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A Power Play on the Blue Nile Ethiopia Turns on Africa's Biggest Dam



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By Mariah Faridah Muli

Abstract

On September 9, 2025, Ethiopia officially inaugurated the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, now the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa. GERD will have an installed capacity of 5,150 MW surpassing the nation's previous electricity output by more than double. The USD 5 billion project, mostly funded (91 per cent) by Ethiopia's central bank and citizens, symbolizes both national resilience and ambition. Towering at 170 meters and spanning nearly 2 kilometers, the dam holds a 74 billion cubic meters reservoir, hence it is now among the 20 largest hydroelectric facilities globally. Although only two turbines fluctuating around 750 MW were in operation during the ceremony, the dam's full potential is expected to power millions

of households, boost industrial growth, and pave the way for power exports to neighboring countries such as Kenya and Sudan. The inauguration drew regional and continental attention, with leaders from Kenya, Somalia, and the African Union framing the project as both a unifying symbol and a catalyst for regional electrification. However, the dam also ignites geopolitical tensions. Egypt, which depends on the Nile for over 90 per cent of its fresh water, perceives GERD as a direct threat to its water security, while Sudan voices concerns over future water governance and dam safety. These unresolved disputes highlight the tension between Ethiopia's developmental aspirations and downstream states' existential concerns. Despite years of diplomacy, no binding agreement has been reached. This paper situates GERD at the intersection of development and geopolitics. It examines the dam as a transformative infrastructure project with profound implications for Ethiopia's energy transition, regional cooperation, and the contested politics of transboundary water management.

Introduction

The Nile River, the world's longest watercourse, has for centuries been the lifeblood of Northeast Africa. Shared by 11 countries, the River Nile Basin sustains more than 300 million people, with its waters underpinning agriculture, energy production, and livelihoods across the region. Yet, this shared dependence has also entrenched patterns of political tension. Egypt, situated downstream, has historically claimed dominant rights over the river, drawing on colonial-era agreements that allocated the majority of Nile waters to Cairo and Khartoum while marginalizing upstream states such as Ethiopia. In recent decades, population growth, urbanization, and climate change have sharpened these competing demands, transforming the Nile into both a critical resource and a source of enduring contestation.

Against this backdrop, Ethiopia's decision to construct GERD marks a transition moment in the geo-politics of the Nile Basin. Launched in 2011 and officially inaugurated in September 2025, GERD is now the largest hydroelectric project in Africa, with an installed capacity of 5,150 megawatts. The dam embodies Ethiopia's aspiration to overcome chronic electricity shortages, industrialize its economy, and position itself as a regional energy hub. Ethiopia's financing model for the construction of GERD, with over 90 per cent of the funds sourced domestically through state bonds and citizen contributions, has imbued it with the symbolic weight as a project of sovereignty and

resilience, free from dependence on external lenders. GERD is therefore not only an infrastructure achievement but also a marker of Ethiopia's developmental ambitions and national identity.

At the same time, the dam has become a flashpoint of geopolitical friction. Egypt, which relies on the Nile for over 90 per cent of its freshwater needs, views GERD as an existential threat that could reduce water availability in drought years, destabilize agriculture, and undermine its long-standing claims to Nile hegemony. Sudan has expressed a more ambivalent stance, acknowledging potential benefits such as flood control and access to cheap electricity, but also voicing concern about dam safety and coordination over water flows. Beyond these riparian states, the project has drawn in regional and international actors from the African Union to the United Nations each seeking to mediate disputes and prevent escalation. GERD thus sits at the intersection of domestic development and transboundary politics, its implications extending well beyond Ethiopia's borders.

This paper engages with the central research problem of balancing national development, regional cooperation, and water security. While GERD promises to double Ethiopia's electricity output and accelerate its industrial growth, it also raises urgent questions about how upstream development can co-exist with downstream dependence in an already fragile geopolitical environment. The case of GERD illustrates both the potential for hydropower to serve as a driver of regional integration and the risk that unilateral development may exacerbate entrenched rivalries.

To address these tensions, the article is guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. How does GERD reshape Ethiopia's domestic development trajectory?
2. What are GERD's geopolitical implications for Egypt, Sudan, and the wider region?
3. To what extent can the dam foster cooperation rather than conflict in the Nile Basin?

By examining GERD through the lenses of energy transition, hydro-politics, and international water law, the paper seeks to illuminate the opportunities and challenges of managing shared resources in a region where development ambitions and security anxieties are deeply intertwined.

Historical and Political Context

The Nile River has long-held profound economic, cultural, and geopolitical significance in Northeast Africa. Economically, it sustains approximately 300 million people across 11 countries (upstream countries including Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, and Kenya downstream countries including Egypt and Sudan) and supports intensive irrigated agriculture, hydropower generation, and urban water supply (Mekonnen, 2021; Kimenyi & Mbaku, 2015). Culturally, the river is deeply embedded in the identities and histories of civilizations from ancient Egypt to modern Ethiopia, shaping mythologies, state formation, and transboundary loyalties. Geopolitically, control over the Nile's flow has been a central axis of power, most prominently for Egypt, whose modern survival and agricultural productivity hinge on its waters (Halidu, Joy, & Onochie, 2025).

Colonial policies codified this imbalance into legal instruments, most notably the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Egypt–Sudan agreement. The 1929 treaty allocated 48 billion m³ annually to Egypt and 4

billion m³ to Sudan, while granting Egypt a veto over upstream developments that might affect the river's flow (Kimenyi & Mbaku, 2015; Ferede & Abebe, 2014). The 1959 agreement further intensified this disparity, assigning Egypt 55.5 billion m³ and Sudan 18.5 billion m³, without accounting for upstream riparians such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (Deribe, 2022; Mekonnen, 2021).

These agreements institutionalized a downstream hegemony, conferring upon Egypt and Sudan dominant claims to Nile waters rooted in historic rights, treaty law, and acquiescence, while upstream states like Ethiopia were marginalized or excluded. Ethiopia, contributing over 80 per cent of the Nile's flow (primarily via the Blue Nile), was not party to the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement or the 1959 Egypt–Sudan Nile Waters Agreement. The only colonial-era document involving Ethiopia, the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty contained a contentious water clause (Article III) restricting dam construction without consent, but its scope, ratification, and continuing force are heavily disputed in scholarship (Woldetsadik 2014; various legal commentators). Egypt, for its part, grounds its position in doctrines of prior



Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed met with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt in Cairo on 12 July, 2023 (Photo Credits: Addis Standard/Abiy Ahmed Ali)



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appropriation, acquiescence, and treaty continuity, claiming its long-standing reliance and the silence of upstream riparians as reinforcing downstream dominance. Many critics characterize the colonial treaties as outdated relics, incompatible with modern principles of equitable and reasonable use, and urge a reformed, inclusive Nile governance regime rooted in contemporary international water law (e.g. Mekonnen 2021; articles on Nile basin water conventions).

In the pre-GERD period, Egypt's invocation of historical entitlement, grounded in colonial-era treaties, defined basin politics. The primary agreement was the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty, signed in Addis Ababa between Great Britain (on behalf of Sudan) and Ethiopia, which was principally intended to delimit the Sudan–Ethiopia boundary. Article III of this treaty, however, has been interpreted by Egypt as obliging Ethiopia not to undertake works on the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, or the Sobat that would obstruct the river's flow without prior consent.

This provision, though contested by Ethiopia as either misinterpreted or obsolete, has long been central to downstream legal arguments. Together with the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement and the 1959 Egypt–Sudan Nile Waters Agreement neither of which included Ethiopia this treaty framework was used by Egypt to resist upstream development projects, viewing them as existential threats to its water security and geopolitical position (Kimenyi & Mbaku, 2015). Ethiopia's developmental aspirations were therefore constrained by the political and diplomatic costs of contravening these agreements. Consequently, Nile negotiations suffered from a persistent legitimacy deficit: upstream riparians rejected the downstream states' reliance on colonial treaties as inequitable and outdated, while Egypt and Sudan defended them as inviolable "*historical rights*" (Mekonnen, 2021).

Ethiopia's exclusion from the major colonial-era Nile treaties notably the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement and the 1959 Egypt–Sudan Nile Waters Agreement, to which it was not a party has long fueled its drive to reclaim sovereign control over its natural resources. The GERD project, launched in 2011, is rooted in the notion that colonial treaties should not hinder the legitimate developmental needs of upstream riparians (Halidu et al., 2025). It thus represents a shift in "*pre-GERD power dynamics*": from downstream dominance shielded by treaties, to upstream assertiveness grounded in equitable sovereignty. Ethiopia's actions have reconfigured Nile Basin geopolitics, prompting regional and international actors to contest or reconsider the territorial water order established in the colonial era.

To summarize, the colonial-era treaties of 1929 and 1959 entrenched a hegemonic water regime favoring Egypt and Sudan. They excluded upstream nations especially Ethiopia, which disproportionately contributes to Nile flows. Pre-GERD, this imbalance shaped an inequitable political landscape in which downstream states held legal and practical advantages, and upstream states remained marginalized. GERD's emergence marks a critical turning point in redressing these historical injustices and renegotiating the fundamentals of Nile Basin cooperation.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project

GERD represents one of the robust infrastructure endeavors in Africa's recent history. Structurally, the dam is a roller-compacted concrete gravity dam, rising roughly 170 meters high and nearly 1.8 kilometers across, the Blue Nile in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region (The Guardian, 2025; Construction Review Online, 2025). It creates the Millennium Reservoir becoming the vast artificial lake formed by impounding the Blue Nile which covers an estimated 1,680–1,874 square kilometers and able to store approximately 74 billion cubic meters (bcm) of water, of which about 59.2 bcm is active storage and 14.8 bcm is dead storage (The Guardian, 2025; Construction Review Online, 2025; Engineering News, 2025; Hydropower, 2025; International Rivers, 2025). At inauguration, only two turbines each rated at 375 MW were operational, together producing around 750 MW, with additional turbines coming on-line progressively (Reuters, 2025; Webuild Group, n.d.). By early 2025, five turbines were operational, including one unit producing

401 MW (Construction Review Online, 2025; Shore. Africa, 2025).

The dam's construction officially began in 2011. The timetable included milestones such as civil works completion (over 98 per cent) and installation of turbines, although delays were introduced by early electro-mechanical challenges. By 2024–2025, the project was nearing full completion, with satellite estimates placing overall progress at between 92.5 per cent to 98.66 per cent (Shore.Africa, 2025; Sputnik Africa, 2025; Engineering News, 2025). The fifth turbine was commissioned in February 2025 and by that time; the hydraulic and electromechanical components were being finalized in preparation for full operations (Construction Review Online, 2025; Sputnik Africa, 2025).

The principal construction contractor is Salini Impregilo (now operating as Webuild), an Italian firm responsible for the core civil engineering components (Africa Energy Portal, 2025; Global Construction Review, 2025). Support came from multiple global partners: GE Hydro France, Voith Hydro Shanghai, China Gezhouba Group, and Sinohydro Corporation, which contributed technical components, pre-commissioning services, and infrastructure, while turbine supply included contributions from Alstom (Engineering News, 2024; Global Construction Review, 2025; Engineering News, 2025).

National mobilization in Ethiopia around GERD has been immense. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians contributed via bond purchases, while the project served as a symbol of sovereignty, resilience, and post-conflict recovery (The Guardian, 2025; Reuters, 2025). It was repeatedly framed by Ethiopia's leadership as a manifestation of national unity and a tangible milestone in the country's quest to electrify the nation sustainably and assert regional leadership (The Guardian, 2025; Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025).

The GERD stands as a transformative infrastructure project: structurally imposing, functionally robust, and symbolically loaded. Its technical scale 5,150 MW capacity, 13 turbines, and a 74 bcm reservoir marks it as one of the world's most significant hydropower installations. Financed largely through domestic means, it showcases a model of self-reliant development. Constructed over 14 years, involving global contractors and mobilizing a sense of national pride, GERD is emblematic of contemporary

trends toward harnessing natural resources for sustainable and sovereign economic transformation.

Domestic Implications for Ethiopia

GERD is rapidly reshaping Ethiopia's energy landscape and offering prospects for its domestic development. At a capacity of 5,150 MW, the dam effectively doubles the nation's electricity production, promising to substantially enhance household energy access, support industrialization, and position Ethiopia as a regional energy exporter (Reuters, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

Energy Production and Electrification

GERD's operational turbines already generate approximately 750 MW, with full capacity expected to enable electrification on an unprecedented scale (Reuters, 2025). Prior to its inauguration, only 55 per cent of the population had reliable electricity access, despite urban areas reaching 94 per cent coverage (Reuters, 2025). Parallel initiatives such as the World Bank-supported ASCENT program aim to extend grid and off-grid access to millions more, supported by GERD's energy output (World Bank, 2025).

Economic Impacts: Industrialization, Job Creation and Energy Trade

GERD is a key pillar in Ethiopia's strategy for structural transformation, enabling expansion of industrial parks and manufacturing zones, while drawing foreign direct investment (World Bank, 2024). GERD accounts for 17 per cent of the nation's electricity supply, generating notable export earnings USD 140 million in the 2023/24 fiscal year, with targets to reach USD 300 million (Addis Standard, 2024). Energy revenues feed into public coffers, supporting strategic economic sectors and catalyzing job creation. A construction boom around the dam area has boosted hospitality, transport, and small businesses, with local leaders noting increased employment and economic activity (AllAfrica, 2024).

National Symbolism and Post-Conflict Unity

GERD has become a powerful symbol of national resilience and unity in a post-conflict setting. In a country beset by internal strife, the dam represents a rare focal point of pride and cohesion, with the Prime Minister affirming its role in reshaping African history and lifting the region to a new era of prosperity (Reuters, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). GERD's overwhelmingly domestic



The US and the World Bank host the 2019 talks on the long-running Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan water dispute over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Washington, DC. (Photo Credits: Middle East Institute/Mirette F. Mabrouk)

financing from the central bank and public contributions reinforces its narrative as an Ethiopian achievement, free from external political or financial strings (Reuters, 2025).

Environmental and Social Challenges

Despite its promise, GERD brings significant environmental and social implications. Large-scale displacement of communities has occurred, with detailed compensation schemes remaining opaque in public reporting. Experience from other expropriation-driven projects in Ethiopia suggests that affected households often face reduced incomes and higher living costs post-displacement, necessitating structured livelihood restoration efforts (Gemedo et al., 2023). The reservoir, flooding over 74 billion cubic meters, alters river ecosystems and may disrupt sediment flows, fisheries, and downstream agriculture—risks that demand rigorous environmental monitoring and management (Reuters, 2025; World Bank, 2025).

