

From Rhetoric to Reality: Analyzing the Structural and Financial Constraints of the African Union Silencing the Guns Initiative

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601448>

Received: 08 July 2026; Accepted: 13 July 2026; Published: 23 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This article offers a rigorous institutional, structural, and financial evaluation of the African Union's (AU) flagship initiative, "Silencing the Guns in Africa," within the broader socio-economic transformation matrix of Agenda 2063. Despite progressive normative shifts from the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) rigid Westphalian principle of non-interference to the AU's robust posture of non-indifference, the strategic milestone to eliminate conflicts has suffered from recurring implementation paralysis, forcing an operational timeline extension from 2020 to 2030. Integrating Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's Greed and Grievance model, Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace theory, and Ted Robert Gurr's Relative Deprivation framework, this study examines the deep systemic bottlenecks that impede continental collective security operations. Methodologically, this inquiry deploys a qualitative content analysis and institutional audit triangulation, referencing macro-regional dynamics within the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Trans-Sahelian Corridor, and the Horn of Africa. The findings reveal that the initiative is heavily constrained by three systemic pathologies: the Subsidiarity Gridlock (jurisdictional turf wars between Addis Ababa and regional bodies), the Sovereignty Paradox (the strategic deployment of Westphalian sovereignty to block early prevention against legalistic autocratization), and severe Financial Constraints (chronic external funding dependency for Peace Support Operations). The study concludes that kinetic reductionism focusing on hardware symptoms like tracking small arms cannot suppress violence while demand-side software drivers like horizontal inequalities remain unaddressed. It recommends codifying absolute legal operational hierarchies, institutionalizing independent human security review panels, and fully capitalizing the AU Peace Fund through internal revenue mechanisms to achieve a sustainable positive peace.

Keywords: Silencing the Guns, APSA, Sovereignty Paradox, Subsidiarity Gridlock, Financial Sovereignty, Positive Peace.

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 21st century generated widespread optimism for a rejuvenated African continent, encapsulated by the institutional mutation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) in 2002 (Welz, 2021). Central to this mutation was a collective declaration to break away from decades of devastating conflicts and pave a sustainable path toward socio-economic development and human security (Mlambo, 2021). This political will culminated in the adoption of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, a 50-year blueprint for continental transformation. Under its fourth aspiration—"A Peaceful and Secure Africa"—the AU launched its flagship project, the "Silencing the Guns" initiative (African Union, 2015). The original goal was strikingly ambitious: to rid the continent of all wars, civil conflicts, gender-based violence, and humanitarian disasters by the year 2020 (African Union, 2016).

However, the arrival of the 2020 baseline did not bring about a conflict-free continent. Instead, it exposed a stark, expanding gap between institutional rhetoric and real-world security dynamics. The persistence of active conflict theaters across the continent—ranging from the asymmetric insurgencies in the Trans-Sahelian Corridor and the Lake Chad Basin to the institutionalized civil wars in the Horn of Africa and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—forced the 14th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly in December 2020 to formally extend the initiative's deadline to 2030 (African Union, 2020).

This paper critically analyzes the structural and financial impediments that have transformed this progressive policy blueprint into an unfulfilled aspiration. It looks past surface-level explanations of political instability to investigate a more fundamental institutional contradiction: Why does a normatively advanced collective security architecture suffer from systemic paralysis when attempting to prevent or transform armed conflict?

The core thesis posits that the "Silencing the Guns" initiative is undermined by an institutional reliance on kinetic reductionism. By treating the physical presence of weapons as the primary cause of conflict rather than as an explosive symptom of broken domestic social contracts, the AU routinely focuses its resources on reactive military containment while leaving the underlying demand-side software drivers—such as structural governance deficits, absolute poverty, legalistic autocratization, and extreme horizontal inequalities—largely unaddressed.

Background to the Study

The Normative Mutation: From Non-Interference to Non-Indifference

The baseline for contemporary African collective security was established during the transition from the OAU to the AU. Founded in 1963, the OAU prioritized protecting fragile, newly independent states from external neo-imperial intervention. This was achieved by enshrining a strict interpretation of Westphalian sovereignty, characterized by absolute state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states (OAU, 1963).

