
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Does Regional Security in Africa Exist Only in Name or in Reality? An Appraisal on Regional Security Structure in Africa

Emem Lawrence Etuk

University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Emem Lawrence Etuk, **E-mail:** olotuadebeayo1990@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines whether regional security in Africa functions as a practical and effective mechanism or merely exists as a formal institutional framework. The study analyzes the structure, mandates, and performance of continental and sub-regional security organizations such as the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS); the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Economic Community of Central African State (ECCAS) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Using a qualitative analytical approach, the paper evaluates selected case studies of conflict management, peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism efforts, and responses to unconstitutional changes of government across different regions of the continent. The findings reveal a paradox within Africa's regional security architecture. While significant institutional frameworks - such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have been established and have recorded notable interventions, implementation gaps, political inconsistencies, inadequate funding, dependence on external actors, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine effectiveness. Instances of selective application of the "zero tolerance" principle against unconstitutional changes of government further expose credibility challenges. The study concludes that regional security in Africa exists both in name and in partial reality. Although the structures are formally operational and have achieved measurable successes, their capacity to deliver sustainable peace remains constrained by structural, political, and financial limitations. The paper recommends strengthening institutional autonomy, improving funding mechanisms, enhancing coordination among regional bodies, and ensuring consistent enforcement of democratic norms to transform regional security from a predominantly normative framework into a fully functional reality.

| KEYWORDS

Regional Security, Collective Defence Mechanism, Peacekeeping Operations, Conflict Prevention, Military Alliances, Sovereignty

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1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the architecture of global security, shifting significant attention from bipolar superpower rivalry to regional dynamics as primary arenas of conflict and cooperation.¹ In this evolving landscape, the concept of *regional security* emerged as a central pillar of international relations theory and practice.

¹Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (2nd ed., Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991), p. 86.

Scholars argue that security interdependence is often geographically clustered, making regions critical units of analysis in understanding patterns of conflict and cooperation.²

Regional organizations were consequently established or revitalized to address shared security threats, promote collective defense, and foster political and economic integration among neighboring states. In Africa, institutions such as the (AU), the (ECOWAS), the (SADC), the (IGAD), the (ECCAS), and the (AMU) were created with mandates that explicitly include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and collective security. These frameworks reflect broader continental commitments such as the AU's principle of non-indifference and the establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).³ Regional Security refers to the protection, stability, and peace within a specific geographical area (region) where neighbouring countries work together to prevent and manage threats.⁴ Put differently, regional security is when countries in the same area cooperate to keep their region safe and stable. It focuses on keeping a particular region safe from dangers such as: war or armed conflict, terrorism, political instability, economic crises, cyber threats, and cross-border crime such as human trafficking, smuggling, among others.

Despite these institutional developments, persistent armed conflicts, unconstitutional changes of government, terrorism, insurgencies, and cross-border crimes continued to characterize many regions, particularly in Africa.⁵ From insurgencies in the Sahel to protracted crises in the Horn of Africa and parts of Central Africa, the recurrence of insecurity raised a fundamental question: does regional security function as an effective mechanism for maintaining peace, or does it exist largely as a formal structure without substantive impact?

This paper interrogates the gap between institutional design and operational reality. It examines whether regional security arrangements have moved beyond declaratory commitments to produce measurable and sustainable security outcomes. By analyzing the theoretical foundations of regional security, the operational capacity of regional organizations, and selected case studies of interventions and failures, the study seeks to determine whether regional security is a lived reality or merely a nominal construct.

Ultimately, while regional security frameworks represent significant normative and institutional progress, their effectiveness appears constrained by deficits in political will, resource limitations, sovereignty sensitivities, and external influences.⁶ The central task, therefore, is not simply to question the existence of regional security, but to evaluate the conditions under which it becomes genuinely operational rather than rhetorically symbolic.

2. Literature Review

The concept of regional security has been a central theme in international relations scholarship, particularly in the post-Cold War era when multilateral security governance became more prominent. Early theoretical work on security communities by Deutsch *et al.* emphasizes the normative dimensions of regional cooperation, arguing that shared identities and interdependence can produce durable peace among states within a region.⁷ Alongside this normative foundation, Buzan and Wæver's Copenhagen School expanded the discourse by illustrating how security is socially constructed and subject to political processes within regions, thereby challenging unitary state-centric paradigms.⁸ These foundational frameworks have influenced subsequent analyses of regional security architectures, investigating both their institutional evolution and practical effectiveness.

²Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 76.

³Adekeye Adebajo, *The Curse of Berlin: Africa After the Cold War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), p. 87.

⁴Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa* (2nd ed., Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

⁶African Union, *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union* (Addis Ababa, 2002), p. 21.

⁷Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁸Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, "Regional Security Complex Theory: A Framework for Conceptualizing Regional Security," *Mershon International Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (1996): 31–95.

Empirical research on regional organizations has illustrated a broad spectrum of institutional designs and operational capacities. In *Regional Security in the Global System*, Buzan and Weaver characterize regional security frameworks as varying significantly in strength and coherence, shaped by historical legacies, power asymmetries, and external influence.⁹ For example, in Europe, the institutionalization of collective security through the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is widely viewed as robust, both theoretically and operationally.¹⁰ By contrast, research on African regional security institutions illustrates persistent gaps between policy frameworks and implementation.¹¹ The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), encompassing mechanisms such as the Peace and Security Council and the African Standby Force, represents a normative milestone, yet scholars highlight recurring challenges in deployment capacity, funding, and political will.¹²

Critical voices have emphasized the discrepancy between institutional commitments and real-world impact. Englebort and Tull argue that many regional security organizations reflect symbolic commitments - espoused principles that are poorly aligned with member states' interests or capacities to act decisively.¹³ Weiss and others contend that this "decoupling" can render regional security arrangements more aspirational than operational, particularly when confronted with complex crises such as civil war, insurgency, or cross-border terrorism.¹⁴ This strand of literature problematizes overly optimistic assessments, suggesting that normative frameworks alone do not guarantee security outcomes.

The role of external actors in shaping regional security dynamics has also received significant scholarly attention. Colloquially termed the "external security multiplier," this literature explores how great power engagement—whether through UN peacekeeping, bilateral military partnerships, or multilateral funding—can both bolster and undermine regional agency.¹⁵ In African contexts, Faulkner and Samatar highlight how interventions by external actors sometimes create parallel security architectures that supplant regional efforts, diluting accountability and regional autonomy.¹⁶ Conversely, some studies argue that calibrated external support can strengthen regional capacities when aligned with local priorities and institutional frameworks.¹⁷

Recent literature has begun to synthesize these perspectives into more nuanced evaluative frameworks that go beyond the binary of "name" versus "reality." For instance, Okumu's typologies differentiate regions that have strategic coherence, operational capacity, and normative legitimacy, proposing that regional security must be assessed across multiple dimensions rather than a singular axis of success or failure.¹⁸ Similarly, Aning and Atuobi introduce metrics that measure responsiveness, adaptability, and preventive impact of regional security institutions, stressing that temporal and contextual variables matter when evaluating effectiveness.¹⁹ These emerging approaches suggest that regional security exists along a continuum - one shaped by institutional design, member state interests, resource endowments, and geopolitical pressures.

⁹Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21.

¹⁰Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 215–50.

¹¹Timothy M. Shaw, *New Regionalism and Conflict Management in Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

¹²Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams, *Understanding Peacekeeping* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

¹³Pierre Englebort and Denis Tull, "Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa: Flawed Ideas about Failed States," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 106–39.

¹⁴Thomas G. Weiss, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

¹⁵Edward Newman, "Exploring the 'Root Causes' of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 749–72.

¹⁶Christopher J. Faulkner and Ahmed I. Samatar, "The African Union's Quest for Peace: Lessons from Darfur," *African Affairs* 109, no. 435 (2010): 539–57.

¹⁷See Sarah E. Parkinson and David A. Hulme, "Taking Stock of External Support for Regional Peace Operations," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 4 (2016): 507–34.

¹⁸Innocent P. Ngowi Okumu, "Towards a General Theory of Regional Integration and Cooperation," *African Security Review* 24, no. 2 (2015): 75–88.

¹⁹Kodjo Aning and O. J. M. Atuobi, "The ECOWAS Conflict Management Framework and Security Governance," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 3 (2013): 313–30.