GERD is a project with both significant benefits and risks: it underpins Ethiopia's ambitious drive toward electrification, industrial growth, and regional integration, while also sustaining national pride and political legitimacy. The ongoing expansion of electricity access and export revenues reinforce these advantages. However, the environmental and social costs if not proactively managed threaten to undermine the project's

long-term social license. As Ethiopia continues to develop, maintaining this balance will be critical to the dam's legacy as both a developmental tool and a model for equitable, sustainable infrastructure.

Regional and International Geopolitics

Egypt: Hydro-Security and Diplomatic Assertiveness

Egypt's downstream dependency on the Nile is profound: the river provides around 90–97 per cent of the country's freshwater needs, making it the lifeline of Egypt's agriculture, industry, and urban systems (Financial Times, 2025; Ahram Online, 2025). Its annual water needs exceed 90 billion cubic meters (bcm), yet its Nile allocation under the 1959 treaty 55.5 bcm falls significantly short, pushing per capita water availability below the UN's 1,000 m³ threshold for water poverty (Ahram Online, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

Consequently, Egypt perceives GERD as an existential threat. Officials from Egypt such as the Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty have made clear that Egypt will “not hesitate to defend its Nile water rights” (Ahram Online, 2025). President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt warned that Egypt would not ignore threats to its water security, and the government has signaled readiness to act through

diplomatic, legal, or even military means if necessary (The Guardian, 2025).

Egypt's diplomatic strategy has manifested through appeals to international forums, including the UN Security Council and the League of Arab States, arguing that the GERD violates colonial-era treaties and that bilateral enforcement mechanism are required. In practice, this bilateral mechanism is envisioned by Egypt as direct state-to-state arrangements particularly between Egypt and Ethiopia, or Egypt and Sudan that would obligate upstream parties to notify, consult, and seek consent before undertaking projects that significantly affect downstream flows. While Egypt has not specified military measures, its posture and regional engagement such as strengthening ties with Eritrea and Somalia signal strategic positioning to reinforce its leverage both diplomatically and, implicitly, through security partnerships (Reuters, 2025; Ahram Online, 2025).

Sudan: Between Optimism and Caution

Sudan occupies an intermediate position between downstream risks and potential benefits. On the one hand, GERD offers clear advantages such as flood control, reduced sediment accumulation, and electricity supply, all beneficial to agriculture and population centers (ENA, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2024). Analysts suggest coordinated water release strategies could enable three planting seasons annually and yield up to 4–6 bcm in stored water that could benefit Sudan and even Egypt (ENA, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

Nevertheless, Sudan also bears the potential costs of uncoordinated dam operations. The Roseires and Merowe dams downstream may face operational disruptions if reservoir releases are not carefully managed. Moreover, concerns over dam safety and Sudan's instability complicate its stance, leading Khartoum to demand legally binding operational agreements, in line with Egypt's approach, while remaining open to strategic cooperation (CEMMIS, 2025; Ahram Weekly, 2022).

Ethiopia's Perspective: Sovereignty, Regional Good, and Institutionalism

Ethiopia frames the GERD as a legitimate assertion of national sovereignty and a developmental imperative. Addis Ababa rejects the binding nature of colonial-era treaties, labeling them obsolete and inequitable, and insists that upstream nations have the right to develop

their water resources (Financial Times, 2025; CEMMIS, 2025). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has positioned the GERD as a "shared opportunity" rather than a threat, characterizing its benefits, such as, energy generation and flood control as regional public goods (The Guardian, 2025). Ethiopia's rhetorical strategy emphasizes regional electrification and integration, proposing bilateral energy trade with Kenya and Sudan, and reiterating its openness to negotiated, cooperative management frameworks (Financial Times, 2025).

African Union Mediation

The African Union (AU) has taken a central role in mediating GERD-related tensions. Despite high ambitions, AU-led talks have repeatedly failed to produce binding agreements, due in part to institutional constraints and divergent national interests (Tawfik, 2023). Critics argue that the AU's comparative advantage as a regional mediator is underutilized, affected by weak enforcement mechanisms and lack of trust among stakeholders (Tawfik, 2023).

Role of External Powers: United States, European Union, Gulf States, China

External powers have sought to influence the GERD negotiations in different ways. The United States has periodically facilitated talks, most notably through the U.S. Treasury and the World Bank in 2019–2020 while the European Union has supported dialogue through technical and financial assistance frameworks. Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have offered both mediation and investment incentives to encourage compromise. China, as the principal financier and contractor of GERD's construction, has exerted influence primarily through its economic role. Despite these varied forms of engagement, outcomes have been limited: Ethiopia resists external mediation as an encroachment on its sovereignty, while broader geopolitical rivalries complicate consensus-building in the Nile Basin (Reuters, 2025).

China's influence is more discreet yet significant. Through its involvement in dam-related infrastructure (e.g., provision of turbines and technical support by Sinohydro, China Gezhouba), China has bolstered Ethiopia's capacity while maintaining a low political profile in the diplomatic dispute (Global Construction Review, 2025). This reflects China's broader approach of infrastructure-first engagement without overt geopolitical posturing.

The GERD has catalyzed competing regional narratives and strategic responses, shaped by underlying pressures. Egypt, facing extreme hydro-dependency on the Nile and mounting demographic pressures, views the dam as an existential threat and has mobilized both domestic opinion and international diplomacy to defend its water security. Sudan, positioned downstream but closer to the dam, acknowledges potential operational benefits such as flood control and electricity access, yet remains cautious over unresolved safety and governance concerns. Ethiopia, by contrast, emphasizes sovereignty and developmental rights, presenting the GERD as both a national project of self-determination and a potential catalyst for regional energy cooperation. Meanwhile, the African Union's mediation efforts highlight the institutional limits of continental mechanisms, while external actors—from the U.S. and EU to Gulf States and China—play divergent but generally restrained roles. Collectively, the GERD dispute underscores how hydro-politics, developmental imperatives, and geopolitical rivalries converge in the Nile Basin, generating persistent contestation over water, power, and legitimacy.

GERD and the Politics of Water Governance

Theories of hydro-hegemony and transboundary water management

The politics of GERD are usefully read through contemporary theories of hydro-hegemony and transboundary water governance. Hydro-hegemony foregrounds how material, institutional, and ideational asymmetries of power shape who controls river basins and under what terms (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Applied to the Nile, this framework explains how historical downstream dominance (through legal instruments, diplomatic leverage, and technical expertise) has shaped basin politics while creating incentives for upstream actors to contest the established order (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006; Warner, 2017).

GERD as a case study in “development vs. dependency.”

The GERD highlights the tension between upstream development imperatives and downstream dependency risks. For Ethiopia, the dam is a sovereign development project designed to double national electricity capacity, catalyze industrialization, and generate export revenues through regional power markets. This developmental

trajectory is presented as both a right and a necessity, given Ethiopia's energy poverty. For Egypt, by contrast, unilateral upstream development heightens dependency risks, since the country's extreme reliance on the Nile means that any alteration in flow is perceived as a direct threat to its water security and strategic stability (Basheer et al., 2021; Etichia et al., 2024). In this sense, the GERD reconfigures the traditional narrative that framed upstream poverty as a risk to downstream security, instead casting upstream development itself as the perceived risk, thereby pitting development rights against dependency vulnerabilities.

Equitable utilization vs. no-harm principles under international water law (UN Watercourses Convention)

International water law offers two core, sometimes-tensioned norms: equitable and reasonable utilization (which recognizes each riparian's right to develop water resources) and the no-significant-harm obligation (which requires states to prevent serious injury to other watercourse states) (UN, 1997; UNECE, 2025). The UN Watercourses Convention (1997) places both obligations in the same legal frame, and procedural duties—prior notification, exchange of data, and cooperation—are intended to reconcile them (UN, 1997). In practice, however, downstream and upstream states privilege different norms: upstream states emphasize equitable use and development sovereignty; downstream states stress no-harm and historical security (Vick, 2014; Salman, 2021). Legally, normative reconciliation is possible but it requires transparent burden-of-proof rules, cooperative institutions, and operational protocols that translate abstract law into day-to-day reservoir rules (UNECE, 2025; IPRI, 2023).

Empirical modeling and policy research illustrate feasible pathways. Multi-sector and high-resolution simulations indicate that coordinated operation of GERD coupled with data sharing, drought protocols, and energy trade can preserve most upstream hydropower benefits while substantially mitigating Egyptian and Sudanese deficits (Basheer et al., 2021; Etichia et al., 2024; Heggy et al., 2024). The “benefit-sharing” approach, discussed prominently in water law literature, privileges electricity trade, flood control, and joint investment over rigid volumetric allocations. It has gained traction as a pragmatic strategy to transform what might otherwise be zero-sum water disputes into opportunities for positive-

sum regional development (Etichia et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, institutional and political obstacles loom. The Declaration of Principles (2015), signed between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan, invoked UN norms on transboundary watercourses but lacked binding operational rules. Subsequent negotiations have repeatedly stalled over legal form, drought contingencies, and data transparency (Basheer et al., 2021). Hydro-hegemonic dynamics persist: Egypt's asymmetric leverage through diplomatic networks, international legal arguments, and political capital can constrain negotiated outcomes, while Ethiopia's domestic political salience of GERD reduces its bargaining flexibility (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006; Tawfik, 2023).

Scenarios: cooperation, confrontation, or "controlled tension."

Three plausible scenarios structure the near-term transboundary resource governance outlook. First, cooperation: sustained technical dialogue, an enforceable operating protocol (with clear drought triggers and release schedules), and deepened power-trade arrangements yield a durable bargain—reducing hydrological risk while sharing economic gains (Basheer et al., 2021; Etichia et al., 2024). Second, confrontation: failure to agree on binding rules during multi-year droughts could produce acute political crises, legal escalation, or destabilizing regional alignments, particularly given Egypt's existential framing of Nile security (Mekonnen, 2021). Third, controlled tension: an uneasy equilibrium in which partial cooperation (data sharing, ad hoc releases) prevents immediate crisis but leaves structural disputes unresolved and the basin vulnerable to shocks (Tawfik, 2023).

GERD tests the capacity of international water law and regional institutions to translate shared norms into operational governance under asymmetric politics. The research consensus is pragmatic: law provides the core


principles (equitable use of water, no-harm rule and cooperation), but durable resolution will depend on technical transparency, multisectoral benefit-sharing (notably energy trade), and institutional mechanisms that shift incentives away from unilateralism toward reciprocal and verifiable cooperation (Basheer et al., 2021; Etichia et al., 2024; UNECE, 2025). In sum, GERD is less a binary of war or peace than a laboratory for rethinking hydro-governance in politically uneven basins.

Future Prospects and Challenges

The GERD's long-term promise depends less on the concrete of the dam than on the integration of its output into national and regional systems, and on how well riparian states manage hydrological uncertainty. Full energy roll-out and grid integration require continued expansion of Ethiopia's high-voltage network and cross-border links. Ethiopia's transmission plans and donor programs (including a recent World Bank ASCENT program to extend access to millions of households) are essential to convert GERD's potential into broad electrification and productive use; without faster grid reinforcement the dam's benefits risk remaining spatially concentrated. (World Bank, 2025; EA-Energianalyse, 2025).

Climate change complicates this technical agenda. Recent basin-scale studies underscore large uncertainty in future Nile flows: while many models project increased mean rainfall in parts of the Ethiopian highlands, they also indicate greater interannual variability i.e., more intense floods and deeper multi-year droughts (Shapland, Wheeler, & Cascão, 2025; Nigatu et al., 2024). Drought propagation analyses show meteorological deficits can rapidly translate into agricultural and groundwater droughts across the basin, heightening risks to food security and riparian livelihoods (Nigatu et al., 2024). Modeling work indicates that coordinated reservoir operation and explicit drought protocols can substantially reduce downstream deficits during dry periods, but only if data sharing, transparent rules and

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Beyond the Nile Basin, GERD represents a test case for Africa's future in renewable energy, cross-border cooperation, and shared resource governance. It exemplifies how mega-infrastructure can catalyze regional integration, but also how fragile political trust and hydrological uncertainty can derail collective gains

contingency financing are in place (Basheer et al., 2021; Etichia et al., 2024).

One of GERD's most practicable futures is as the backbone of regional energy corridors. Technical and policy studies show that enhanced power-trade arrangements for example, Ethiopia–Kenya interconnectors and the broader Eastern Africa Power Pool, can turn hydropower revenues into incentives for cooperation, while reducing net water stress by making retention or timed releases economically attractive (Etichia et al., 2024; IEA, 2024; AfDB/MapAfrica, 2025). Pilot wheeling trials and existing PPAs (power purchase agreements) demonstrate feasibility, yet scaling to gigawatt-level trade will require High-Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) transmission upgrades, synchronized market rules, and creditworthy off-takers (IEA, 2024; MapAfrica/AfDB, 2025).

Prospects for a durable trilateral agreement (Ethiopia–Sudan–Egypt) remain uncertain but not implausible. Research consensus emphasizes that legally binding volumetric allocations are politically fraught; instead, pragmatic packages combining operational protocols, benefit sharing (energy exports, flood control), and independent monitoring are more likely to endure (Basheer et al., 2021; Tawfik, 2023). The political window for such a deal will depend on trust-building measures (transparent hydrological data, third-party technical verification), mechanisms for compensation during extreme droughts, and embedding agreements within regional institutions (Tawfik, 2023; Shapland et al., 2025).

In sum, GERD's future hinges on three linked capacities: (i) Ethiopia's ability to integrate generation into a resilient domestic grid and export architecture; (ii) basin-scale adaptation to increasing hydrological variability through cooperative rules and contingency financing; and (iii) realistic, benefits-focused diplomacy that substitutes rigid water sharing quotas with enforceable, multisectoral agreements. If these elements converge, GERD can be a catalyst for regional development; if they do not, the dam will intensify vulnerability to climate-driven hydrological shocks and political strain.

Conclusion

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) stands as both a transformative development milestone and a persistent geopolitical flashpoint in the Nile Basin. For Ethiopia, it embodies a long-awaited aspiration: harnessing the Blue Nile to double national electricity capacity, accelerate industrialization, and solidify energy sovereignty. Its financing model driven overwhelmingly by domestic contributions further enhances its symbolic weight as a project of resilience and self-determination. Yet, this assertion of sovereignty collides with the existential water concerns of downstream states. Egypt's near-total reliance on the Nile, and Sudan's ambivalence between opportunity and risk, underscore how one nation's development breakthrough can intensify another's vulnerability.