While this defensive framework was historically necessary to build post-colonial statehood, it created a severe structural paradox. The OAU's strict non-interference clause effectively rendered the organization a passive bystander to domestic autocratic excesses, human rights violations, and catastrophic internal structural violence (Khadiagala, 2018). During this era, the state frequently mutated from being a protector of human security into the primary source of domestic insecurity and marginalization (Ayoob, 1995).

The operational and moral limits of this rigid Westphalian paradigm were exposed during the post-Cold War era. The abrupt withdrawal of superpower patronage destabilized clientelistic regimes across the continent, triggering long-suppressed ethnic, economic, and identity-based grievances (Clapham, 1996). This institutional paralysis was tragically illustrated by the complete collapse of the state in Somalia in 1991 and the execution of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, where over 800,000 citizens were systematically murdered while regional and international frameworks stood frozen in bureaucratic gridlock (Melvern, 2000).

These humanitarian disasters drove a profound normative shift from "state sovereignty as non-interference" to sovereignty as responsibility (Deng et al., 1996). This shift directly shaped the AU Constitutive Act of 2000, which formally institutionalized the norm of non-indifference. Most notably, Article 4(h) represents a revolutionary departure from classical international law by granting the Union an explicit, legally binding mandate to intervene directly within a member state under grave circumstances, specifically encompassing war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity (African Union, 2000).

Historical Path Dependencies of African Insecurity

Despite this progressive normative shift, contemporary conflict trajectories remain bound by historical path dependencies. The structural origins of modern continental instability are rooted in the arbitrary cartographic boundaries drawn during the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference (Rodney, 2012). These artificial borders split

cohesive pre-colonial socio-political communities apart while forcing historically antagonistic ethnic and political entities together within single, highly centralized state structures (Mamdani, 1996).

Furthermore, the extractive economic architectures set up by colonial administrations were explicitly designed to export raw primary commodities to metropolitan core economies while systematically underdeveloping domestic manufacturing, human capital, and internal trade networks (Amin, 1972). Post-colonial African states inherited these highly dependent economies, leaving them structurally vulnerable to volatile global market fluctuations and unequal terms of trade.

During the Cold War, these structural vulnerabilities were further aggravated by superpower proxy rivalries. Both global blocs treated Africa as a strategic chessboard, funneling massive quantities of small arms and military hardware to repressive client regimes in exchange for ideological alignment and resource access (Leftwich, 2000). When the Cold War ended and this external funding dried up, these militarily bloated but structurally fragile state apparatuses fractured, allowing illicit arms networks and opportunistic non-state armed actors to easily hijack deep-seated domestic grievances.

The Evolution of Continental Conflict Trajectories (1990–2026)

Empirical conflict repositories document a notable transformation in the nature of political violence across Africa over the last three decades (Pettersson & Öberg, 2020). The immediate post-Cold War era (1990–2005) was dominated by highly destructive, resource-fueled interstate and conventional intrastate wars featuring distinct rebel armies fighting state militaries for control of capital cities or mineral reserves, as observed in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and the DRC (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

In contrast, the contemporary security landscape (2006–2026) is characterized by a major rise in asymmetric, fluid, and highly fragmented non-state conflicts. Modern conflict spaces are increasingly populated by a complex array of violent extremist organizations, localized self-defense militias, ethnically mobilized factions, and transnational criminal syndicates operating across porous border regions (International Crisis Group, 2024). This structural shift is visible across three main macro-theaters of instability:

Macro-Theater	Key Non-State Actors	Primary Conflict Drivers
The Trans-Saharan Corridor	JNIM, ISGS, localized ethnic militias	Structural state neglect, environmental degradation, collapse of agricultural economies, exploitation of youth marginalization (Falode, 2019).
The Lake Chad Basin	Boko Haram, ISWAP	Deep-seated economic abandonment, structural marginalization, porous borders, active war economies.
The Horn of Africa & East Africa	Al-Shabaab, factionalized military elites	Fragmented state architectures, ethnic federalism disputes, weak regional institutional coherence (Williams, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical Matrix

Greed and Grievance Theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004)

The econometric approach pioneered by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004) argues that civil conflicts occur where conditions make rebellion economically feasible and profitable for rebel elites. Under the Greed Thesis, primary commodity dependence provides easily lootable resource rents (alluvial diamonds, oil, timber, rare earth minerals) that can fund insurgencies and sustain illicit black markets. Warlords, corrupt officials, and arms brokers operate as profit-maximizing conflict entrepreneurs who have a strong financial interest in preventing peace, as a continuous state of lawlessness allows them to extract wealth with impunity (Keen, 1998).

