

Africa in Security Politics

Africa is a diverse continent. It contains 54 states in five major regions, some of which are ruled by democratic governments, some by military governments. Over the last two decades, security threats have changed in Africa, to which the African security structure now has to respond.

Firstly, armed conflict in Africa has changed from largely centralised violence between armed forces or large armed groups to decentralised conflicts. Traditionally, armed violence has taken place between either state militaries or larger groups of armed forces in internal conflicts. In recent years, however, this has shifted: Violence now takes place in a more “decentralised” manner, often between smaller groups and governments or without government involvement at all. Especially in Eastern, Western and Northern Africa, terrorism and violent extremism, e.g. by Al Qaida or ISIS, has increased. In Western Africa, especially the Sahel region, organised crime has also risen, particularly through human trafficking and the trade of drugs. And in Eastern and Central Africa, conflicts take place between smaller groups, herders and farmers or governments and independence movements such as the Azawad. Secondly, most conflicts today impact whole regions, not stopping at borders of countries. Thirdly, since 2020, especially West Africa has seen a surge in military coups, in Mali, Sudan, Guinea, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Since then, insecurity and especially civilian deaths and human rights violations have increased.

The African security architecture now has to respond to these changes. At the centre of the African security architecture is the African Union, which comprises 55 states. Its Peace and Security Council (PSC) is central to security politics, as it may decide on mandating the use of force, if necessary, against the will of the affected government.

The PSC is supported by regional African organisations (RECs) that also may act in case of conflict, such as ECOWAS or ECCAS. In addition, many UN-missions have taken place in Africa over the years, complementing the AU’s action through mutual cooperation.

If the AU detects a brake of peace, its central means to address this are either peacebuilding or mediation. This, however, is not adequate for the security challenges described: Mediation, e.g., often is supposed to take place between state leaders, while most conflicts today involve other parties than states. Consequently, over the last years, other formats have been implemented outside of the AU, such as the G5 Sahel Group. Additionally, the RECs and external actors such as UN or EU had difficulties in dealing with these changes. ECOWAS, e.g., was left by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2025 and UN and EU missions have been evicted by governments in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. Due to a perceived failure of “traditional” means of addressing security threats in Africa, many populations and some governments have increasingly relied on other external actors to address security threats, particularly on the Wagner Group, which is associated with Russia.

It remains unclear how the African security structure will change in the next years and what role foreign influences will have. Future political action, be it at the EU, the UN, or the Munich Security Conference, will need to address questions such as:

- What role could organisations such as the EU or UN have in Africa’s security politics when acknowledging that Western-centric ideas of stability and peace did not work out during the last two decades?
- How can the participation of rising numbers of youth in African security politics be enhanced?

Important specialist terminology

The Sahel region is located between the Sahara Desert and tropical savannas. It comprises Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal (UN).

The borders of many African states were drawn at the Berlin conference in 1884/1885 without the presence of African representatives. This impacts (border) conflicts until today and so represents only one of many colonial legacies in Africa’s security architecture.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) are regional organisations in Africa.

The G5 Sahel group comprised Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger and aimed at countering terrorism in the Sahel region. It was dissolved in 2023.