The central challenge lies in reconciling these competing imperatives. GERD has reconfigured the hydro-political landscape, pressing the basin states to confront enduring asymmetries embedded in colonial-era treaties while also navigating modern principles of international water law equitable utilization and no significant harm. Its trajectory illustrates the thin line between cooperation and confrontation, with African Union-led mediation, regional energy trade prospects, and climate adaptation strategies offering pathways toward controlled, constructive engagement rather than destabilizing rivalry.

Beyond the Nile Basin, GERD represents a test case for Africa's future in renewable energy, cross-border cooperation, and shared resource governance. It exemplifies how mega-infrastructure can catalyze regional integration, but also how fragile political trust and hydrological uncertainty can derail collective gains. The dam's ultimate legacy will not be decided by engineering triumphs alone, but by the capacity of Ethiopia, Egypt,

and Sudan to transform zero-sum narratives into shared dividends. In that sense, GERD is more than a national project, it is a proving ground for whether Africa can align

development ambitions with cooperative stewardship of transboundary resources in an era of climate volatility and rising demand.

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Securing Tomorrow: Harnessing Gen Z's Potential for National Security and Economic Transformation in Kenya

By Stansilous Mukaye

Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z) has emerged as a key demographic in Kenya's digitalized era, influencing national security and economic stability. Their relationship with the digital world has been dualistic—they are both a potential threat (due to misuse of technology) and a transformative force (driving innovation and social change). This article explores this dual nature of Gen Z in Kenya in the digital landscape. It specifically investigates the key factors and issues that influence the direction of this dualistic relationship, such as economic hardships and sense of exclusion, among others. The paper highlights policy gaps and makes youth-centric recommendations that can contribute to transforming Gen Z from a perceived national threat to an asset. Findings underscore the need to have inclusive digital literacy programs, youth engagement, adaptive governance, and empowerment to safeguard Kenya's future in the digital era.

Introduction

Generation Z, also denoted as Gen Z, comprises persons born approximately between 1997 and 2012 falling between age range of 13 years and 28 years as of 2025. This group succeeds Millennials and preceded Generation Alpha (Twinomurizi, 2024). As digital natives, Gen Z grew up in an internet-dominant environment, setting them apart from preceding generations. They are distinguished by their technological proficiency, diversity, cybersecurity awareness and pragmatic outlook on life. Like some of the previous protests by opposition groups, the Gen Z's Finance Bill 2024 protests too were driven by dissatisfaction with the government, including governance failures, corruption, unemployment, high cost of living, and taxation, particularly fuel tax hikes in 2023.

However, unlike previous opposition protests led by political figures such as former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, the Gen Z movement was leaderless and partyless, primarily organized by young Kenyans with no political groups (Apollo et al., 2024). They mobilized citizens using social media platforms like X, TikTok, and Facebook, using memes, hashtags, online crowdfunding, and coordinated protest activities.

The Gen Z protests opened a new window for the public to scrutinize every Finance Bill presented by the

government, which was not the case in the past. Therefore, the primary objective is to promote understanding of the nature and dynamics underlying and shaping Gen Z's actions to harness their potential in promoting national security and economic stability.

Contextualizing Gen Z in Kenya

Kenya is a country with one of the youngest populations in the world, with approximately 75 per cent under the age of 35 (Munga, 2024). They are better educated than previous generations but have increasingly been struggling with unemployment. Even though the headline GDP growth reached 5-5.6 per cent between 2022 and 2023, the economic gains have been unable to translate into job creation whereby formal employment has continued to remain sparse, and youth unemployment soared (Munga, 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Zs in Kenya are "highly informed" and well-educated with a large number of them having secondary and tertiary education, thanks to education reforms under the late President Kibaki and successive expansions like Free Day Secondary Education under former President Uhuru Kenyatta. Notably, Kenya's institutions might have, over time, not adapted to meet the needs of this generation. It is because of the foregoing that Gen Z in Kenya mobilized against the Finance Bill 2024, which proposed various tax hikes on essential goods.



Generation Z (Gen Zs) at work. Technology proficiency is common currency (Photo Credit: Carol Odera)

The integration of digital technology has significantly restructured the nature of threats and opportunities in national security and economic stability. This article aims to understand the dual nature of Gen Z in Kenya in the digital landscape as a possible source of threats to national security and economic stability, and as a transformative force due to their digital competencies and skills. Kenya offers a strategic opportunity to capitalize on Gen Z for creativity and digital fluency, by increasing investment in digital infrastructure. The article attempts to shift the conversation from viewing Gen Z along the lines of risk or a threat demographic to considering them as a national strategic asset for economic and national security in the digitized era.

Understanding Gen Z's Role in Kenya: A Conceptual Lens

To understand the dynamic influence of Gen Z in Kenya, it's essential to draw on a blend of theoretical perspectives that highlight their unique position in society. The article explores the impact of Gen Z in Kenya using three theoretical perspectives. Firstly, social media engagement theory emphasizes the role of digital platforms in empowering young people and democratizing knowledge (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Secondly, generational theory, specifically the Strauss-Howe theory, suggests studying recurrent generations can help understand societal trends and history. Andrałójc

(2024) explains how these cycles influence events and reshape successive generations, leading to predictable social development patterns. Lastly, Lerner et al. (2005) propose positive youth development (PYD), a strength-based approach that views children and adolescents as "resources to be developed" rather than "problems to be solved." PYD offers a strategic lens for Gen Z to create supportive structures for their engagement and growth.

This article delves into the multifaceted role of Gen Z in Kenya with three core aims in mind. First, it examines the dual-edged nature of their relationship with technology, how it can pose threats through misuse while also serving as a powerful tool for innovation and social transformation. Second, it evaluates the opportunities for Gen Z to bolster national security and economic stability, highlighting their contributions in areas like cybersecurity, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. Third, it proposes practical policy recommendations to enhance their involvement in promoting both security and development, ensuring that Kenya harnesses this generation's energy for sustainable progress.

Drawing on insights from secondary sources, this article synthesizes insights from books, peer-reviewed journals, newspapers, and reliable online databases, combined with personal observations to provide a well-rounded perspective.

Factors and Issues that Contributed to the 2024 Gen Z Protests

The Gen Z uprising was fueled by growing youth dissatisfaction driven by economic hardship, unemployment, political exclusion, corruption, and the mobilizing power of digital activism. For a generation raised with high expectations but met with limited opportunities, the 2024 Finance Bill became a flashpoint, igniting long-simmering grievances into a nationwide movement. Below, we explore the key factors that fueled this unprecedented uprising.

i. Unemployment and Economic Hardship

One of the pivotal factors contributing to the discontent experienced by Generation Z in Kenya is the scarcity of employment opportunities. The late President Kibaki introduced free education and the 100 per cent transition policy from primary to high school, which raised literacy levels and the expectations of young Kenyans (Iraki, 2024). However, the pace of job creation has not matched the growth in the educated youth population, leaving many graduates underemployed or struggling to find sustainable livelihoods. There is also underrepresentation

of young people in public service. Approximately 35–45 per cent of public servants are between 36 and 50 years old, and 26–35 per cent are above 50, while youth, despite being the majority demographic, account for only 13.2 per cent of the workforce (The Star, 2024). The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, as cited by Mwaniki and Omariba (2024), estimates that 500,000–800,000 young people enter the labor market annually. While the Public Service Commission has introduced internship programs, these remain short-term and do not guarantee transition into permanent positions, limiting the effective utilization of skills acquired by graduates. Economic instability further compounds this challenge.

Kenya's average growth rate of 4.52 per cent between 2013 and 2023 fell short of the Vision 2030 target of 10 per cent, leaving many young people unemployed or underemployed, with youth unemployment reported at 67 per cent (Iraki, 2024). These conditions have shaped perceptions among Generation Z that economic policies and resource allocation have not adequately addressed their needs, reinforcing feelings of exclusion from meaningful economic participation.



Protesters chant slogans during demonstrations against the Finance Bill 2024, in Kisumu, Kenya, on June 20, 2024. (Photo Credits: Brian ONGORO / AFP)

ii. Taxation and Economic Grievances

Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill, intended to raise an additional USD 2.5 billion in revenue, triggered widespread youth discontent by imposing new taxes on essential goods and services, including mobile money transactions, a 16 per cent value-added tax increase, and expanded taxation on digital work (Munga, 2024). Provisions such as a 15 per cent withholding tax on income from digital platforms and a higher Digital Services Tax were perceived as disproportionate by young Kenyans, many of whom rely on content creation, online freelancing, and digital entrepreneurship as alternative income sources amid rising underemployment and unemployment (The Analyst, 2025). These measures were seen as undermining economic independence and stifling innovation in the digital economy, a critical sector for youth navigating limited formal employment opportunities.

Simultaneously, the new Higher Education Funding Model intensified economic pressures by increasing university fees, pushing students toward financial distress or less preferred academic programs (Okeyo, 2024). This restructuring, perceived as rendering higher education less accessible, compounded frustrations with the Finance Bill's tax policies. Together, these reforms highlighted a disconnect between government fiscal strategies and the socioeconomic realities of Kenya's youth, fueling perceptions of diminished opportunities for economic participation and educational advancement.

iii. Police Brutality, Human Rights Violations and Extrajudicial Killings

Kenya's Constitution guarantees the right to protest under Article 37. The Bill of Rights further enshrines freedoms of speech, assembly, and conscience, which are essential for sustaining democratic governance (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). In practice, however, the policing of demonstrations has periodically raised concerns regarding the proportionality of force used during crowd control operations.

Cases such as the deaths of Albert Ojwang (2025), the Kianjokoma brothers, and Rex Maasai—highlighted through post-mortem examinations and independent reporting—have amplified public debate about police accountability and the adequacy of current oversight mechanisms (Omondi, 2025). These incidents, and others like them, have shaped perceptions among young people that the space for lawful dissent is narrowing.

For Generation Z, calls for justice and accountability in the wake of such events became central to protest movements. Importantly, these dynamics underscore the need for continued policy and institutional reforms, including strengthened civilian oversight, improved training in crowd management, and adherence to human rights standards in law enforcement. Addressing these concerns is critical not only for building public trust in state institutions but also for ensuring that peaceful protest remains a legitimate and protected avenue for civic engagement.

iv. Corruption

For young people in Kenya, corruption remains a significant concern, often seen as undermining their opportunities for socio-economic advancement. According to a GeoPoll study, 84 per cent of Gen Z respondents ranked corruption as the second most pressing issue after unemployment (Kibuacha, 2024). This perception has contributed to growing mistrust in public institutions and a sense that governance systems are not adequately responsive to youth priorities.

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) provides further context. The CPI scores countries on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Kenya's score of 32 in 2024, compared to 31 in 2023, shows little substantive change from previous years (Transparency International Kenya, 2025). Over the past five years, the score has shifted by just one point (31 in 2020 to 32 in 2024), suggesting persistent governance challenges despite ongoing anti-corruption initiatives. These perceptions, when combined with economic pressures, have fueled demands among young people for greater transparency, accountability, and reform in public institutions.

v. Political Exclusion and Lack of Representation

Although 75 per cent of Kenya's population is under 35 years old (Zezeza, 2024), youth remain underrepresented in governance, holding less than 10 per cent of political appointments. Surveys indicate that 65 per cent of young people view government institutions as unresponsive to their concerns.

Political parties often engage youth during election campaigns but rarely include them in substantive decision-making. While quotas exist to enhance youth representation, they are inconsistently applied, and when

“Kenya’s average growth rate of 4.52 per cent between 2013 and 2023 fell short of the Vision 2030 target of 10 per cent, leaving many young people unemployed or underemployed, with youth unemployment reported at 67 per cent

youth leaders are appointed, their influence is often limited (Nyabola, 2025).

This underrepresentation has contributed to skepticism toward formal politics and pushed many young people to seek alternative platforms, particularly digital activism. Addressing this gap requires more deliberate efforts to integrate youth perspectives into policymaking and build institutional mechanisms that reflect Kenya’s youthful demographic profile.

Gen Z as Potential Security Threat

Recently, Kenya has witnessed a shift from viewing Gen Z’s activism as just discontent to recognizing it as a potential security concern. Empowered by technology, their actions, ranging from digital protests to cyber disruptions, challenge traditional structures. Below, the article highlights some of the potential security threats posed by Gen Z with their potential is not harnessed effectively.

i) Vulnerability to Radicalization and Violent Extremism

Generation Z, particularly those experiencing unemployment and systemic marginalization, faces heightened vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. Economic hardship creates an enabling environment for recruitment, as these groups often present financial incentives and a sense of belonging not easily accessed through legal means (Mwangi, 2016). In Kenya, Al-Shabaab has established local networks that target youth through both offline and online channels. Some individuals voluntarily access extremist websites or forums, motivated by ideological commitment, a perceived duty to defend the Muslim Ummah, or the search for identity and community.

The internet, while not the sole driver of radicalization, acts as a significant catalyst by providing access

to propaganda, networks, and training materials (Lohrmann, 2016). Digital platforms also accelerate the adaptation of extremist strategies, making online spaces an increasingly important domain for recruitment and radicalization. These dynamics underscore the need for policies that address both the structural drivers of vulnerability such as unemployment and exclusion and the digital dimension of radicalization, through targeted prevention, community engagement, and investment in digital literacy and resilience.

ii) Information Disorder and Cybercrime

Periods of political or social contention often create fertile ground for information disorder, where misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information can escalate tensions, erode trust in institutions, and impose economic and security costs. Kenya’s Generation Z, while highly proficient with digital tools, is particularly exposed to both the risks and the opportunities of cyberspace.

Misinformation campaigns and online fraud have increased in recent years. The National Intelligence Service has cautioned that disinformation targeting protest movements or public debates has the potential to heighten tensions and undermine national stability (Nation Africa, 2024). Youth participation in sophisticated digital financial fraud highlights a growing challenge, ranging from mobile-money scams to coordinated misuse of overdraft products such as Fuliza. Practices like SIM-swap fraud and phishing have expanded alongside Kenya’s rapid adoption of mobile money and digital credit.

At the same time, cyberbullying and online harassment have become more prevalent on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, shaping the online environment in ways that can exacerbate social divides. Some young hackers have also engaged in more serious activities, including website defacements, system breaches, and targeted social media hacks. Notable incidents, such as the 2011 breach of the Kenya Police website (Misiko, 2020), exposed vulnerabilities in digital security practices.

iii) Online Political Activism

For many years, youth activism has been a driving force behind social and political change. This is evidenced with social media engagement theory where globally, youth-led political movements worldwide have found social media to be a vital instrument.

