



Internal and External Constraints of the African Union's Mediation in the Malian Crisis : Perspectives for a Strengthened Role in Conflict Management in Africa for a Sustainable Compromise

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Abstract

This article analyses the internal and external constraints that have hindered the effectiveness of the African Union's (AU) mediation in the Malian crisis since 2012. Despite its efforts, the AU has faced institutional limitations, a lack of coordination with regional organisations, and interference from external actors, diminishing its role in achieving a lasting compromise. The study adopts a qualitative approach, combining interviews with AU officials and Malian stakeholders, along with a review of institutional reports and academic publications. It highlights several limiting factors: a lack of resources, poor coordination with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), strategic divergences among member states, and dependence on external funding, particularly from the European Union and the United States. Furthermore, the involvement of international actors such as France, the United Nations (UN), and Russia has reduced the AU's autonomy and its ability to implement lasting solutions. The article proposes several recommendations to strengthen the AU's role in the management of conflicts across Africa. In particular, it suggests greater financial autonomy, enhanced cooperation with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the training of specialised mediators through a Pan-African Peace and Security Academy, as well as a redefinition of relations with external powers to enhance the organisation's legitimacy. These reforms aim to enable the AU to better fulfil its mandate of promoting peace, security, and stability across the continent.

Keywords:

African Union; Malian Crisis; mediation; institutional constraints; ECOWAS; external interference; Conflict Resolution.

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Introduction

Africa, has been subject to numerous conflicts since its independence, with devastating consequences for its populations, economies, and regional stability. Civil wars, interethnic conflicts, and political rivalries have led to massive loss of life, forced displacements, and destruction of infrastructure and institutions. These crises have also hindered the continent's economic and human development, with affected countries registering lower growth (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002).

Conflicts in Africa are not only confined to national borders, but also affect the neighbouring countries, destabilising them through massive refugee flows and inter-state tensions. This dynamic highlighted the need for global and concerted solutions to address not only the immediate violence, but also the underlying causes of conflict: socio-economic inequalities, political exclusion and poor management of natural resources. Therefore, resolving conflicts in Africa requires sustainable political and diplomatic approaches that emphasise reconciliation, justice and respect for human rights.

After independence, Africa tried to harmonise its economic and security policies through regional organisations, namely the Organisation of African Unity and the African Union (RFI, 2022). The Organisation of African Unity, founded in 1963, played a major role in decolonisation and the promotion of unity between African states (Constitutive Act of the OAU, 1963, Article I). Faced with budgetary and operational constraints, the Organization of African Unity evolved into the African Union (AU) in 2002, with regional integration, peace, security and economic development as its main missions (African Union, 2000). The AU thus adopts as its vision : 'An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force on the world stage' (African Union, 2015). The AU has established itself as a key player in the management of African conflicts, setting up diplomatic and security mechanisms, in particular mediation. However, crisis in Mali highlighted the challenges faced by AU as well as its limits in this mediation.

The crisis in Mali can be traced back to the historical tensions between the central state and the Tuareg populations in the north of the country, who have led several successive rebellions. In 1963, a first Tuareg insurrection was violently put down by Malian government, with no response to the demands for autonomy and cultural recognition. The 1990 rebellion, led by the *Mouvement Populaire de l'Azawad (MPA)* and other armed groups, led to peace agreements (the 1992 National Pact). But these were only partially implemented, fuelling a climate of mistrust. A new rebellion broke out in 2006, with similar demands, but here again, the peace agreements struggled to be implemented, due to the lack of a clear commitment from the government of Mali and of sufficient resources (Atallah, 2013).

With the fall of Mouammar Kadhafi in Libya in 2011, the situation worsened. Massive return of heavily armed Tuareg fighters who had served in the Libyan army strengthened the *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (Lewis & Diarra, 2012). This group unilaterally declared Azawad's independence in 2012, but was quickly overtaken by better organised jihadist groups, notably *Ansar Dine*, *Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI)* and the *Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO)*. These groups,

imposed 'Sharia' law in several towns in northern Mali, jeopardising the sovereignty of the country (Clingendael, 2015).