Conversely, the Grievance Thesis, expanded by Frances Stewart's (2008) theory of Horizontal Inequalities, emphasizes that severe, systematic disparities in political power, economic assets, and social services between culturally or ethnically defined groups provide the collective identity and moral legitimacy needed to mobilize mass rebellions. In contemporary African contexts, greed and grievance reinforce each other within deep-seated war economies.

Perpetual Peace Theory (Kant, 1795)

Evaluating the institutional design of collective security architectures requires engagement with Immanuel Kant's liberal internationalist tradition. Kant (1795) argued that permanent peace is not a spontaneous state of nature but an institutional structure that must be actively constructed through three definitive pillars: republican governance (representative constitutions with institutional separation of powers), a pacific federation (foedus pacificum—a voluntary alliance of free states committed to international law), and cosmopolitan rights (universal hospitality). Modern Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) extensions formalize the empirical claim that representative, accountable governance introduces institutional checks and balances and shared normative values that lower the risk of states resorting to armed coercion (Doyle, 1983; Russett, 1993).

When applied to Africa, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA) function conceptually as a Kantian pacific federation. However, their execution is constrained by widespread legalistic autocratization and democratic backsliding, where ruling elites manipulate constitutional provisions and eliminate term limits to insulate themselves from public accountability, dismantling the domestic institutional checks necessary for regional stability (Diamond, 2015).

Frustration-Aggression and Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970)

To capture the socio-psychological drivers of violence, this matrix integrates Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) Relative Deprivation framework. Gurr defines relative deprivation as the perceived discrepancy between a group's value expectations (the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are justifiably entitled) and their value capabilities (the goods and conditions they think they are actually capable of getting and keeping). When systemic corruption, structural exclusion, and high youth unemployment block alternative livelihoods, it generates a profound psychological tension. This collective frustration accumulates over time until minor socio-political triggers displace it into explosive, violent aggression against the state or rival social groups.

Conceptual Review: The Trap of Kinetic Reductionism

A core conceptual gap within current AU policy execution is the reliance on kinetic reductionism. This approach collapses the multidimensional nature of systemic insecurity into the singular metric of active firearm deployment and active physical battlefield violence. This focus aligns closely with Johan Galtung's (1969) concept of Negative Peace—the temporary absence of direct, kinetic physical violence.

By prioritizing direct disarmament, demobilization, and physical weapons tracking (the hardware of conflict), the AU's operational strategy tends to treat the visible symptoms of political violence while ignoring what Galtung defines as Structural Violence (the invisible institutional arrangements, systemic inequalities, and legal frameworks that deny marginalized groups basic human security) and Cultural Violence (the ideological and religious narratives used to legitimize direct force). Achieving sustainable Positive Peace requires moving past the simple suppression of weapons to dismantle these structural demand vectors, ensuring that the socio-economic and political root causes of violence are resolved.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a qualitative institutional audit and content analysis triangulation design to systematically examine the structural and financial operations of the AU's peace architecture. The analytical framework is divided into three distinct operational vectors:

- **Documentary Analysis:** A comprehensive evaluation of official supranational texts, including the AU Constitutive Act (2000), the PSC Protocol (2002), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG, 2007), the Lusaka Master Roadmap (2016), and official AU Assembly declarations up to 2026.
- **Macro-Regional Comparative Tracking:** Cross-referencing institutional reports with empirical conflict trends and security assessments compiled by independent tracking bodies—such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)—focusing on operational friction points within Regional Economic Communities (RECs), specifically the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), ECOWAS, and IGAD.
- **Thematic Coding Matrix:** Systematically coding manifest and latent institutional texts against the core research hypotheses to isolate structural pathologies (the Sovereignty Paradox, the Subsidiarity Gridlock) and trace the operational flows of the AU Peace Fund.