While the right to political participation and protest is constitutionally guaranteed, periods of deep dissatisfaction can create risks if not managed constructively. In June 2024, demonstrations against the Finance Bill marked a turning point in online activism. Gen Z activists used creative digital tactics, including mass emails and meme campaigns such as the “kusalimia” messaging initiative, to register discontent with government policies (Simba, 2025). These actions extended to coordinated online protests against a foreign dignitary’s visit, which officials described as a form of “strategic sabotage” to Kenya’s image abroad.

This reaction underscores how youth online activism is now viewed through a national security lens. Further, the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government urged social media companies to set up local offices in Nairobi to “manage” content and address these alleged cyber threats.

Harnessing Gen Z’s Potential in Promoting National Security and Economic Resilience

Kenya’s Generation Z is a powerhouse of innovation, digital fluency, and entrepreneurial drive, positioned to transform the nation’s security and economic landscape. By leveraging their skills in technology, creativity, and cybersecurity awareness, Kenya can turn this vibrant cohort into a catalyst for progress. Below, the article explores how Gen Z’s expertise can be harnessed to strengthen national security and foster economic resilience.

i) Tech-Savvy Surveillance and Mapping Skills

Kenyan Gen Z have acquired GIS and remote sensing skills through tech boot camps, university programs, and open-source platforms. These skills are crucial for crime mapping and analysis, enabling smarter governance and safer communities. GIS tools like ArcGIS and QGIS help analyze spatial patterns of incidents, such as political unrest, robberies, and gender-based violence. Gen Z

practitioners can create real-time heat maps of high-crime areas, enabling data-driven deployment of law enforcers and emergency services (SATPALDA, 2024). Also, remote sensing methodologies like satellite imagery and aerial photography provide high-resolution spatial data, enabling analysts to discern environmental factors conducive to criminal behavior. The government can leverage Gen Z’s proficiency in aerial surveillance analytics, CCTV systems, and drones for data collection, monitoring, border patrol, wildlife conservation, and conflict-prone areas.

ii) Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Kenya’s Generation Z has demonstrated strong capacity for innovation, particularly in leveraging emerging technologies to address social and economic challenges. Their skills in digital tools, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), present opportunities that can be harnessed to strengthen national systems. For example, AI-driven applications could be applied in areas such as crime detection, counter-terrorism, and public service delivery.

According to UNESCO, Kenya currently faces a shortage of qualified AI specialists, with 30 per cent of employers in AI-related industries citing the skills gap as a significant challenge (Kaur, 2025). This highlights the importance of investing in AI education, research, and capacity building to ensure that the country can fully utilize the potential of these technologies. Without targeted efforts to bridge the skills gap, progress in innovation could be slowed.

Beyond AI, Gen Z’s entrepreneurial spirit is evident across sectors. Through fintech solutions such as M-Pesa, agri-tech platforms like Twiga Foods, and other digital innovations, young entrepreneurs are contributing to productivity gains, job creation, and financial inclusion. These developments reduce reliance on traditional job markets and expand opportunities for flexible, technology-driven employment. In the long term, such initiatives can enhance economic resilience and mitigate the risks posed by automation and shifting global labor markets.

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Harnessing this potential will require policy frameworks that support innovation ecosystems, provide access to financing for youth-led startups, and align technical training with industry needs. By enabling Gen Z to translate their creativity into sustainable enterprises, the government can strengthen both economic transformation and national security.

iii) **Cybersecurity Awareness**

Kenya's Generation Z, having grown up in a digital environment where cyber risks are widespread, possesses increasing awareness of cybersecurity practices. This awareness is valuable as national security operations increasingly depend on robust cyber defenses to protect infrastructure and sensitive data. Targeted initiatives such as university ICT programs, digital training bootcamps, and mentorship schemes have contributed to building these skills among youth (Sarjito, 2024).

To maximize this potential, structured pathways are needed to channel Gen Z's digital expertise into national cybersecurity priorities. These could include internships, fellowships, or partnerships between government, industry, and academia. At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all young people are proficient in digital security, and continued investment in digital literacy is essential. By expanding training opportunities while creating entry points into national security institutions, Kenya can both strengthen resilience to cyber threats and provide meaningful opportunities for its youth.

iv) **Media Proficiency**

Social media expertise is one of Gen Z's most distinct digital skills. Social media engagement theory highlights that digital platforms have transformed political participation, empowering young engagement and democratizing knowledge. According to Sarjito (2024), they are skilled at communicating, sharing information, and organizing communities through social media platforms.

The national security can use this ability to collect intelligence and for public relations. For instance, social media can be a valuable source of open-source intelligence (OSINT). Omand et al. (2019) postulate that social media intelligence (SOCMINT) has the capabilities of offering information on new vulnerabilities, public opinion, and potential security gaps. The proficiency that

these demographics have in these platforms, can be used to improve the operation and efficiency of the OSINT by fighting misinformation during emergencies.

v) **Data-driven Intelligence Capabilities: "Data is the New Gold"**

The spread of big data has led to an increase in the need for people who can analyze and extract valuable insights from massive datasets. With the effectiveness of Gen Z in data analysis, they are well-positioned to meet such demand since they have familiarized themselves with analytical and technology tools (Khadka, 2019). Through data analysis, Gen Z can assist in finding possible security threats, predicting trends, and designing well-informed strategies by evaluating data from various sources, such as public records, surveillance, and social media which leads in improved efficiency within national security agencies. Gen Z also possesses IBM i2 skills, which are advanced intelligence analytics software used across the globe in crime detection; hence, the government can tap into these skills to improve national security. Therefore, when the government engages this generation in its security sector, it has the potential to build a robust intelligence network that can combat complex crimes like corruption, cybercrime, terrorism, and drug trafficking.

vi) **Online Financial Literacy and Online Work**

Financial inclusion, a cornerstone of economic stability, is accelerated by Gen Z's adoption of mobile banking, M-Pesa, blockchain, and cryptocurrencies. However, the need for improved financial education is highlighted by the fact that just 37 per cent of Kenyan youngsters comprehend financial concepts (Kiarie, 2024). Gen Z can aid in reducing fraud and stabilizing Kenya's financial systems by promoting investing apps and digital lending platforms. Kenya is Africa's biggest financial powerhouse compared to South Africa and Nigeria. Modern technical innovations like the well-known M-Pesa money transfer system are part of it. The use of cryptocurrencies has significantly increased in Kenya, in contrast to many developing countries. The Chain analysis 2021 Global Crypto Adoption Index places Kenya sixth in the world for cryptocurrency adoption.

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2022), unemployment among the youth has pushed them into the gig economy like freelancing, content creation, digital marketing and virtual assistant



A group of young people attending a workshop on shaping policies, holding leaders accountable, and building a culture of governance that works for everyone (Photo Credit: Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy)

services offering monetization opportunities for them (Baraka & Wambua, 2023). The government's efforts, like the Ajira Digital program to formalize and support young people in the digital economy, are crucial in harnessing these skills, which offer them income and leads to revenue collection to the government.

Policy Recommendations

Building on these findings, Kenya's Generation Z presents both challenges and opportunities for national security and economic transformation. While risks linked to unemployment, exclusion, and digital vulnerabilities cannot be overlooked, Gen Z's skills, creativity, and entrepreneurial drive position them as a valuable partner in shaping the country's future. To convert this potential into tangible outcomes, the government and other stakeholders need to adopt deliberate strategies that align youth capabilities with national development priorities. The following policy recommendations outline practical steps to achieve this.

i) Empower Startups and Innovation Hubs

Strengthen the Kenyan Startup Fund by ensuring transparent governance and accountability. Complement it with tax incentives, public-private partnerships, and County-Based Innovation Trusts

to support youth-led enterprises. These measures can help Gen Z scale innovations in fintech, agri-tech, and AI, promoting job creation and economic resilience.

ii) Integrate Gen Z into Cybersecurity and National Security Roles

Establish structured recruitment pathways to leverage Gen Z's digital expertise in national security institutions. A Youth Cybersecurity Reserve Program (YCRP) could identify and train top tech talent for roles in cybersecurity, intelligence, and digital defense, ensuring resilience against evolving threats.

iii) Inclusive Policy-Making and Political Engagement

Create institutional platforms to capture Gen Z's political voice. Interactive policy forums, digital town halls, and "Digital Policy Labs" under the Ministry of ICT and Digital Economy can strengthen participatory governance. This would enhance trust and ensure that youth perspectives inform national decision-making.

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2022), unemployment among the youth has pushed them into the gig economy like freelancing, content creation, digital marketing and virtual assistant services offering monetization opportunities for them

iv) **Leverage Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies**

Position Kenya as a technological leader in Africa by investing in AI and digital manufacturing centers, linked to global initiatives such as the U.S.–Kenya digital pact. Building capacity in high-value industries like semiconductors projected to be worth trillions globally by 2030 will generate employment opportunities and expand Kenya's digital economy.

v) **From Strategy to Implementation: Realizing Kenya's Digital Potential**

Accelerate the rollout of President Ruto's Digital Superhighway Strategy to create jobs and digital

opportunities for the estimated one million young Kenyans entering the workforce annually. This requires both short-term interventions (job placement, internships, and digital skills training) and long-term investments (infrastructure, innovation hubs, and policy coherence).

Conclusion

This article set out to examine whether Kenya's Generation Z is a national security liability or a strategic asset. The evidence suggests they can be both, depending on the extent to which the state engages them constructively. On one hand, unemployment, political exclusion, corruption, and digital vulnerabilities amplify the risks associated with Gen Z discontent. On the other, their skills in innovation, entrepreneurship, cybersecurity, and digital activism represent untapped opportunities for national security and economic transformation.

The central lesson is that Gen Z's potential is not self-activating it requires deliberate policies, institutional reforms, and inclusive governance to be realized. By aligning national frameworks such as Vision 2030 and the Digital Economy Blueprint with youth capabilities, Kenya can harness Gen Z as a partner in securing the future. Policymakers who recognize and act on this opportunity will not only strengthen national security but also build a more adaptive, resilient, and inclusive society.

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Between Autonomy and Anarchy:

Assessing Federalism and Institutional Stability in Somalia

By Majid Sheikh Hared, Ph.D and Ramla Abbas, Ph.D

Abstract

Somalia has navigated a turbulent path since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, marked by clan rivalries, state collapse, and persistent insecurity. The 2012 Provisional Federal Constitution (PFC) introduced federalism as a framework to reconcile centralized authority with regional autonomy, aiming to address historical clan-based divisions and decentralize power. This article critically assesses Somalia's federalism, tracing its roots in localized governance models, such as Somaliland's hybrid system and Puntland's clan-based administration, and analyzing the federal structure's design and implementation. It examines key instability drivers: unresolved constitutional ambiguities over resource-sharing and state boundaries, fragmented security sector reforms, contested electoral models, and Al-Shabaab's parallel governance. External actors, including the UAE, Egypt, and Ethiopia, further complicate dynamics by fueling regional tensions through competing agendas. Despite these challenges, grassroots governance by local councils, elders, and women groups demonstrates Somali resilience. The article proposes a path toward consolidation through inclusive constitutional dialogues, a formalized National Consultative Council, integrated security forces with equitable clan representation, and transparent economic policies to reduce aid dependency. By prioritizing Somali-led solutions and harnessing local agency, federalism can evolve from a contested framework into a unifying force for sustainable stability and nation-building.

Introduction

The status of the Somali state as unified, stable, and sovereign has been an elusive goal for generations of Somali citizens. Since the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, the nation has traversed a landscape of conflict, international intervention, radical insurgency, and fragile political transitions (Menkhaus, 2014). The adoption of the Provisional Federal Constitution (PFC) in 2012 marked a critical juncture; PFC is an attempt to forge a new social contract to accommodate the country's deeply fragmented clan dynamics within a structured, representative government system. Federalism presented a mechanism to dismantle the winner-take-all politics of Mogadishu and distribute power and resources to the periphery. Yet, over a decade later, the structure remains incomplete.

Somalia's federalism is currently trapped in a transitional phase, characterized by continuous negotiation and frequent confrontation between the central government in Mogadishu and federal member states. This dynamic is often a source of significant instability, threatening to undermine the very state-building process it was designed

to facilitate, hence the space between autonomy and anarchy is narrow, and Somalia navigates it daily.

This article assesses this journey by first revisiting the historical roots of decentralization, then examining the architecture and implementation of the federal model, analyzing the key drivers of instability through a human lens, and finally, considering future prospects for a more stable and institutionalized political order.

Historical Foundation of Federalism

Federalism is a governance system where power is constitutionally divided between a central authority and regional or subnational entities, enabling shared sovereignty while preserving local autonomy (Lépine, 2012). It allows diverse regions to govern themselves in specific domains while uniting under a national framework for common goals such as defense, foreign policy, or economic regulation. The regions are often with distinct cultural, ethnic, or linguistic identities. The concept traces its origins to ancient confederations, such as the Achaean League in Greece, but gained prominence in the modern

era with the 1787 U.S. Constitution, which inspired federal systems worldwide. Globally, federalism has been adopted in diverse contexts for instance, Germany's post-WWII federal structure, Canada's accommodation of Quebec's distinct identity, and India's management of linguistic and cultural diversity (Amadi, Echem & Nwoko, 2017). These entities adapted the model to balance unity and regional autonomy. Its evolution reflects principles of divided power and has been shaped by global experiments in managing complex societies, preventing both centralized tyranny and anarchic fragmentation.

In Somalia, the modern federal structure concept is derived from the historical precedents for decentralization and the profound legacy of state collapse. Somalia is often described as a homogeneous nation, united by language, religion, and ethnicity (Hashi & Hock, 2024). While these factors provide a common cultural fabric, the clan system represents the most potent and enduring socio-political organizer (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021). The centralizing, authoritarian state under Siad Barre (1969-1991) attempted to suppress clan identities but ultimately exacerbated inter-clan rivalries by privileging

certain lineages over others, particularly those of his own Marehan clan and the related Darod sub-clans (Balthasar, 2014). The regime's violent collapse did create clan divisions, transforming political dissent into a bloody struggle for survival and supremacy among clan-based militias.

The period of state collapse that followed (1991-2000) triggered a uniform vacuum of authority (Harun, 2022). While Mogadishu descended into catastrophic violence, other regions developed localized forms of governance. The north-west saw the establishment of Somaliland, a former British protectorate. This led to the region experiencing relative stability through a hybrid system blending clan traditions with formal institutions. This was the result of a series of community-led reconciliation meetings, most notably the Borama conference in 1993, where clan elders negotiated a power-sharing arrangement that has, for the most part, held (Menkhaus, 2016). Similarly, the north-east region of Puntland established an autonomous administration in 1998, founded on a clan contract, the Garowe Principle, rather than a secessionist agenda (Hashi & Hock, 2024).



Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, President of Somalia, after being elected by MPs in the first Federal Government in September 2012 (Photo Credits: Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP)

Somaliland and Puntland demonstrated that in the absence of a functional central state, the Somalis were capable of constructing governance structures to provide a measure of security and service delivery. Such historical reality made a return to a highly centralized unitary state politically difficult. Federalism emerged as a feasible formula to reassemble a Somali state that could acknowledge and incorporate these autonomous regions. However, it also inherited the deep-seated mistrust between regions that had found a way to manage their own affairs.

The Architecture of Somali Federalism: Blueprint and Reality

The current federal model is enshrined in the Provisional Federal Constitution (PFC) of 2012 (Balthasar, 2014). The document outlines a vision of a federal republic consisting of the Federal Government (FG) of Somalia and Federal Member States (FMS), with powers divided between them. The Federal member states include Puntland State of Somalia, Galmudug State, Hirshabelle State, South West State, Jubaland State, Somaliland, and Banadir Regional Administration (BRA). Key areas like foreign policy, defense, citizenship, and monetary policy are exclusive federal competencies, while the PFC envisions significant shared and residual powers for the states.

The PFC (2012) delineates a federal framework which distributes powers between the Federal Government of Somalia and the Federal Member States, balancing national unity with regional autonomy through exclusive and shared responsibilities. The FGS holds authority over national unity, sovereignty, foreign affairs, defense, citizenship, monetary policy, and setting national standards for sectors like education and health, ensuring Somalia's territorial integrity and global representation. The FMS exercise self-governance, managing local administration, security, public services such as education and healthcare, and regional economic development, while enacting laws that align with the Constitution. Shared roles include equitable management of natural resources, revenue sharing, and coordinated security efforts, with the Federal Government overseeing national defense and the FMS handling local policing and stability (Menkhaus, 2016). The judiciary operates dually, with federal courts for national matters and regional courts for local disputes, fostering a cooperative federal structure aimed at harmonizing Somalia's diverse regions under a unified national identity.

The constitution is a provisional and an incomplete document; contentious chapters on power-sharing, resource revenue distribution, and the boundaries of federal and state jurisdictions remain unresolved (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021). This inherent ambiguity is a primary source of ongoing conflict. The process of forming FMS has been ad hoc and politically driven, often following periods of intense negotiation and external pressure rather than a consistent, constitutional process. It has been difficult, human process of bargaining, coercion, and compromise.

Puntland, is depicted as the founding state of federalism, distinct from Mogadishu (Hashi & Hock, 2024). Its leadership has frequently clashed with the Federal Government over constitutional interpretations. Jubaland State was officially formed in 2013 through a reconciliation conference in Kismayo, where clan elders, local leaders, and regional stakeholders, backed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). It adopted a regional constitution and elected Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Ahmed Madobe) as president, establishing Jubaland as a Federal Member State under Somalia's 2012 Provisional Constitution. The process was initiated in 2011 with the Azania Initiative, driven by local clans, particularly the Ogaden, and supported by Kenya's military (Harun, 2022). This liberated Kismayo from al-Shabaab in 2012, creating a security and political environment conducive to establishing a semi-autonomous administration to counter insurgency, secure the Kenya-Somalia border, and promote regional governance in the Lower Juba, Middle Juba, and Gedo regions.

Galmudug's formation was complicated by intra-clan conflicts, and Hirshabelle was artificially created to amalgamate the Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions, an effort that remains unstable. The name itself, a portmanteau of the two regions, symbolizes its top-down origins. Many residents still identify more strongly with their specific clan and region than with the hybrid state. This inconsistent and contested state-formation process has resulted in a federation of uneven capacity, legitimacy, and commitment to the federal ideal itself.

The Central Drivers of Instability

The implementation of federalism has been with challenges that trigger institutional weakness. These can be categorized into political, security, and economic drivers, each with profound human consequences.

Political and Constitutional Contestation

The most significant obstacle to stability is the fundamental lack of consensus on what Somali federalism should be. The FG, particularly under the administrations of Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo (2017-2022), often exhibited a centralizing structure, seeking to weaken FMS leadership and assert control over regional security and fiscal resources (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021). This was perceived by FMS leaders as a betrayal of the federal compact and a return to the control of Mogadishu. In addition, some FMS leaders, empowered by their local constituencies, have pushed for a more confederal model, demanding maximum autonomy and direct relationships with international partners. This tug-of-war plays out in constant disputes over:

Resource Sharing

Resource sharing in Somalia's federal system remains a core source of tension, highlighting the unstable nature of the country's governance framework (Balthasar, 2014). At its heart, the issue stems from the lack of a clear, ratified law that defines how revenues from natural resources, ports, and other economic assets are divided between the FG and the FMS. The Constitution mandates that natural resources, including petroleum, minerals, water, and land, are collectively owned by the Somali people, with the Federal Government and Federal Member States tasked to negotiate equitable, transparent, and fair resource management and revenue-sharing frameworks. While it emphasizes joint ownership and fairness, the Constitution defers specific percentages or formulas to future legislation. This ambiguity turns potential economic gains into flashpoints for conflict, as each side fears losing control or being shortchanged. For instance, offshore oil and gas exploration has sparked disputes, with states like Puntland claiming rights to resources in their territories, while the central government insists on national oversight to ensure equitable distribution (Harun, 2022). Without

agreed rules, discoveries could exacerbate divisions rather than foster growth, leading to stalled investments and lost opportunities for development.

The problem is compounded by Somalia's reliance on donor funding, which covers a large portion of the national budget, but local revenues from ports, fisheries, and agriculture are controlled regionally. Resource imbalances fuel mistrust, as central authorities view this as undermining national unity, while states see federal demands as overreach that ignores local needs (Gimeno, 2017). In practice, this means essential services like healthcare and education suffer unevenly; a community in a resource-poor area might wait months for federal aid, while neighboring states invest locally, widening inequalities.

Efforts to resolve this include ongoing constitutional reviews, but progress is slow due to political instability. International partners urge a fair revenue-sharing formula, perhaps modeled on other federal systems, but implementation falters amid clan loyalties that prioritize subgroup interests over national ones (Harun, 2016). The result is a fragile economy. If unaddressed, these disputes risk escalating into violence, as seen in past border clashes tied to resource claims. Building consensus requires inclusive dialogues that consider the human impact, ensuring resources translate into jobs and stability for all Somalis, rather than becoming a tool for elite power struggles. Ultimately, effective sharing could transform Somalia's potential wealth into a unifying force, but only with transparent mechanisms that build trust across levels of government.

Security Sector Control

Control over the security sector in Somalia illustrates the deep-seated challenges of integrating diverse forces into a cohesive national structure while addressing regional fears and central ambitions (Beyene, 2020). The core issue revolves around merging clan-based militias and regional armies into the SNA, a process plagued by suspicion and incomplete reforms. Federal leaders push for a unified command to combat threats like Al-Shabaab effectively, but states resist, viewing it as a loss of autonomy that could leave their communities vulnerable. This hesitation stems from historical experiences where centralized forces were used against specific groups, fostering a preference for local militias that provide immediate protection tied to clan identities.



Somalia's federalism is currently trapped in a transitional phase, characterized by continuous negotiation and frequent confrontation between the central government in Mogadishu and federal member states

The lack of a strong independent economic base makes both the FG and the FMS perpetually vulnerable to external pressure and internal patronage politics, undermining the fiscal autonomy that is essential for a healthy federal system

The fragmentation means security operations are often uncoordinated, with regional forces handling threats in their areas while the national army focuses on key urban centers. For example, in regions like Galmudug or Jubaland, local militias lead anti-insurgent efforts, but without full integration, they lack access to federal training, equipment, or intelligence sharing (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021). This leads to inefficiencies, such as duplicated efforts or gaps in coverage that insurgents exploit, prolonging instability.

Reforms aim to build a professional force through plans like the Security Sector Development Plan, supported by international partners such as the African Union (Gimeno, 2017). These include training programs and incentives for militia integration, but progress is uneven due to political disputes over representation. States demand guarantees that their fighters won't be marginalized or posted far from home, while the center worries about armed groups challenging its authority (Issaev & Zakharov, 2024). Clan dynamics add complexity, as militias often protect specific lineages, and disbanding them without alternatives could spark internal conflicts.

International missions, transitioning from African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) to African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), emphasize Somali-led security, but funding shortfalls and differing priorities hinder momentum (Beyene, 2020). Without trust-building measures, like joint operations or equitable resource allocation for forces, the sector remains divided, weakening overall stability. For Somalis, this means living with persistent threats; traders in markets hesitate to expand due to unpredictable security, and children in conflict zones miss school amid flare-ups (Menkhaus, 2016). Resolving this requires gradual integration with local input, ensuring security serves the people rather than political agendas, ultimately fostering a sense of shared protection across the federation.

Electoral Models

The Provisional Constitution of Somalia (2012) establishes a democratic and representative electoral system with universal suffrage, multiparty competition, and an independent National Independent Electoral Commission. However, it leaves specific procedures to future parliamentary laws and agreements between the Federal Government and Federal Member States. Electoral models encapsulate the broader struggle between centralized authority and regional autonomy, with debates centering on whether to adopt a one-person-one-vote system or stick to clan-based indirect elections (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021).

The indirect model, rooted in the power-sharing formula, allocates representation among major clans and minorities, empowering state leaders and elders who select delegates. This approach has been used in past cycles to manage diversity in a fragile context, but it's criticized for entrenching elitism and excluding broader participation, leading to perceptions of favoritism and limited accountability. Proponents of one-person-one-vote argue it would democratize the process, allowing direct appeals to citizens and reducing clan intermediaries' influence (Harun, 2016). However, opponents in the states fear this could centralize power in Mogadishu, where urban populations might dominate, marginalizing rural or minority voices. This tension has delayed elections, as seen in prolonged stalemates that halt governance and diverted security resources.

The push for reform gained traction under recent administrations, with agreements aiming for universal suffrage, but implementation faces hurdles like voter registration in insecure areas and clan resistance. States like Puntland and Jubaland have boycotted talks, insisting on safeguards to prevent federal overreach (Harun, 2022). International observers stress the need for inclusive models to build legitimacy, but domestic politics often prioritize short-term gains, risking violence during cycles.

Human impacts are profound; in urban areas, youth eager for change see direct voting as a path to influence, yet in rural zones, communities tied to clans worry about losing protections (Hashi & Hock, 2024). Without consensus, elections become crises, undermining trust in institutions. Moving forward involves hybrid approaches, perhaps phasing in direct voting with clan quotas, supported by civic education to empower voters. This could bridge divides, turning elections into tools for unity rather than division, ensuring all Somalis feel represented in shaping their future.

The Insecurity Insurgency

The presence of a potent anti-government, anti-federalist insurgent groups fundamentally distorts the state-building process. These insurgent groups such as Al-Shabaab controls significant territory and populations, providing a harsh form of governance. This insurgency:

- ❑ **Diverts Resources:** Immense financial and military resources are funneled into a military campaign, starving the political and social development necessary for federalism to thrive. The Somali national budget is overwhelmingly dedicated to security, leaving little for the ministries of health, education, or justice that are essential for earning citizen loyalty (Issaev & Zakharov, 2024). The resultant effect is lack of provision of basic elements including health, education and infrastructure.
- ❑ **Undermines Governance:** The lack of consensus on Somalia's federal model severely undermines governance, hampering the FGS and FMS from effectively administering liberated areas. In towns freed by the SNA and the ATMIS, the absence of unified policies leads to governance vacuums (Gimeno, 2017). Without consistent security, judicial systems, or basic services like healthcare and water, local populations remain vulnerable. Al-Shabaab exploits these gaps, re-establishing control through shadow courts and taxation. This fragmentation delays development, leaving communities caught between passing state promises and insurgent influence, further complicating efforts to build lasting stability.
- ❑ **Creates Strange Bedfellows:** The fight against Al-Shabaab sometimes forces tactical alliances between the FGS, FMS, and clan militias, but these are fragile and can quickly break down (Harun, 2016). These alliances are often engagements of convenience, lacking a shared vision for the future

of the state, and can dissolve as quickly as they form, leaving communities vulnerable.

Economic Fragility and the Rentier State

Somalia's economy remains fragile and heavily dependent on external sources: remittances from the diaspora, humanitarian aid, and budgetary support from international donors. The state itself has a very limited capacity to generate domestic revenue. This creates a rentier state dynamic where political power is often a gateway to access and distribute external rents rather than to generate wealth through productive enterprise.

This economic model fuels corruption and rent-seeking at all levels of government. Competition over access to foreign aid and seats in parliament, which at times confer immunity and access to resources, becomes a zero-sum game, intensifying political conflict between the FG and FMS and among clans. The lack of a strong independent economic base makes both the FG and the FMS perpetually vulnerable to external pressure and internal patronage politics, undermining the fiscal autonomy that is essential for a healthy federal system.

The Role of External Actors

The Somali state-building process is one of the most internationally mediated in the world. Actors including the United Nations, African Union, European Union, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Kenya and the United States all play significant roles (Beyene, 2020). While providing essential support, this dense international engagement often has negative consequences:

Inconsistent Policies: Competing agendas of the international community often deepen Somalia's internal divisions, complicating federal cohesion. The 2017-2021 Gulf crisis exemplified this, with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) backing rival factions in Somali politics (Gimeno, 2017). The UAE supported Puntland and Jubaland, providing financial and logistical aid to strengthen their autonomy, while Qatar aligned closely with the Farmajo administration, bolstering the Federal Government of Somalia's (FGS) centralizing efforts. This external backing internationalized local disputes, turning regional grievances into proxies for broader geopolitical rivalries.

For instance, UAE's investments in Puntland's ports heightened tensions with the FGS, which



Somalia's Federal Parliament official seventh session opening in September 2025 (Photo Credit: Shabelle Media Network)

sought control over national infrastructure. Such interventions make compromise harder, as external funds embolden factions to resist dialogue, undermining trust between the FGS and Federal Member States (FMS). Ordinary Somalis feel the ripple effects—development projects stall amid political standoffs, and communities face uneven aid distribution. To mitigate this, international actors must align their support through coordinated mechanisms, like a unified donor framework, prioritizing Somalia's stability over strategic interests. Consistent policies that encourage inclusive FGS-FMS talks can reduce external interference, fostering a governance model that serves citizens, not foreign agendas, and strengthens federal unity.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has exemplified its involvement in Somalia through its deepening ties with Puntland, where it has invested heavily since 2010 in developing the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) and constructing a strategic base near Bosaso port (Hashi & Hock, 2024). These efforts have bolstered counter-terrorism operations against al-Shabaab. However, relations soured after a deadly al-Shabaab attack on a UAE training camp in Mogadishu in 2024, prompting Abu Dhabi to suspend training programs and

pivot toward supporting semi-autonomous regions like Puntland and Jubaland in opposition to the federal government.