Collectively, this body of work reveals both the conceptual richness and empirical complexity inherent in discussions of regional security. While earlier scholarship established foundational theories of cooperation and institutional development, later research has problematized simplistic triumphalist narratives and highlighted persistent gaps between rhetoric and practice. This literature review underscores the need for analytical frameworks that are capable of capturing both the normative aspirations and operational realities of regional security mechanisms.

3. Institutional Framework for Regional Security in Africa: The Reality Argument versus “Only in Name” Argument

3.1 African Union (AU)

The African Union (AU) is a continental organization that aims to promote unity, peace, security, and sustainable development across Africa. Membership of the AU includes all 55 African countries. It was established on July 9, 2002, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, replacing the Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in 1963.²⁰ Its purpose and objectives include: promoting political and economic integration among African countries; advance peace, security, and stability across the continent; protect human rights and promote democratic governance; encourage sustainable development and social progress, and strengthen Africa’s voice in global affairs.²¹

Structurally, the Assembly of the African Union composed of the Heads of State and Government which make major decisions; the Executive Council composed of foreign ministers which handles policy matters; the African Union Commission which acts as the AU’s secretariat and administrative body; the Pan-African Parliament, Court of Justice, Peace and Security Council which supports governance, law, and security.

AU’s Security Structure is the African Standby Force (ASF) and Peace and Security Council (PSC). Its major achievements: deployment of peacekeeping missions in Sudan (Darfur) and Somalia (AMISOM/ATMIS); mediation of conflicts in South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Mali adoption of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to coordinate continental responses to crises; and promotion of early-warning systems for conflict prevention.²²The African Union (AU) has played a vital role in promoting unity, peace, and development across Africa since its formation in 2002 (succeeding the Organization of African Unity). However, it has faced several criticisms over the years.²³

a. Ineffectiveness in Conflict Resolution

The AU has often been criticized for being slow or ineffective in responding to conflicts on the continent. For instance, in the Darfur crisis (Sudan, early 2000s), the AU deployed the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), but it struggled with limited resources, insufficient troops, and bureaucratic delays. The UN eventually had to take over with a hybrid mission (UNAMID) to provide more effective intervention. Also, during the 2011 crisis in Libya, the AU proposed a peaceful resolution, but its recommendations were largely ignored by international actors, highlighting its limited influence in enforcing peace.²⁴

b. Weak Enforcement of Democratic Principles

While the AU has a mandate to promote democracy and good governance, enforcement was often inconsistent. For instance, in Zimbabwe, especially during the contested 2008 elections, the AU’s response was seen as too cautious and unwilling to strongly pressure the Mugabe regime, despite widespread electoral violence. Also, in Guinea (2008 coup), the AU suspended Guinea from membership but failed to enforce meaningful sanctions that could restore democratic rule promptly.²⁵

²⁰Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 258-276.

²¹Tim Murithi, “The African Union’s Evolving Role in Peace Operations,” *African Security Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2008), pp. 70-82.

²²*ibid.*

²³Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 258-276.

²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵*ibid.*

c. Bureaucracy and Financial Dependence

The AU's large bureaucratic structure and reliance on external donors reduced its effectiveness. For instance, the AU budget was heavily dependent on contributions from foreign partners like the EU, China, and the US, which sometimes compromised its autonomy and decision-making. Reports have indicated delays in paying staff and deploying peacekeeping missions due to funding constraints.²⁶

d. Limited Impact on Human Rights Issues

The AU has struggled to enforce human rights across its member states. For instance, in countries like Eritrea, which was accused of severe human rights abuses, the AU was criticized for inaction and failing to hold governments accountable. Also, in Sudan under Omar al-Bashir, despite charges by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for genocide and war crimes in Darfur, the AU initially shielded him from arrest and extradition.²⁷

e. Overemphasis on Sovereignty

The AU tended to prioritize state sovereignty over intervention which hindered timely responses to crises. During the 2012 Mali crisis, the AU hesitated to intervene decisively against the Tuareg rebellion and Islamist insurgency, leading to delayed military action and eventual French intervention.²⁸

f. Limited Economic Integration

Despite ambitious plans for a Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), economic integration across Africa remained slow. Infrastructure gaps, inconsistent trade policies, and political disagreements among member states slowed the realization of AU's goals for a fully integrated African economy.²⁹ The following were some of its challenges:

g. Inconsistent Policy Implementation

AU decisions were often non-binding, and enforcement mechanisms were weak. For instance, several AU decisions on sanctions against coup leaders in countries like Mali (2021 coup) and Burkina Faso (2022 coup) were often symbolic, with little practical impact on the ground. The AU's main criticisms revolved around ineffective conflict resolution, weak enforcement of democracy and human rights, overreliance on external funding, bureaucracy, and slow economic integration. While it made notable progress in promoting African unity, these challenges show that its goals were sometimes constrained by political, financial, and structural limitations.

This shows that regional security in Africa is recognized and institutionalized "on paper" through treaties, protocols, and organizational charters. The African Union (AU) had the *Constitutive Act* and the *Peace and Security Council Protocol*, which legally defined its mandate to maintain peace in Africa. The organization often struggle to enforce decisions, mobilize resources, or intervene consistently. That's why your paper's argument — "*regional security exists in name more than in reality*" — is supported by the contrast between the formal treaties (footnotes we collected) and the actual outcomes in conflicts.

4. Regional Economic Communities

The Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are regional blocs that handle security issues within their areas. In the West African region is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). East African region has the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which focuses on conflict mediation in the Horn of Africa. Southern Africa region has the Southern African Development Community (SADC) which operates with a standby brigade for regional intervention. Central Africa has the Economic Community of Central African State (ECCAS) manages peace missions in central Africa. North Africa has Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) which promotes cooperation in the Maghreb region.³⁰

²⁶*ibid.*

²⁷*ibid.*

²⁸Tim Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," *African Security Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2008), pp. 70-82.

²⁹*ibid.*

³⁰*ibid.*

African Standby Force (ASF) Structure is divided into five regional brigades: ECOWAS Standby Force, SADC Brigade (South), EASF – Eastern Africa Standby Force, ECCAS Brigade (central) and North African Regional Capacity (North). These forces are designed to conduct peacekeeping missions, intervene in genocide or war crimes and restore constitutional order after coups. They partner with international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) which provide funding, training, and logistical support.³¹

4.1 Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS)

Established on May 28, 1975, ECOWAS is a regional organization made up of West African countries, and created to promote economic integration, peace and cooperation in the region. It was founded under the Treaty of Lagos. Membership includes: Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. However, membership of ECOWAS has changed overtime due to political events among member states.³² Main Objectives are to promote free trade among West Africa countries; allow free movement of people; maintain peace and security in the region and promote democracy and good governance.³³ ECOWAS has its military force called ECOMOG, which has intervened in conflicts in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali.³⁴

Security Structure include: ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and ECOWAS Standby Force. Its major achievements include: the intervention and restoration of peace in Liberia (1990s) and Sierra Leone; it played a key role in Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia during political crises; it facilitated democratic transitions through mediation and elections monitoring; and enabled regional security coordination, including free movement of military information.³⁵ Critiques of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are:

a. Ineffectiveness in Preventing Political Instability

ECOWAS is often criticized for struggling to prevent coups and political crises in member states, despite having protocols for democracy and good governance. For instance, in Mali (2021), after the military coup ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, ECOWAS imposed sanctions, closed borders, and suspended Mali from its institutions. While these measures pressured the junta, they failed to restore civilian rule immediately, highlighting the limits of ECOWAS's influence. Another instance was the 2023 coup in Niger which similarly showed ECOWAS's struggle to effectively prevent or quickly resolve political instability, despite threats of intervention.³⁶

b. Slow Response to Conflicts

ECOWAS has peacekeeping mechanisms, such as ECOMOG, but the organization was often slow to mobilize or inconsistent in its interventions. During the Liberia civil war (1989–2003), ECOWAS eventually intervened through ECOMOG, but the initial response was slow, and the peacekeeping force faced challenges in manpower, funding, and coordination. Also, in Sierra Leone (1997–1999), ECOWAS forces intervened to remove the military junta, but there were significant delays, showing inconsistent enforcement of its principles.³⁷

c. Limited Enforcement of Economic Integration

ECOWAS aims to create a common market and harmonize trade, but progress was slow due to weak enforcement and member states' protectionist policies. Despite the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), some member states still imposed tariffs on goods from neighbours, reducing the effectiveness of intra-regional trade. Nigeria, for

³¹*ibid.*

³²Cyril Obi, "Economic Community of West African States on the Ground: Comparing Peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Cote d'Ivoire," *African Security*, Vol. 2, No. 2-3 (2009), pp. 119-135.