Discussion: Structural and Financial Constraints

The Sovereignty Paradox: Article 4(g) vs. Article 4(h)

The primary structural impediment paralyzing the AU's conflict intervention framework is the Sovereignty Paradox, an institutional contradiction embedded within the AU Constitutive Act itself. The peace architecture attempts to balance two fundamentally incompatible international law principles: Article 4(g) enshrines non-interference by the Union in the internal affairs of member states, preserving traditional Westphalian sovereignty, while Article 4(h) establishes the right of the Union to intervene in a member state pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances: war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity (African Union, 2000).

In practice, member states actively weaponize Article 4(g) as a legal shield to insulate their regimes from timely continental oversight. This trend is particularly evident during episodes of legalistic autocratization, where incumbent regimes use strategic lawfare to alter constitutions, remove presidential term limits, suppress political opposition, and manipulate electoral frameworks (Binningsbø et al., 2012; Diamond, 2015). Because the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) is composed of sitting state executives, it consistently hesitates to flag these structural governance abuses as imminent threats to regional security. The AU's early-warning mechanisms (such as the Continental Early Warning System—CEWS) regularly generate clear alerts during the upstream stages of political manipulation, but the PSC remains politically paralyzed by the norm of non-interference. Consequently, the AU is structurally barred from intervening until a domestic crisis turns kinetic and breaks out into open warfare, moving it from a proactive preventive body to a reactive damage-control mechanism.

The Subsidiarity Gridlock and Institutional Friction with RECs

Under the 2002 PSC Protocol, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are designated as the functional institutional pillars of APSA (Engel & Porto, 2010). The operational relationship between the central AU Commission in Addis Ababa and the sub-regional bodies (such as ECCAS, ECOWAS, and SADC) is governed by the principle of subsidiarity, which implies that local security challenges should be managed by the regional mechanism closest to the conflict theater. However, this decentralized structure has degenerated into a Subsidiarity Gridlock characterized by intense institutional competition, overlapping mandates, and uncoordinated mediation efforts.

In regions like Central Africa (ECCAS), this friction is worsened by a breakdown in the early warning-to-response pipeline. Regional standby forces—such as the Forces Armées de l'Afrique Centrale (FOMAC) under ECCAS—frequently suffer from severe command delays, conflicting national loyalties among contributing states, and a lack of harmonized standard operating procedures with the African Standby Force (ASF). Furthermore, when political crises erupt, rebel forces and target governments frequently exploit these fragmented institutional lines to engage in "forum shopping". By pitting competing mediation teams from the AU, a regional

bloc, and external bilateral actors against one another, belligerents successfully delay negotiations, stall peace processes, and prolong active hostilities to protect their wartime economic interests.

Financial Constraints and the Perils of Resource Dependency

The most acute operational limitation undermining the "Silencing the Guns" framework is the chronic absence of financial sovereignty. Sustainable collective security requires a reliable, autonomous financial baseline. Article 22 of the PSC Protocol established the AU Peace Fund to provide the necessary resources for operationalizing APSA pillars, focusing on three specialized thematic windows: (1) Mediation and Preventive Diplomacy, (2) Institutional Capacity, and (3) Peace Support Operations (PSOs).

To institutionalize financial independence, the July 2016 AU Assembly adopted the historic Kigali Decision (AU/Dec.605 XXI-VII), which mandated all 55 member states to institute a 0.2% import levy on eligible non-African goods to fully fund the Union's operational budget and endow the Peace Fund with an initial internal capital baseline of \$400 million. However, an institutional review demonstrates a major implementation deficit regarding the Kigali targets: only 16 states implemented it by 2018, rising to just 17 states by 2025.