Somalia's entanglement in the Ethiopia-Egypt rivalry over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) further illustrates how external actors can destabilize institutional stability. Cairo has leveraged military pacts with Mogadishu to counter Addis Ababa's influence. Following Ethiopia's January 2024 port deal with Somaliland, which prompted Somalia to expel Ethiopian troops from the African Union mission, Egypt signed a defense agreement in June 2024 to arm and deploy forces, viewing the GERD as an existential threat (Tariku & Kefale, 2025). This has drawn Somalia into proxy dynamics, with Egypt positioning troops near the Ethiopian border.

Undermining Accountability: The reliance on external funding can reduce the government's accountability to its own citizens, as its primary constituency can become the donors rather than the Somali people (Issaev & Zakharov, 2024). This dynamic often shifts priorities toward meeting foreign expectations, sidelining local needs. As a result, public trust in governance weakens, with citizens feeling their voices are overlooked in favor of external agendas.

Creating Dependency: The prolonged presence of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and its predecessors, while essential for countering threats like Al-Shabaab, has inadvertently hindered the development of capable and accountable Somali security forces by fostering reliance on external troops. This dependency manifests in several ways: Somali forces often defer to ATMIS for major operations, limiting their own tactical growth, while logistical support from international partners reduces incentives to build self-sufficient systems. For instance, critical functions like intelligence sharing and heavy weaponry are frequently managed by external actors, leaving gaps in local capacity. Delays in training and equipping the SNA mean that regional militias, tied to clan loyalties, often fill security voids, further complicating national cohesion. This reliance undermines public trust, as communities see foreign troops as primary protectors rather than their own forces. To address this, a clear timeline for ATMIS has been developed, coupled with increased investment in SNA training, infrastructure, and local accountability mechanisms, is crucial. Empowering Somali forces to lead operations independently can shift the dynamic from dependency to self-reliance, ensuring security aligns with local needs and fosters national unity.

Local Governance and Civil Society

Amidst the high-level political disputes between Mogadishu and the states, it is crucial to recognize the Somali people's agency and resilience. Below the radar of national politics, local governance often functions (Menkhaus, 2014). In many areas, municipal councils, traditional elders, women's groups, and business

communities collaborate to provide basic services, resolve disputes, and maintain a semblance of order. This is the everyday effort to build a functional life from the bottom up.

In places like Puntland and Somaliland, hybrid models of traditional and modern governance have achieved notable, though imperfect, stability (Dill, Weller & Nobbs, 2021). The house of elders works alongside an elected parliament. In parts of South West State and Jubaland, local administrations manage ports and taxation. Women's groups, often sidelined in formal high-level politics, are at the forefront of grassroots peacebuilding, negotiating access for aid and mediating local ceasefires. The grassroots efforts demonstrate a pragmatic capacity for self-rule that the top-down federal project must learn to harness and support, rather than stifle or ignore. The success of federalism will ultimately depend less on the wording of the constitution and more on its ability to connect with and legitimize these organic local governance structures.

Prospects for the Future

Somalia stands at a crossroads. The federal model is unlikely to be abandoned, as it is now too politically entrenched. However, its future trajectory could lead toward greater consolidation or further fragmentation. The current administration of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has championed a holistic approach and revived the National Consultative Council (NCC), a forum that brings together the FGS and FMS leaders (Ali, 2025). This is a positive step towards stability of federalism structure. This initiative fosters cooperation, aiming to resolve disputes over power, resources, and security, marking a promising step toward stabilizing the federal structure.

Somalia stands at a crossroads. The federal model is unlikely to be abandoned, as it is now too politically entrenched. However, its future trajectory could lead toward greater consolidation or further fragmentation

Yet, challenges persist that could tip the balance toward fragmentation. Ongoing constitutional ambiguities, particularly around revenue-sharing and FMS boundaries, fuel mistrust, as seen in Puntland's 2023 election boycott over voting reforms (Issaev & Zakharov, 2024). Al-Shabaab's resilience, controlling significant rural areas, exploits governance gaps, while clan loyalties continue to undermine unified policymaking. For ordinary Somalis, these tensions translate into real struggles—delayed aid, insecure markets, or schools lacking resources. To achieve consolidation, the NCC must evolve into a permanent, inclusive body, incorporating voices beyond political

elites, such as women, youth, and local business owners. Additionally, implementing transparent fiscal policies and integrating security forces with clear clan representation are vital. Without these, Somalia risks sliding into further division, where regional autonomy overshadows national unity, threatening long-term stability.

A Positive Trajectory

To steer Somalia toward stability, a locally driven political settlement is essential, rooted in inclusive dialogue and practical reforms. The following enhanced points outline a roadmap for consolidating federalism and fostering institutional stability, ensuring the process resonates with the needs of ordinary Somalis.

- **Finalization of the Constitution:** Completing Somalia's Provisional Constitution demands a transparent, inclusive process that clearly defines the number, boundaries, and powers of FMS, alongside a fair revenue-sharing framework. This cannot be a top-down exercise; it requires a national dialogue involving not only political elites but also traditional elders, women, youth, and business leaders. The
- process must be deliberate, avoiding rushed timelines that alienate stakeholders, and should leverage local forums to build trust and consensus, ensuring the constitution reflects Somalia's complex social fabric.
- **Consensual Politics:** Moving away from a winner-take-all approach to a culture of power-sharing is vital for Somalia's federal stability. The National Consultative Council (NCC) should be formalized as a permanent platform for dialogue between the FGS and FMS leaders, not merely a tool for crisis management. Regular meetings, including civil society representatives, can foster trust and collaboration. This shift encourages compromise, reducing conflicts over authority and building a governance model that prioritizes collective progress over regional or clan-based rivalries.
- **Security Integration:** Integrating regional militias into a unified SNA requires a phased, trust-based plan with clear command structures and balanced clan representation. This must address FMS



The Prime Minister of the Federal Government of Somalia H.E. Hamza Abdi Barre attending the 4th National Consultative Council (NCC) conference, convened at Villa Somalia Presidential Palace in Mogadishu (Photo Credit: OPM-Somalia)

concerns about local protection while strengthening national security. Training programs, supported by international partners, should include local fighters, ensuring they feel valued. A robust justice sector, with accessible courts, is critical to complement this, winning public confidence. Such integration can reduce Al-Shabaab's exploitation of security gaps, creating a cohesive force that serves all Somalis, not just specific regions or clans.

- **Economic Development:** Building a sustainable economy hinges on strengthening domestic revenue collection and fostering opportunities that break free from clan and regional patronage. A transparent tax system, with clear FGS-FMS revenue splits, can reduce disputes over resources like port fees. A predictable investment climate, free from corruption, attracts foreign partners while empowering locals. Businesses could thrive with clear regulations, reducing reliance on informal networks and fostering economic unity across Somalia's diverse regions.

Conclusion

Somalia's journey between autonomy and anarchy is far from over. The federal model was adopted as a necessary remedy for a deeply fractured society, offering a framework to balance unity with diversity. However, its implementation has revealed a system under

severe strain, contested from within and overwhelmed from without.

Institutional stability remains elusive because the institutions themselves, the presidency, parliament, judiciary, and the FMS administrations, are often vehicles for clan competition rather than neutral arbiters of a common good. The federal structure has not yet transcended the underlying pathology of Somali politics; it has simply reorganized it into a new, more complex format.

The future will be determined by adherence to the model of federalism. Stability will emerge from pragmatic, Somali-driven compromises that acknowledge the realities of clan power, reward cooperation over confrontation, and gradually build trust between the center and the periphery. It requires building from the grassroots up, not just from the capital down. The international community's role should be to support these organic processes, bolster accountability mechanisms, and practice strategic patience, rather than impose blueprints or seek quick fixes. Federalism in Somalia is a fraught and ongoing negotiation, a lived experience of a people striving to rebuild their nation from the ashes of war. Its ultimate success hinges on the ability of Somali leaders to choose a negotiated, inclusive autonomy over the catastrophic path back towards anarchy.

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Mercenaries in Africa's Security: The Opportunity Cost of Foreign Intervention?

By Edmond Pamba

Abstract

The increasing involvement of mercenaries in African security is both a symptom and a driver of the region's fragile security. While foreign states and private military and security companies (PMSCs) present mercenary deployments as a stabilizing measure, evidence shows that their presence exacerbates conflicts, undermines sovereignty of host states, and erodes regional security frameworks such as the African Union Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the complementary regional economic communities (RECs). This paper examines the paradox of foreign intervention through mercenaries, drawing on theories of realism, neo-colonialism, and opportunity cost and situates mercenary activity within the broader geopolitical competition for influence in Africa. The paper further underscores that Africa's reliance on foreign hired combatants is not merely a tactical choice but a structural dilemma; as mercenaries continue to fill the security vacuum left by weak institutions and contested peacekeeping mechanisms, the continent risks deepening cycles of dependency, instability and external manipulation. Case studies from Central, West, and North Africa illustrate the complex ways mercenaries prolong conflicts, destabilize fragile states, and delegitimize regional agency and peace and security mechanisms. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen APSA and regional agency, regulate foreign private military companies, and reinforce African sovereignty in the management of regional security challenges.

Key Words: Mercenaries, Security Architecture, Fragility, Sovereignty

Introduction

On June 27, 2025, the world celebrated the signing of the peace agreement between Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda in Washington DC, ending months of conflict in eastern DRC. However, the diplomatic milestone was overshadowing the irony of Rwandan forces having captured more than 280 foreign mercenaries—mostly Romanians—fighting alongside the Congolese forces (Sputnik Africa, 2025). The paradox of “Africa's new peacekeepers” being mercenaries, illustrates the duality of Africa's contemporary security environment, where foreign powers publicly promote peace and diplomatic interventions, but clandestinely rely on private military actors to pursue their geopolitical interests, often exacerbating instability.

The incident in eastern DRC is not an anomaly but part of a broader pattern in which mercenaries and private military and security companies (PMSCs) have become central players in African conflicts and security. Governments in fragile states, disillusioned by ineffective regional security arrangements or seeking rapid military solutions, increasingly contract foreign mercenaries. At the same time, foreign powers exploit mercenaries as

instruments of intervention that bypass parliamentary oversight, reduce the political and budgetary costs of military involvement, and advance geopolitical agendas (Francis, 2021).

The term *mercenary* has long carried pejorative connotations, but the Article 47 of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions defines a mercenary as someone recruited to fight in an armed conflict, motivated primarily by private gain, and not a member of the [regular] armed forces of a party to the conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 1977). However, such definitional parsimony jettisons the growing category of PMSCs which offer security, training, and combat services to governments. For this paper, therefore, mercenaries are the foreign combatants, whether individuals or organized under PMSCs, hired by states, and non-state or sub-state actors to provide military services in exchange for remuneration. Such recruitment is mostly outside the framework of legitimate national or multinational security institutions. As such, both traditional mercenaries—in post-colonial secessionist wars in Congo, Angola and Biafra—and contemporary



Wagner Group personnel are seen near Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadera on August 23, 2023 (Photo Credits: Leger Serge Kokpakpa/Reuters)

manifestations such as the Russian Wagner Group in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) are captured. This allows analysis of how mercenary activities intersect with fragile governance structures, undermine security goals and peace processes, and facilitate external geopolitical interests under the guise of security assistance.

Mercenaries in Africa are becoming the hallmark of the region's contemporary conflicts. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, regimes facing existential threats from jihadist insurgencies have turned to foreign fighters, particularly the Wagner Group, after expelling French troops (International Crisis Group, 2023). In Sudan, the ongoing confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has been inflamed by the influx of foreign fighters from the Sahel, while in Libya, the proliferation of foreign mercenaries since 2011 has entrenched factional divisions, and both countries are on the brink of state fragmentation (Wehrey, 2020). Across these theaters, mercenaries have become tools, of both the survival for embattled governments and influence for the external powers unwilling to risk direct military intervention, hence the opportunity cost.

States outsource military functions to mercenaries to quickly bolster their coercive capacity against internal and external threats, even if this undermines long-term sovereignty. Yet the reliance on foreign mercenaries

also embodies the logic of opportunity cost - African governments and foreign powers alike choose expedient mercenary deployments over investing in sustainable, legitimate, and accountable security structures. For African states, the opportunity cost is the erosion of sovereignty, democratic control, and regional security cooperation; for foreign powers, it is the circumvention of domestic accountability and the risk of political blowback as mercenaries destabilize fragile states. This duality is evident in the irony with which African security politics unfolds; while the African Union (AU) champions "African solutions to African problems" through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), individual states increasingly contract foreign fighters outside AU frameworks. But the consequences are profound - mercenary deployments undermine APSA's legitimacy, fracture fragile states, and complicate the legal and moral grounds for international intervention.

This paper proceeds in several parts. First, it develops a theoretical framework for analyzing mercenarism as an opportunity cost of foreign intervention, drawing on realism, neo-colonialism, and political economy. Second, it traces the evolution of mercenary activity in Africa from the Cold War to contemporary private military companies. Third, it presents case studies from Central Africa, the Sahel, Sudan, Mozambique and Libya, to illustrate the diverse roles and consequences of mercenary



involvement. Fourth, it assesses the implications of mercenarism for African sovereignty, regional security architectures, and global governance norms, and finally concludes with policy-relevant recommendations for African governments, the AU, and the United Nations.

Theoretical Framework

The persistence of mercenary activity in Africa cannot be explained by security crises alone. It must be situated within theoretical lenses that illuminate why states and external powers turn to hired soldiers despite the risks of undermining sovereignty and legitimacy. Three complementary frameworks are especially useful: realism, neo-colonialism, and the opportunity cost approach.

Realism and the Logic of Survival

Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, with no overarching authority to regulate state behavior; thus, states must prioritize survival and power (Mearsheimer, 2001). From this perspective, African governments facing existential threats—whether insurgencies in Mali and Sudan, or armed militias in the DRC—may rationally hire or out-source mercenaries to secure immediate military advantage. The reliance on mercenaries is not an anomaly but rather a rational response to state weakness and the urgency of survival in a precarious environment. Realism also explains why foreign powers employ mercenaries—they can project influence and secure interests without the political costs of formal intervention.