³³*ibid.*

³⁴*ibid.*

³⁵Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), pp. 45-72.

³⁶*ibid.*

³⁷*ibid.*

instance, was criticized for maintaining restrictions on imports from other member states, affecting smaller economies like Benin.³⁸

d. Financial and Institutional Constraints

ECOWAS faced challenges in funding its initiatives and maintaining institutional efficiency, affecting its ability to respond to crises. ECOWAS often relied on contributions from member states for peacekeeping, and delays in payments undermine operations. During interventions in the Gambia (2017) to enforce election results, the deployment was effective but relied heavily on voluntary contributions and political goodwill rather than a strong, consistent funding mechanism.³⁹

e. Perception of Bias

Some critics argue that ECOWAS sometimes acted inconsistently or showed favoritism toward certain states, undermining its credibility. For instance, in the case of Côte d'Ivoire (2010–2011 post-election crisis), ECOWAS recognized Alassane Ouattara as president, but its enforcement measures against Laurent Gbagbo were perceived as limited and inconsistent initially, leading to prolonged conflict.⁴⁰

4.2 Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

This is a regional organization in Eastern Africa that focuses on development, peace, and economic cooperation. Founded in 1986 as Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), it was renamed in 1996. Its headquarters is in Djibouti and has 8 countries as members which include: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda.⁴¹ Its objectives include: to promote regional cooperation in development and economic growth; address drought and environmental challenges; enhance peace and security in member countries; foster trade, infrastructure, and integration in the region; support conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts.⁴² IGAD is active in mediation and peacekeeping efforts in the Horn of Africa, including: Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Darfur region).⁴³

It mediated the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan (2005) ending the Second Sudanese Civil War; it facilitated South Sudan's independence in 2011; it supported peace talks in Somalia, including creating frameworks for Somali federal governance; it coordinated regional responses to drought, refugee crises, and armed conflicts.⁴⁴ Critiques of Intergovernmental Authorities on Development include:

a. Limited Enforcement Power

Intergovernmental authorities often lacked the ability to enforce development policies or compel member states to comply fully. Their decisions were usually advisory or dependent on voluntary cooperation. For instance, the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 aims for continental integration and sustainable development, but many member states struggled to meet the goals due to limited enforcement mechanisms and reliance on voluntary implementation. Also, the European Union's Cohesion Policy sets development and funding targets for less-developed regions, but compliance depended on member states' reporting and national implementation, sometimes leading to delays or mismanagement.⁴⁵

³⁸Thomas Jaye, "ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peace-building," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008), pp. 513-537.

³⁹Abdel-Fatau Musah, "ECOWAS and Regional Security in West Africa," in *Africa's New Peace and Security*, in Said Adejumbi and Adebayo Olukoshi (eds.), *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 136-154.

⁴⁰*ibid.*

⁴¹Intergovernmental Authority on Development, *IGAD Agreement Establishing the Intergovernmental Authority on Development* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1996), Arts. 2-5, 7-9.

⁴²*ibid.*

⁴³Michael Walls, "IGAD and Conflict Management in the Horn of Africa," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2012), pp. 235-258.

⁴⁴*ibid.*

⁴⁵Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 300-312.

b. Slow and Bureaucratic Decision-Making

IGAs often involved complex decision-making processes, with multiple layers of committees and consultations, which slowed down action. World Bank and UNDP programmes required approval from multiple stakeholders, including boards, governments, and local agencies, which delayed infrastructure and social development projects. Another instance was ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) which had development frameworks for economic and social growth, but implementation was often slow due to the consensus-based decision-making process among ten member states.

