian Defense – has been fighting Tuareg separatists and Jihadist groups alongside the Malian armed forces. However, it has so far been largely unsuccessful in preventing the spread of the Jihadists in the country and beyond, in spite of having ‘instructors’ in neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso as well. Instead it has [alienated the local population](#) through its abuses, and suffered [large casualties](#) itself, demonstrating the limits of its brutal approach. Russian mercenary groups are nevertheless not the only ones in Africa.

Congolese President Tshisekedi whose enthusiasm for outsourcing his security concerns to foreign actors far outweighs his efforts to reform and improve the national security forces, has also dipped his toes into the murky waters of mercenary business. Nobody has forgotten the somewhat humiliating photos of Romanian mercenaries delivering themselves to the UN in January 2025 at the M23’s takeover of Goma. The majority of the mercenaries came from the second of the [two private military firms hired by the DRC](#) government in late 2022: Agemira, made up of about 40 former French security personnel, and the

second firm headed by a Transylvanian former French legionnaire, which at one point supposedly had about 1,000 troops in the DRC. The Congolese government was nevertheless not discouraged from this experience, and [struck a deal with the American mercenary Erik Prince](#), the founder of the PMC Blackwater, in 2025. The deal includes the deployment of predominantly Colombian mercenaries to provide security for the country’s mines and oversee tax collection systems. Prince has however not been limiting himself to the DRC however, but has also proposed services of [protecting Christians in Nigeria](#), President Trump’s recent pet project to secure Christian voters’ support at home.

Thanks to the Wagner group’s heavy mediatization and Prince’s previous (in)famous career, Turkish PMC Sadat, also surnamed ‘Turkish Wagner’ has managed to expand its presence on the continent relatively discreetly. Starting with missions in Libya already in 2013, it has since expanded its operations in the country since 2019, while [multiple sources report](#) its presence as trainers and troops for counter terrorism operations in Somalia, a strong partner of Turkey, something that was [denied](#) by the organization in 2025. SADAT has also been rumored to have provided around [1,000 troops to Niger](#) to protect mines, military bases and other infrastructure, yet there is no clear confirmation about this. What is clear however, is that through SADAT, Turkey is able to further its own foreign policy in Africa together with its drone diplomacy, while playing in the infamous grey zone of PMCs heavily linked to state authorities.

So are, of course, the many Chinese private/state security companies popping up around Chinese mining and infrastructure sites on the continent. A network of Chinese state-linked security contractors are now operating across [14 African countries, employing former People’s Liberation Army \(PLA\) personnel](#) to protect its workers. So far however, these companies differ from the Russian and Turkish private security companies in that they have been focused on protecting its own companies and citizens and not directly proposed their services to foreign governments. This is nevertheless more likely to be a question of time, given the rapid proliferation of companies in Africa, and the market for it.

The African security landscape has also welcomed Rwanda's rise as a continental gendarme, willing and able to intervene to counter rebels and terrorists both in its own region and beyond. In CAR, Rwanda has [deployed its own force alongside the UN peacekeeping](#) mission under a bilateral defense agreement in 2021, while simultaneously maintaining its contribution to the UN mission. It has, over the years since, [shared space with the Russian Wagner group](#), dividing tasks and influence in the country's security and economic sectors. Since 2021, Rwanda has also deployed troops to [quell a jihadist insurgency in Cabo Delgado](#), Mozambique, resulting in a close relationship with France, as it recently permitted French TotalEnergies to resume its \$20 billion gas project in Palma, after five years of suspension. Three years ago, Rwanda also seemed to be on the verge of deploying troops to Benin for a counter-terrorism operation to protect borders after [signing a military cooperation deal](#), yet so far this has not materialized.

CONCLUSION

Africa's security landscape is mirroring the global security situation, characterized by growing authoritarianism, militarization and privatization of security. The three trends identified here: the decline of multilateralism, regionalized ad hoc coalitions and security outsourcing are all contributing to a fragmentation of security governance and an erosion of norms of accountability, transparency and democracy. These trends also showcase a shift from earlier types of multilateral peace operations which aimed for political settlements and sustainable peacebuilding, towards kinetic, military responses to immediate threats with no clear ambition to address the root causes of the armed conflict or insurgency.

In the short to medium term, a return of broad UN peacekeeping missions to Africa is unlikely. If the UN is to survive the current crisis, it will need to adapt to the context and reinvent itself through hybrid mandates and custom-made missions. Yet, in the contemporary conflict context it is also probable that it would have to forsake some of its core principles, such as impartiality, to carve out a place for itself in the African conflict landscape.

The UN has already strongly drifted towards supporting governments in place in the face of insurgents and terrorism, Mali and the DRC are examples of this. However, it has remained ready to denounce human rights abuses and transgressions by the same governments, which ultimately has preserved its legitimacy and principle of impartiality. If the UN were to abandon that watchdog role, it would also lose one of its main assets.

The ongoing privatization and outsourcing of security to private and bilateral actors is likely to continue in the coming years for three reasons. First, the (non-) state armed conflicts that are plaguing the continent at the moment are not close to being over any time soon. Partly because the national responses are military rather than political and therefore avoiding addressing the root causes, and partly because war economies generate profit for certain actors, which reduces incentives to end the conflicts. Second, the military rulers that came into power through coups during the past five years have made it clear that they are there to stay. Regime maintenance services will thus remain in demand, whether from private PMCs or bilateral authoritarian security actors.

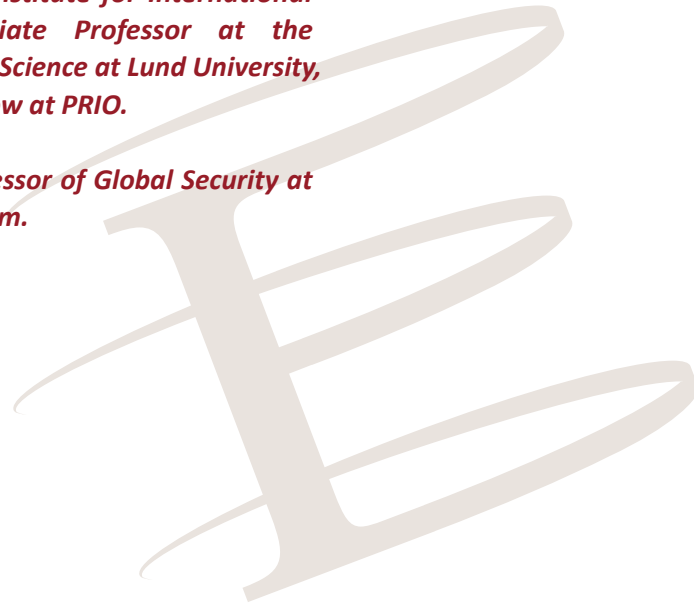
Finally, the war in Ukraine risks producing an [influx of demobilized and battle-hardened soldiers](#) from both Russia and Ukraine which will look for new sources of income. African conflicts are most likely high on the list of places to consider, especially given the continuous demand. While Ukrainian soldiers may choose Western high-paying states keen to develop their drone warfare capabilities, they are unlikely to be able to absorb the approximately 350,000 – 500,000 troops that are expected to demobilize, making African states a viable second option, especially as it would entail them to fight Russians in another theater.

Addressing this fragmentation will require renewed political commitment to multilateralism and stronger mechanisms to regulate emerging security actors, in Africa and beyond. Yet, so far, the political will and capacity to do so are left wanting.



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