Neo-Colonialism and Dependency

Mercenarism in Africa also fits within the neo-colonial framework articulated by Nkrumah (1965), where external powers maintain control through indirect means, including economic leverage, political influence, and security arrangements. By outsourcing military assistance to private firms such as the Wagner Group or “Executive

Outcomes”, foreign actors sustain African dependence on external security while advancing their geopolitical and economic interests. This arrangement bypasses the accountability mechanisms of both African states and foreign parliaments, entrenching a form of “privatized neo-colonialism” (Musah, 2002). African reliance on foreign mercenaries mirrors patterns of dependency established during colonial rule, where external powers dictated security arrangements to facilitate resource extraction. Today, mercenaries often secure access to mining concessions, oilfields, or logistical contracts as part of their compensation, perpetuating exploitative dynamics (Matfess, 2020).

Opportunity Cost of Mercenary Reliance

The opportunity cost framework underscores what is foregone when states and foreign powers choose mercenary deployments. Opportunity cost, a concept rooted in economics, refers to the benefits foregone when a particular choice is made (Lipsey & Chrystal, 2015). In this context, when African governments—and by extension, their foreign partners—choose to deploy mercenaries, they forego investments in national armed forces, regional peace and security frameworks, and long-term institution-building. For African governments, hiring mercenaries may offer immediate battlefield support but at the cost of undermining long-term investments in professional, accountable security institutions. For foreign powers, deploying mercenaries avoids the risks of direct intervention but erodes legitimacy, strains relations with African regional organizations, and fuels anti-foreign sentiment. Mercenaries offer a cost-effective means of influence, but at the expense of sustainable, accountable engagement. In both cases, the choice of mercenarism substitutes short-term expediency for sustainable security, locking fragile states into cycles of dependency and vulnerability (Francis, 2021). Thus, the growing normalization of mercenaries reflects both a strategic shortcut and a structural abdication of responsibility for African-led peacebuilding.

Historical Roots of Mercenarism in Africa

The history of mercenarism in Africa dates back to the immediate post-independence era. During the Congo Crisis of the 1960s, European mercenaries—including French, Belgian, and South African fighters—were hired to suppress secessionist movements and protect Western mining interests (Mockler, 1985). These early interventions established a pattern—mercenaries were contracted not only to defend African governments

but also to safeguard foreign economic and strategic interests. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a proliferation of mercenary activity across Angola, Nigeria (during the Biafra war), and the Comoros, often involving ex-colonial officers and opportunists motivated by resource rents and political instability (Musah & Fayemi, 2000). The Cold War accentuated this trend, as both Western and Soviet blocs exploited mercenaries to pursue ideological and strategic goals in Africa without direct confrontation. Thus, mercenarism was embedded early on in the continent's security architecture as a tool of proxy warfare and resource extraction. Angola's civil war in the 1970s and 1980s saw mercenaries fighting on both sides, often with tacit backing from the Cold War powers. The proliferation of mercenaries during this period reflected both the weakness of post-colonial armies and the global competition for influence in Africa (Clapham, 1998).

By the 1990s, mercenary activity became more institutionalized through private military companies (PMCs). One of the most prominent was Executive Outcomes, a South African firm that operated in Sierra Leone and Angola, providing combat operations, training, and security services (Singer, 2003). Unlike ad hoc mercenary groups, PMCs presented themselves as corporate entities with professional structures, blurring the line between legitimate security contractors and outlawed mercenaries. This transformation was facilitated by the global trend toward privatization of security functions after the Cold War. Weak states, constrained peacekeeping operations, and the retreat of superpower patronage created a market for private force. African conflicts became laboratories for the expansion of PMCs, with companies like Sandline International playing roles in Sierra Leone (and Papua New Guinea) (Howe, 2001).

Contemporary Trends: Mercenaries in the 21st Century

The contemporary landscape of mercenarism in Africa is shaped by several interlocking dynamics: state fragility, the global war on terror, and renewed great power competition.

Fragile States and Security Gaps

Many African states suffer from weak institutions, porous borders, and overstretched security forces. The inability of national armies to contain insurgencies or organized crime creates incentives to outsource military functions. In CAR, successive governments have relied on foreign mercenaries for protection against rebel groups,

culminating in the deployment of Russian Wagner operatives in 2018 (International Crisis Group, 2019). Beyond mercenaries, foreign powers play a perversely strategic role in shaping Africa's security; some African presidents and defense ministries employ foreign security advisors — often retired military officers from Europe, the US, Russia, or Israel — to design security strategies, manage elite units, or oversee reforms. Similarly, through bilateral partnerships for instance, in the case of France in the Sahel and the US in Somalia and Niger, advisors train local forces, introduce doctrine, and guide counterterrorism operations. While meant to enhance capacity, this often creates dependency and aligns local forces with external geopolitical agendas. Akin to mercenaries and beyond government-to-government (G2G) arrangements, African governments also hire private military and security advisors. In Mozambique for example, Dyck Advisory Group's foreign consultants not only provided tactical support but also advised on strategy against insurgents in Cabo Delgado (Fabricius, 2019).

The War on Terror and Counterinsurgency Gaps

Since 2001, Africa has become a major theater of counterterrorism operations, with groups such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Islamic State affiliates expanding across fragile regions, opening fronts for foreign intervention. France's Operation Barkhane (OB) in the Sahel, launched in 2014, was the largest Western counterterrorism mission in Africa. At its peak, it deployed over 5,100 troops across Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania, and France spent at least €1 billion annually. OB aimed at dismantling jihadist networks affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and other insurgent movements (Charbonneau, 2021). However, just as other foreign counterterrorism missions in the Middle East for instance by the US,

OB registered chequered results and drove up anti-French sentiment upon which France's withdrawal partly emanated. OB eliminated jihadist leaders and prevented insurgent advances, but failed to deliver lasting stability in the Sahel; violence quintupled during its deployment, civilian casualties eroded local trust, and Sahelian governments became dependent on French military support rather than developing autonomous capacities. Coupled with the perception of France's role as neocolonial, OB's failures fueled widespread anti-French

sentiment, mass protests with slogans such as “*France dégage*” (“France, get out”) erupted, and political backlash, including military coups in Mali (2020, 2021) and Burkina Faso (2022), leading to the expulsion of French troops. Against this backdrop, governments in Mali and Burkina Faso have increasingly turned to mercenaries to fill counterinsurgency gaps (Thurston, 2020). OB thus exemplifies how Western counterterrorism efforts, while tactically effective, can be strategically counterproductive by entrenching fragility, undermining legitimacy, and opening the door for alternative actors such as Russian mercenaries.

Great Power Competition and Proxy Influence

The resurgence of great power competition has positioned Africa as a key arena, where external powers pursue strategies of influence through indirect military involvement. Russia, in particular, has instrumentalized the Wagner Group to secure access to natural resources, project power, and cultivate political alliances in the African countries Wagner Group operates. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner provides close

protection for President Touadéra while gaining lucrative concessions in gold and diamond mining (Rouvinski, 2022). At the height of anti-French sentiment, coups and expulsion of French troops in West Africa, the arrival of Wagner Group as a replacement in Mali in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2023, and Niger in 2024, and its earlier entry in Sudan in 2017, CAR in 2018 and Mozambique in 2019, symbolized a one fell geopolitical swoop for Russia against France and other geopolitical competitors. In Sudan, Wagner has supported both the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces at different points, facilitating illicit gold exports that finance both local conflict and Moscow’s geopolitical ambitions (Stronski, 2022).

Beyond Wagner, Gulf states especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have bankrolled mercenary deployments in Libya, often aligning with rival factions to secure regional influence and energy interests (Wehrey, 2020). These interventions prolonged Libya’s fragmentation by empowering militias and circumventing UN arms embargoes. Meanwhile, Western states have historically used private contractors more discreetly,



Romanian mercenaries queue to be screened at Goma, eastern DRC at the Grande Barrier border crossing on the Gisenyi side of Rwanda on January 29, 2025 (Photo Credits: Moses K. Gahigi | Nation Media Group)

particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in African contexts such as Somalia, where US-based firms provide training and logistical support for counterterrorism operations against al-Shabaab (Avant & Sigelmann, 2010). In each case, mercenaries and private military contractors serve as tools of plausible deniability, enabling states to pursue economic and geopolitical interests without the political costs of parliamentary scrutiny, public debate, or international oversight. This allows external actors to shape conflict outcomes while displacing accountability onto fragile African governments, thereby deepening instability rather than resolving it.

The Blurred Line Between Legitimacy and Illegitimacy

A central analytical challenge in understanding contemporary mercenarism is the difficulty of distinguishing between “legitimate” Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) and “illegitimate” mercenary groups. While international law, most notably the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (Article 47) and the 1989 UN Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, explicitly prohibits mercenary activity, PMSCs often exploit definitional ambiguities and legal loopholes. By presenting themselves as “consultants,” “instructors,” “contractors,” “trainers,” or “logistics providers,” many PMSCs evade the mercenary label while engaging in activities that go far beyond advisory functions (Percy, 2007).

The blurriness is evident in Africa, where Wagner operatives in the CAR are officially contracted as “military instructors” under agreements with the government. Yet multiple reports, including those by Amnesty International (2021) and Human Rights Watch (2022), have documented Wagner’s direct involvement in combat operations, targeted killings, and systemic human rights abuses. Such cases underscore how “advisory” designations often serve as cover for combat roles that mirror traditional mercenary activity.

International regulatory efforts, such as the Montreux Document (2008)—a non-binding agreement developed by Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross—and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC), provide frameworks for ensuring accountability and compliance among PMSCs. These instruments emphasize transparency, state oversight, and adherence to international humanitarian

law. However, most African states hosting PMSCs lack the institutional capacity, resources, and political leverage to enforce these norms (Cockayne, 2008). This gap is particularly acute in fragile or conflict-affected states where governments rely on external actors for regime survival.

The result is a grey zone of legality, where PMSCs and mercenary outfits thrive at the intersection of state weakness, international demand for proxy forces, and foreign geopolitical interests. This regulatory ambiguity not only complicates accountability but also allows powerful states to manipulate the distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” force to suit their strategic objectives. In practice, this undermines the normative framework of international humanitarian law and exposes African populations to unchecked violence.

Case Studies of Mercenary Engagement in Africa

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Ironies of Peace and Mercenarism

The DRC exemplifies perhaps the most dramatic and globally televised paradox of mercenarism in Africa. In 2021, the Congolese government contracted private South African and European firms to provide air support and technical assistance (Africa Confidential, 2021). While these forces have offered tactical support, they have not altered the structural weaknesses of the Congolese army, which remains plagued by corruption and poor cohesion (Stearns, 2012). More recently, the DRC has continued to attract private contractors in counterinsurgency efforts against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and M23 rebels; the mercenaries – mostly Romanian and Bulgarian – were captured and repatriated on live television by Rwandan authorities. The reliance on such mercenaries has had the effect of disincentivizing contracting governments’ commitment to formal peace processes, as seen in the months of diplomatic sterility to secure just a ceasefire. But the tacit shift of military advantage upon seizure of mercenaries and territorial advances by M23 and Rwandan troops, and attendant withdrawal of troops from Southern Africa which included South African units, quickly incentivized and rehabilitated DRC’s attitude towards talks with Rwanda and led to the June peace agreement signed in Washington DC. The opportunity cost is evident - short-term mercenary aid substitutes for investments in sustainable army reform, perpetuating dependence on outsiders.

Beyond Wagner, Gulf states especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have bankrolled mercenary deployments in Libya, often aligning with rival factions to secure regional influence and energy interests

Central African Republic (CAR): Wagner's Entrenchment

The CAR has become one of the most prominent sites of mercenary activity in Africa. Since 2018, Russian Wagner Group operatives have provided personal security for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, trained government troops, and engaged in direct combat against rebel groups (International Crisis Group, 2019). Wagner's presence has coincided with Moscow's growing influence in CAR's mining sector, particularly in gold and diamond concessions (Stronski, 2022).

Wagner's deployment illustrates how mercenaries serve both host governments and foreign patrons. For Bangui, Wagner provides critical regime security in the face of persistent rebellions; for Moscow, CAR offers geopolitical footholds and economic returns. Yet the costs are steep: UN reports accuse Wagner of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture (United Nations Panel of Experts on CAR, 2021). Moreover, reliance on Wagner undermines the legitimacy of the AU-led peace processes and weakens the central government's sovereignty by embedding foreign actors in its security architecture.

Mozambique: Counterinsurgency in Cabo Delgado

Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province has faced a violent insurgency since 2017, led by Ansar al-Sunna, an Islamist group later affiliated with Islamic State (Morier-Genoud, 2020). In 2019, the Mozambican government contracted the Russian Wagner Group to assist its under-equipped military. However, Wagner's involvement quickly faltered: unfamiliarity with the terrain, poor coordination with Mozambican forces, and high casualties led to the group's withdrawal within months (Fabricius, 2019). Subsequently, Mozambique turned to the South African company Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), which provided aerial support against insurgents from 2020 to 2021. While DAG achieved limited tactical successes, it was criticized for indiscriminate

targeting and civilian casualties (Amnesty International, 2021). The eventual intervention of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) and Rwandan troops in 2021 underscored both the inadequacy of mercenary solutions and the resilience of regional security communities. Mozambique thus highlights the risks of relying on mercenaries: while offering temporary relief, they cannot address the underlying grievances fueling insurgency, nor can they substitute for regional stabilization frameworks.

The Sahel: Anti-French Sentiment and the Wagner Alternative

Mali

Mali's trajectory epitomizes the political dynamics driving mercenary reliance. Following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and jihadist insurgency, France launched Operation Serval (2013) and later Operation Barkhane (2014) to contain extremist groups. However, widespread perceptions of French neo-colonialism and military failure fueled anti-French sentiment. By 2021, Mali's military junta expelled French forces and invited Wagner operatives (Thurston, 2023). While Wagner provided regime protection, jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State expanded their control in central and northern Mali. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2023) show that attacks increased by over 30 percent between 2021 and 2023, suggesting that mercenary deployments failed to deliver meaningful security improvements.