c. Unequal Benefits Among Member States

Development IGAs sometimes inadvertently favoured wealthier or more politically influential members, leaving poorer or smaller states behind. In the EU, Structural and Investment Funds sometimes disproportionately benefitted richer regions due to better administrative capacity to apply for funds, leaving poorer regions underfunded.⁴⁶ ECOWAS agricultural and trade initiatives sometimes benefitted countries with stronger economies like Nigeria, while smaller economies struggle to compete or access funding effectively.⁴⁷

d. Funding Constraints

Many IGAs relied on contributions from member states, which was inconsistent or insufficient, limiting the scale and sustainability of development projects. African Development Bank (AfDB) programmes often depended on member contributions and external donors; delays in contributions slowed down infrastructure and social projects. Also, CARICOM (Caribbean Community) development programmes faced funding gaps, which reduced the impact of regional initiatives like disaster management and economic diversification.⁴⁸

e. Challenges in Coordinating Across Diverse States

IGAs operated across countries with different political systems, capacities, and priorities, making it difficult to implement uniform development strategies. UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were promoted through regional intergovernmental agencies, but national priorities, governance structures, and resource availability caused uneven progress. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) struggled to implement regional development projects due to political tensions among India, Pakistan, and other member states.⁴⁹

4.3 Southern African Development Community (SADC)

Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a regional organization focused economic integration, peace, and development in Southern Africa. It was founded in 1980 as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), and renamed SADC in 1992. It is headquartered in Gaborone, Botswana and had 16 members, including: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.⁵⁰ Objectives of SADC are: to promote sustainable economic growth and development; foster peace and security in Southern Africa; encourage regional integration and free trade among member states; improve infrastructure, energy, and industrial development; and combat poverty and social inequalities.⁵¹ SADC has a Standby Force for conflict prevention and peacekeeping and mediates in member states during political crises.

The security structure of SADC included: the Standby Force, Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation. It mediated political crises in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Madagascar; it deployed peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo; coordinated regional security training and disaster response exercises; and

⁴⁶*ibid.*

⁴⁷John R. Heibrunn, "Regional Security in the Horn: IGAD's Struggle with Governance and Peace," in African Security Governance and Peace" in Adekeye Adebajo (ed.), *African Security Governance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), pp. 122-145.

⁴⁸*ibid.*

⁴⁹Solomon A. Dersso, "Regional Organizations and the Politics of Security in Africa: The Case of IGAD," *African Security Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2014), pp. 355-372.

⁵⁰*Southern African Development Community, SADC Treaty* (Windhoek, Namibia, 1992), Art. 5-10, 20-25.

⁵¹*ibid.*

developed protocols on non-aggression and conflict resolution among member states.⁵²Critiques of the (SADC) include:

a. Weak Response to Political Crises

SADC promoted democracy, peace, and security, but critics argued that it was often slow or reluctant to act decisively against member states experiencing political instability. For instance, Zimbabwe (2008 Election Crisis), after disputed elections between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai, widespread violence occurred. SADC facilitated negotiations that led to a Government of National Unity, but critics argue it was slow to condemn electoral violence and avoided strong sanctions. Also, during pro-democracy protests in Eswatini (2021), SADC sent a fact-finding mission but was criticized for not taking stronger action to pressure the monarchy toward reforms.⁵³

b. Limited Enforcement of Democratic Principles

Although SADC had principles on democratic governance (SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections), enforcement mechanisms were weak. In Zimbabwe (2013 and 2018 Elections), SADC election observer missions declared the elections generally peaceful, but opposition groups and international observers raised concerns about fairness and transparency. Critics argue SADC's assessments were often lenient toward incumbent governments.

c. Slow Economic Integration

SADC aims to promote regional economic integration through a Free Trade Area (FTA), but progress was uneven. For instance, SADC Free Trade Area (launched 2008), while tariffs were reduced among many member states, non-tariff barriers (such as customs delays and import restrictions) remained widespread, limiting effective regional trade. Also, the implementation of industrialization strategy (2015–2063) slowed due to varying economic capacities among member states and lacked of coordinated industrial policies.⁵⁴

d. Dependence on Dominant Economies

SADC's economy was heavily influenced by the region's largest economy. This created imbalances. For instance, smaller economies (such as Malawi, Lesotho) depended heavily on trade with South Africa. Regional trade often favoured South African manufactured goods, while smaller states struggle to compete. This imbalance limited equal economic benefits across the region.⁵⁵