As a direct consequence of this dismal compliance rate, the funding of continental peace and security remains dependent on external actors. For instance, a substantial share of the AU's peace support and stabilization missions budget continues to be funded by international partners like the European Union, the United Nations, and bilateral Western donors. This extreme structural dependency creates a clear principal-agent dilemma that compromises the strategic independence and ownership of African peace initiatives. External funding streams are frequently rigid, tied to the geostrategic priorities of foreign donors, and heavily skewed toward short-term counter-terrorism or kinetic containment operations rather than long-term, community-led upstream conflict transformation and peacebuilding. When global geopolitical priorities shift or traditional external funding dries up—as observed in the severe financial crises afflicting transition missions like the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and its successor, the AU Stabilization Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM)—the AU's operational capacity collapses, leaving fragile transition zones highly vulnerable to immediate conflict relapse.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The transition from the ambitious rhetoric of the 2020 "Silencing the Guns" milestone to the extended 2030 roadmap underscores the limits of top-down, over-militarized collective security models. This study demonstrates that the persistence of violent conflict across Africa is not caused by a lack of normatively advanced policy frameworks, but by deep-seated structural and financial contradictions built directly into the continental architecture.

The Sovereignty Paradox permits member states to hide behind the principle of non-interference, effectively blocking early structural interventions against autocratization and constitutional manipulation until after internal grievances erupt into kinetic warfare. Concurrently, the Subsidiarity Gridlock generates institutional friction that fragments mediation responses, while a chronic failure to implement internal revenue mechanisms leaves the AU Peace Fund dependent on external financing.

Ultimately, guns cannot be silenced by simply tracking physical weapons or deploying reactive military containment missions. If the underlying structural violence, systemic governance deficits, absolute poverty, and lucrative war economies are left intact, new flows of weapons will continuously enter unstable spaces. To achieve a durable positive peace, the AU must abandon kinetic reductionism and commit to a comprehensive human security approach that addresses the structural demand-side drivers of violence.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

- 1. Codify an Absolute Legal Operational Hierarchy Over RECs:** The AU Commission and the PSC should formalize a legally binding protocol that establishes a strict operational hierarchy over Regional Economic Communities (RECs) during active security crises. This framework must clearly define jurisdictional lines, eliminate duplicate mediation tracks to prevent forum shopping, and mandate the synchronization of regional early warning indicators with the central CEWS pipeline.
- 2. Institutionalize an Independent Autonomous Human Security Review Panel:** To bypass the political paralysis caused by the Sovereignty Paradox within the PSC, the AU should establish an independent, non-political Human Security Review Panel. Composed of jurists, human rights experts, and civil society representatives, this panel should possess the explicit statutory authority to monitor domestic governance trends, flag strategic lawfare and constitutional manipulations, and trigger mandatory preventive diplomacy reviews before internal crises turn kinetic.
- 3. Enforce Compliance with the Kigali 0.2% Import Levy Mechanism:** The AU should introduce clear financial accountability measures and penalty clauses for member states that fail to implement the 0.2% import levy. True financial sovereignty and ownership of the peace architecture require a fully capitalized, internally funded Peace Fund that can independently plan and sustain long-term conflict prevention and stabilization operations without external donor restrictions.
- 4. Transition from Kinetic Disarmament to Community-Led Livelihood Pacts:** The AU Silencing the Guns Unit should redesign its Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) operational manuals. Instead of relying on individual cash-for-weapons programs—which often treat the symptoms of violence—the AU should pioneer Community-Led Livelihood Transformation Pacts. These programs should channel resources into restructuring local rural economies, resolving environmental degradation, and providing sustainable agricultural or manufacturing jobs for marginalized youth, directly raising the opportunity cost of rebel recruitment.

Recommendations for Further Research

- **The Micro-Dynamics of War Economies:** Conducting localized, field-based empirical studies on the informal financial networks and cross-border smuggling routes that fund contemporary non-state armed groups in the Sahel and Central Africa.
- **The Quantitative Impact of UNSC Resolution 2719:** Assessing the long-term operational and strategic implications of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 regarding the predictable financing of AU-led peace support operations.
- **Integrating Indigenous Conflict Transformation Models:** Investigating practical methodologies for structurally embedding historically validated African restorative justice frameworks (such as Ubuntu ontology or traditional elder mediation councils) into the formal, track-one diplomatic structures of the AU and RECs.

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