Burkina Faso

In 2022 and 2023, Burkina Faso followed Mali's path, after Captain Ibrahim Traoré seized power in September 2022, expelling French troops and turning to Wagner for support. Yet jihadist advances have continued, with Islamist groups controlling nearly 40 percent of the country's territory by mid-2023 (Heni, 2023). Local accounts suggest Wagner has focused more on regime survival than on systematic counterinsurgency, raising

questions about the long-term viability of mercenary reliance. Despite heavy propaganda disinformation campaigns, insecurity has sharply worsened since Traore took over. Fatalities linked to militant Islamist violence have nearly tripled in three years, civilians and soldiers face record-scale attacks, to 17,775 deaths from 6,630 deaths. The state territorial control has shrunk to less than a third of national territory from two thirds (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Simultaneously, economic decline is evident with gold and cotton production falling, foreign investment collapsing from USD 670 million in 2022 to USD 83 million in 2024, and millions displaced amid collapsing health and education systems.

The junta's reliance on narrative control, coupled with repression of journalists and civil society, obscures these crises while entrenching authoritarianism. This widening gap between propaganda and lived realities underscores the destabilizing role of external influence operations and the urgent need for credible governance and regional cooperation to address Burkina Faso's spiraling insecurity (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

Niger

The 2023 coup in Niger, which toppled President Mohamed Bazoum, further accelerated the Sahel's shift toward mercenary reliance. Although Wagner had not yet been formally deployed by late 2023, Niger's military junta openly considered its services after terminating agreements with France (International Crisis Group, 2023). This reflects a regional pattern; anti-French sentiment provides political cover for African leaders to turn to alternative security providers, even when evidence suggests that mercenaries fail to contain extremist groups. The junta can use association with Wagner to project strength, autonomy (from former colonial powers like France), and an image of decisive action. This can have value domestically and regionally to shore up legitimacy, especially in an environment of anti-French sentiment. However, Wagner and associated Russian actors are likely to be drawn by Niger's mineral potential and strategic location—its proximity to conflict zones in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria makes it a valuable staging ground or partner for actors wanting influence in the Sahel (Eledinov & Lechner, 2023).

Sudan: Fragmentation and Foreign Fighters

Sudan's civil conflict between the SAF and RSF, which erupted in April 2023, has drawn in regional mercenaries and foreign fighters. Reports indicate that both sides

have enlisted Chadian, Central African, and Libyan fighters, while Wagner has reportedly provided logistical support to the RSF (Al Jazeera, 2023). The involvement of foreign mercenaries risks fragmenting Sudan into rival fiefdoms, reminiscent of Libya's trajectory after 2011. The opportunity cost here is particularly stark: rather than engaging AU mediation or investing in a unified national army, Sudan's warring elites have outsourced violence to transnational networks and announced parallel governments as in Libya. This not only undermines sovereignty but also destabilizes the broader Horn of Africa, where porous borders allow the conflict's spillover into Chad, South Sudan, and Ethiopia.

Libya: The Mercenary Epicenter

Since the NATO-backed overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has become a magnet for foreign mercenaries. Both the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) have relied on thousands of foreign fighters. Syrian, Sudanese, Chadian, and Russian Wagner mercenaries have entrenched themselves across Libya's frontlines (Wehrey, 2020). At the peak of hostilities in 2020, the UN estimated that over 20,000 foreign mercenaries and fighters were active in Libya (United Nations Security Council, 2020). Their presence has prolonged stalemate, entrenched external patronage networks (notably Turkey, Russia, and the UAE), and destabilized the Sahel by providing weapons and fighters to neighboring states. Libya thus represents the extreme case of how mercenaries transform conflicts into regionalized, protracted crises resistant to negotiated settlement.

Implications of Mercenary Engagement in Africa

Sovereignty and Statehood Under Siege

Mercenary involvement in the management of national security and military operations directly undermines the sovereignty of African states. Traditionally understood as the monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a defined territory (Weber, 1919/1946), governments outsourcing this monopoly to foreign fighters, dilutes their authority and cedes coercive power to actors with divergent interests who fracture their sovereignty. In Sudan, the contracting of foreign fighters by both SAF and RSF reflects a breakdown of national sovereignty; instead of consolidating the armed forces under state command, Sudan's rulers have fragmented the security sector, opening pathways for foreign intervention. The



Group photo of delegates during the African Peace and Security Architecture APSA workshop in Kigali, Rwanda from October 25-27, 2019 (Photo Credits: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung)

result has been a centrifugal drift toward state collapse, echoing Libya's post-2011 fragmentation (De Waal, 2023). In CAR and Mali, the sovereignty trade-off is even more explicit. Wagner provides regime protection, but in return secures mining concessions and strategic influence for Russia; this quid pro quo reduces sovereignty to a transactional exchange, mortgaging countries' future autonomy for temporal survival (Stronski, 2022).

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) Undermined

The African Union's APSA was designed to embody the principle of "African solutions to African problems." Anchored in institutions such as the Peace and Security Council, the African Standby Force, and regional economic communities (RECs), APSA represents a continental attempt to manage conflicts through collective security (Murithi, 2009). Mercenary reliance undermines APSA in three critical ways: (i) erosion of legitimacy - by bypassing AU or REC frameworks, states signal mistrust in continental mechanisms. Mozambique's reliance on Wagner and Dyck Advisory Group before SADC and Rwanda intervened illustrates this sequencing (Fabricius, 2019). Further, (ii) mercenaries can entrench operational fragmentation and undermine security goals—mercenaries create parallel chains of command outside regional missions, complicating coordination.

In CAR, Wagner's presence undermined the AU-brokered Libreville peace agreements by sidelining AU forces (International Crisis Group, 2019). Lastly, (iii) "mercenarization" of security delegitimizes norms; APSA is grounded in the norms of accountability and multilateralism. Mercenary reliance normalizes unilateral and extra-legal security measures, thereby eroding the credibility of the AU's commitment to collective security (Williams, 2021). In essence, mercenarism undercuts APSA's twin foundations—legitimacy and multilateralism.

The Moral and Legal Quagmire

International law formally outlaws mercenaries. The 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, criminalizes mercenary activity (United Nations, 1989). Yet enforcement has been weak, and the blurred status of PMCs has allowed states to circumvent prohibitions. The moral stakes are equally stark. Mercenaries operate in opaque legal environments, often shielded from accountability. Reports from Amnesty International (2021) and the UN (2020) have documented widespread human rights abuses by Wagner operatives in CAR, Libya, and Mozambique. Unlike state militaries or UN peacekeepers, mercenaries are not bound by strong oversight mechanisms. Their profit motive further amplifies risks of exploitation and abuse. The moral paradox deepens when foreign powers

simultaneously denounce instability in Africa while backing mercenary deployments that perpetuate it. This duplicity delegitimizes international norms, weakens multilateral peacekeeping, and fuels African skepticism of foreign intervention.

Geopolitics and the Externalization of Conflict Management

Mercenary activity in Africa cannot be divorced from global geopolitical competition. Russia through Wagner, has embedded itself in Africa's security landscape, trading security services for mineral concessions in CAR, Mali and Sudan. This strategy allows Russia to project power without parliamentary oversight, while countering Western influence (Stronski, 2022). In effect, France, once the dominant security guarantor in Francophone Africa, has been forced into retreat. Between 2021 and 2023, French forces withdrew from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger under popular pressure, replaced—at least partially—by Wagner (Thurston, 2023). After its withdrawal, France has quietly deployed PMSCs to countries such as Mauritania (Themis), DRC (Agemira), and Cote d'Ivoire (Corpguard), and Chad (CAE Aviation) (RFI, 2025); this move seems to cushion Paris from the political backlash it suffered in West Africa, but such deployments go as far back as pre-2010 when Secopex operated in Libya, CAR and Somalia before its dissolution in 2011.

The US, while less reliant on mercenaries than Russia, has long outsourced logistics, intelligence, and base security to private contractors in Africa. This reflects a broader U.S. reliance on PMCs in global counterterrorism (Avant, 2005). The Gulf States and Turkey, as seen in Libya, have also aggressively pursued geopolitical ends through mercenaries. The UAE financed Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries to support Haftar, while Turkey deployed Syrian fighters to back the GNA (Wehrey, 2020). In fact, it was at the height of the conflict in Libya, that Turkey established its own PMSC, SADAT International Defence Consultancy. SADAT has been involved in defense and security cooperation agreements between Turkey and at least 13 African countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Nigeria and Mali, among others. This geopolitical contestation demonstrates the opportunity cost logic: foreign powers avoid the risks of direct intervention, but at the cost of exacerbating Africa's conflicts and undermining regional institutions. Mercenaries become proxies in great power rivalries,

entrenching Africa as a theater of external competition.

Risks to Territorial Integrity and Regional Stability

Mercenaries exacerbate secessionist pressures and regional spillovers. In Libya, mercenary proliferation fueled arms flows across the Sahel, empowering insurgents in Mali, Niger, and Chad (United Nations Security Council, 2020). In Sudan, mercenary involvement heightens risks of partition, with Darfur and Kordofan sliding toward autonomous warlord enclaves. Moreover, mercenary deployments distort civil-military relations through indiscriminate violence and human rights violations, which strain public support for military operations. By securing regimes from coups and uprisings, they insulate ruling elites from domestic accountability. This reduces incentives for governance reforms and perpetuates authoritarianism. In Mali and Burkina Faso, Wagner's presence has coincided with democratic backsliding, highlighting the governance costs of mercenarism (Thurston, 2023). The military rulers in Mali and Burkina Faso are only consolidating the military's hold over politics, blurring the transition path to democracy and extending their rule without constitutional basis, having suspended legitimate constitutions.

Policy Analysis

The persistence of mercenary reliance in Africa reflects a deeper structural problem, the mismatch between African states' urgent security needs and the limited responsiveness of both domestic institutions and multilateral frameworks. Governments facing existential threats such as insurgencies in Mozambique, civil wars in Sudan, or jihadist offensives in Mali — often view mercenaries as "security shortcuts." Yet these shortcuts produce long-term costs in sovereignty, governance, and legitimacy. To move beyond reliance on mercenaries, Africa must re-center agency within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and prioritize sustainable solutions that address both immediate threats and their structural causes.

Most states contracting mercenaries suffer from weak or fragmented security sectors. In Sudan, the SAF-RSF rivalry institutionalized parallel militaries; in CAR, state forces were too weak to secure Bangui; and in Mozambique, the army was ill-equipped to contain the Cabo Delgado insurgency. These structural weaknesses made external coercive support attractive, but also entrenched

dependency (De Carvalho & Kumalo, 2022). APSA remains underfunded and politically constrained hence the African Standby Force, though envisioned as a rapid deployment capacity, has never been operationalized at scale (Williams, 2021). The AU often defers to ad hoc coalitions (e.g., G5 Sahel) or external actors (UN, EU), leaving vacuums that mercenaries exploit.

Public backlash against France in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reflects frustrations with Western security engagement, creating fertile ground for Wagner's entry. Mercenary groups have been adept at exploiting narratives of sovereignty and anti-colonialism, even as they undermine sovereignty in practice (Thurston, 2023). However, contracting mercenaries provides ruling elites with a mechanism for regime survival. By securing mining deals or cash payments, elites can finance their patronage networks while bypassing accountability to domestic populations. This elite calculus often overrides long-term considerations of sovereignty or institutional strengthening (Stronski, 2022).

Conclusion

Mercenary activity in Africa is not an aberration but a symptom of deeper governance crises, institutional weaknesses, and geopolitical rivalries. From Libya's post-Gaddafi collapse to Mozambique's Cabo Delgado insurgency, mercenaries have stepped into vacuums created by fragile states and constrained multilateral mechanisms. Their presence may offer short-term battlefield gains, but it consistently undermines sovereignty, delegitimizes APSA, and fuels authoritarian entrenchment. The challenge for Africa is twofold: to build resilient domestic security institutions and to

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reclaim collective security under APSA from external and private actors. This requires political will, sustainable financing, and a shift from regime survival logics toward people-centered security.

If unaddressed, mercenarism risks transforming Africa's governance and security structures; mercenaries are likely to entrench Africa as a theater of proxy wars, resource exploitation, and authoritarian survival. If confronted through African agency and genuine multilateralism, however, the continent can move toward a security order rooted in sovereignty, accountability, and legitimacy. In the end, the battle against mercenarism is not only a military struggle — it is a struggle for the soul of African sovereignty and the credibility of collective security in the 21st century.

Recommendations

Relevant regional stakeholders should take the following measures to address the impact of mercenaries on Africa's security, sovereignty, peace and stability:

Strengthen APSA Operational Capacity

- The AU and RECs must operationalize the African Standby Force with dedicated funding and clear mandates for rapid deployment in insurgency and counterterrorism contexts.
- A levy system — such as the AU's 0.2 percent import levy for peace operations — should be scaled up to reduce reliance on donor-driven funding (Murithi, 2009).

Enhance Security Sector Reform (SSR)

- African governments, must prioritize SSR programs which professionalize the military, integrate parallel armed groups, and improve civilian oversight.
- Development partners should reprogram support away from technical assistance alone toward strengthening accountability structures, preventing elites from diverting resources toward mercenary contracts.

Regulate Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs)

- The AU should harmonize national laws with the Montreux Document principles on PMSCs, distinguishing between legitimate security

providers (e.g., guarding infrastructure) and combat mercenaries.

- AU Peace and Security Council should develop a continental monitoring mechanism to track foreign security contractors and enhance transparency and accountability on the part of contracting governments and PMSCs.

Recalibrate International Partnerships

- There is need to foster partnerships which emphasize governance, livelihoods, and inclusive peacebuilding, as opposed to counterterrorism operations.
- Mercenaries demonstrate the appeal of transactional and rapid responses. To counterbalance, the AU

should offer credible, flexible alternatives that combine security with accountability, to help restore the credibility and legitimacy of APSA and regional agency.

Community-Centered Approaches

- Insurgencies in Cabo Delgado, Mali, and Darfur are rooted in socio-economic grievances, marginalization, and governance failures. Addressing these drivers requires inclusive development, not just kinetic force.
- Civil society and local leaders must be incorporated into peace processes to ensure that external security arrangements do not alienate populations.

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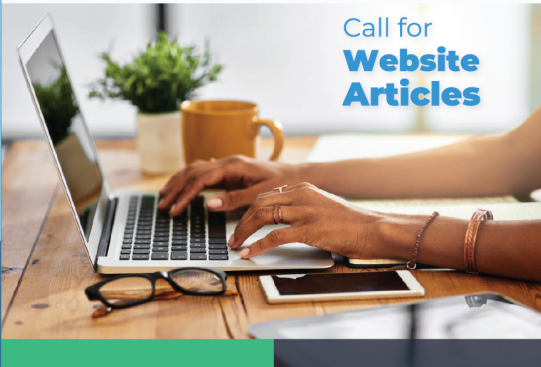
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