e. Funding and Institutional Constraints

SADC relied on member state contributions and external donors for many development programmes. Delays in member contributions affected project implementation. For instance, infrastructure initiatives under the Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan faced funding shortages and slow execution.⁵⁶

f. Inconsistent Conflict Intervention

SADC deployed peacekeeping or military missions, but responses sometimes were inconsistent in Lesotho (1998 and 2017). In 1998, SADC forces led by South Africa intervened after post-election unrest. The intervention restored order but was controversial and criticized as heavy-handed. In 2017, SADC deployed a preventive mission to stabilize political tensions, showing improved response, but still limited long-term institutional reform. In Mozambique (2021-Cabo Delgado Insurgency), SADC deployed the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) to combat insurgents. However, the response came after years of escalating violence, leading critics to argue that the organization reacted too slowly.⁵⁷

⁵²*ibid.*

⁵³Timothy M. Shaw, *The Politics of Regionalism in Africa: SADC and Regional Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 45-68.

⁵⁴Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 280-290.

⁵⁵*ibid.*

⁵⁶Stephanie B. Beswick, "SADC's Role in Conflict Management and Regional Security in Southern Africa," *African Security Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2006), pp. 21-38.

⁵⁷*ibid.*

4.4 Economic Community of Central African State (ECCAS)

The Economic Community of Central African State (ECCAS) is a regional organization aimed at promoting economic cooperation and integration in Central Africa. It was founded on June 18, 1983. Headquartered in Libreville, Gabon, its members include: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe.⁵⁸ Its objectives are to: promote regional economic integration and development; encourage free trade and investment within member states; promote peace, security, and political stability in Central Africa; enhance transport, energy, and infrastructure development; strengthen cooperation in education, health, and environmental management.⁵⁹ Its security structure includes: Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa (COPAX). ECCAS has mediated conflicts in the Central African Republic (CAR); coordinated regional security measures against rebel groups in DRC and Chad; and supported peacekeeping operations in conflict-affected member states.⁶⁰

a. Weak Response to Conflicts and Insecurity

Central Africa remained one of the most unstable regions in Africa despite ECCAS' existence. The region experienced repeated coups and civil wars (2013 crisis, 2020–2021 violence). ECCAS deployed peace missions (such as MICOPAX), but they were poorly funded and ineffective. Eventually, the UN had to intervene through peacekeeping forces (MINUSCA).⁶¹

b. Overlapping Membership and Institutional Confusion

Many ECCAS member states also belonged to other regional organizations, creating duplication. For instance, countries like Burundi and Congo (Brazzaville) are members of both ECCAS and CEMAC (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) handles monetary integration more effectively than ECCAS.⁶²

c. Poor Economic Integration

One of ECCAS' main goals was economic integration, but intra-regional trade remained very low (less than 5% of total trade in the region). Also, poor road and transport links limited trade. Many countries traded more with Europe and China than with neighbouring states.

d. Leadership and Governance Problems

Some member states were ruled by long-serving leaders, affecting democratic credibility. Example: Paul Biya of Cameroon has been in power since 1979. ECCAS rarely condemned unconstitutional changes of government or governance abuses.

e. Financial Weakness

ECCAS depended heavily on member state contributions, which were often delayed or unpaid. For instance, during security operations in CAR, funding shortages limited effective deployment of forces.⁶³

f. Limited Visibility and Influence

Compared to regional bodies like ECOWAS, ECCAS was less influential in African diplomacy. In many Central African crises, external actors like the UN, or even foreign powers often take the lead.⁶⁴

⁵⁸Economic Community of Central African States, Treaty of the Economic Community of Central African States (Libreville, Gabon, 1983), Art. 1-5, 12-18.

⁵⁹*ibid.*

⁶⁰*ibid.*

⁶¹Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 290-299.

⁶²Tharcisse Gatwa, "Regional Integration and Security in Central Africa: The Role of ECCAS," *African Security Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2009), pp. 55-72.

⁶³*ibid.*

⁶⁴*ibid.*

4.5 Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) is a regional organization in North Africa that focuses on economic integration and political cooperation among Arab countries in the Maghreb region. Founded on February 17, 1989 and headquartered in Rabat, Morocco. Members include: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Objectives of the AMU are to: achieve economic integration among member states; promote free movement of goods, capital, and people; coordinate policies on trade, industry, agriculture, and energy; enhance political cooperation and regional stability.⁶⁵ The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) has faced strong criticism since its creation, which include:

a. Political Rivalry between Member States

The biggest obstacle to AMU progress is the dispute between the Morocco-Algeria over Western Sahara. This was related to claims sovereignty over Western Sahara. Because of this rivalry, the Morocco-Algeria land border has been closed since 1994. AMU summits were not held regularly from the mid-1990s. The AMU was practically inactive for decades because leaders refused to meet over this dispute.

b. Lack of Economic Integration

Despite its goal of creating a common market, intra-Maghreb trade remained extremely low (around 3–5% of total trade). Member states traded more with Europe than with each other. No effective customs union or free movement system existed.⁶⁶

c. Institutional Weakness

The AMU lacked strong supranational institutions. There was no effective enforcement mechanism for agreements. Decisions depended heavily on consensus which was rarely achieved. Many agreements signed in the 1990s were never implemented. The AMU was inactive from the 1990s. The last effective high-level AMU summit was held in 1994. For over 30 years, the organization remained largely dormant. This made it one of Africa's most inactive regional blocs compared to organizations like ECOWAS and AU.⁶⁷

d. Failure to Address Regional Security Challenges

North Africa faced terrorism in the Sahel and instability after the 2011 Arab Spring; Civil conflict in Libya and Egypt. Yet the AMU did not play a significant coordinating role. During the Libyan civil war after 2011, the AMU did not provide a united diplomatic or security response.⁶⁸

e. Competing Regional Alliances

Some members pursue separate foreign policy strategies. They focused on partnerships with the EU and Sub-Saharan Africa and prioritized different regional security strategies. This weakened commitment to AMU integration. The Arab Maghreb Union was criticized for political divisions (especially Morocco–Algeria rivalry).

5. Conclusion

The central question of this study - whether regional security exists merely in name or as a tangible reality - reveals a complex and uneven landscape. While regional security architectures across the globe, particularly in Africa, demonstrate significant institutional development, their operational effectiveness remains inconsistent. Organizations such as the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS); the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Economic Community of Central African State (ECCAS) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), have established legal frameworks, peace and security protocols, standby forces, and mediation mechanisms designed to prevent and resolve conflicts. On paper, these structures reflect a robust commitment to collective security, sovereignty protection, and regional integration.

⁶⁵*Arab Maghreb Union, Treaty Establishing the Arab Maghreb Union* (Rabat, Morocco, 1989), Art. 1-5, 10-15.

⁶⁶*ibid.*

⁶⁷Christopher Alexander, *The Maghreb: Politics, Security and Integration* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 55-78.

⁶⁸*ibid.*

However, the persistence of violent conflicts, unconstitutional changes of government, terrorism, electoral crises, and transnational crime suggests that regional security often struggles to transcend declaratory commitments. The gap between normative frameworks and practical enforcement exposes weaknesses rooted in political will, funding constraints, external dependency, internal rivalries, and selective application of principles. In several cases, responses to crises have been delayed, inconsistent, or influenced by geopolitical interests, thereby undermining credibility and deterrence.

Yet, to conclude that regional security exists only in name would ignore notable successes. Regional interventions have, at critical moments, prevented state collapse, facilitated peaceful transitions, and restored constitutional order. These achievements demonstrate that regional security is not an illusion but a contested and evolving project—one that oscillates between symbolic diplomacy and meaningful action depending on context, leadership, and collective resolve. Ultimately, regional security exists neither purely in name nor fully as a consistent reality; it exists in a dynamic state of becoming. Its effectiveness is shaped by the interplay between institutional design and political commitment. The future credibility of regional security will depend not merely on the existence of treaties and peace mechanisms, but on the courage of member states to subordinate narrow national interests to collective stability, enforce norms without bias, invest sustainably in security infrastructure, and prioritize preventive diplomacy over reactive intervention. Therefore, the debate should shift from questioning whether regional security exists to examining how it can be strengthened, institutionalized, and insulated from political manipulation. Only then can regional security evolve from a framework of aspiration into a lived and dependable reality for the populations it was created to protect.

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