In March 2012, a military coup in Bamako led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo triggered the collapse of central government. Taking advantage of the political chaos, jihadist groups took control of the main towns in the north, including Tombouctou, Gao and Kidal.

Confronted with this threat, French military intervention, known as "Opération Serval", was launched in January 2013 on the request from authorities of Mali and with the support of the international community. This operation succeeded in pushing back the jihadists in few weeks with those towns freed and temporarily stabilising the country (International Crisis Group, 2012).

However, the country is still unstable despite these achievements (CPI, 2013) with Jihadist groups attacking Malian and foreign forces. In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2100 (UN Security Council, 2013), creating the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which has the mission to stabilize the country, support the political process, protect civilians, and promote human rights.

Despite the presence of French and UN forces, instability persisted. In 2020, another military coup ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (Lorgerie, 2020), followed by a second coup in 2021 consolidating the power of the junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta (Bensimon, Le Cam, & Vincent, 2021).

The African Union, through its Peace and Security Council (PSC) and in coordination with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), attempted to facilitate negotiations among Malian actors while respecting the principle of subsidiarity. Adopting an indirect mediation role, it supported regional efforts rather than directly leading negotiations. However, its mediation faced major challenges.

Statement of the problem

Since the outbreak of the Mali's crisis in 2012, African Union has tried to act as an indirect mediator to reach a compromise between the conflicting parties. But its efforts have been hampered by numerous constraints, reducing its effectiveness and influence compared to other regional and international actors. Institutional limitations, lack of coordination with regional organizations, and interventions by external powers have prevented the AU from establishing a lasting solution to the conflict in Mali. This study thus seeks to answer the following question: What are the different factors that have hindered the effectiveness of the African Union's mediation in Malian crisis, and what prospects exist for a sustainable compromise?

Research Objective

This study aims to analyze the impact of internal and external constraints on the effectiveness of the African Union's mediation in the Mali's crisis, highlighting institutional, structural, and geopolitical challenges that have limited its ability to achieve a sustainable compromise.

The timeframe covered extends from 2012 to 2024, a decade that offers a textbook case for assessing the effectiveness of the African Union in exercising its mandate, as defined by its Constitutive Act and the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, which aim to promote peace, security and stability in Africa. The study also aims to determine whether the AU is on track to achieve the goal set out in Aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063, entitled 'An Africa Living in Peace and Security'. By identifying the main constraints, this article proposes ways of improving the AU's role in conflict management in Africa.

Significance of the Study

This research is of both scientific and practical interest. Scientifically, it deepens the study of mediation dynamics in Africa by examining the role of the African Union and identifying factors limiting its effectiveness. This work serves as a reference for future research and enriches academic debates on conflict resolution strategies on the continent. Practically, this study analyzed mediation initiatives in Mali to understand their shortcomings and identified areas for improvement. Its conclusions provide valuable insights for policymakers, diplomats, and peace practitioners, offering concrete tools to enhance crisis management strategies in Africa.

Literature Review

This part of the study focuses on literature review about the African Union mediation in Mali's crisis and is made up of the theoretical and the empirical review.

1. Theoretical Review

Mediation is generally perceived as the intervention of a neutral third-party facilitating dialogue between opposing parties. It is based on fundamental principles such as neutrality, impartiality and mutual trust. According to the *Glossary of Political Science*, mediation consists of 'helping parties in conflict to find a negotiated solution' (Carcassonne, Dreyfus, Nay, et al., 2017) without coercion and by encouraging mutual concessions. The *Dictionary of International Law* defines it as 'a method of diplomatic dispute settlement' (Salmon, 2001) in which an external actor (State, international organisation or influential figure) intervenes to encourage negotiations, without imposing a binding solution. In a more formal legal framework, the *Uniform Act of the Organisation for the Harmonisation of Business Law in Africa (OHADA)* stipulates that mediation refers to 'any process in which the parties ask a third party to help them reach an amicable settlement of a dispute' (OHADA, 2017). Jacques Faget emphasizes the consensual nature of mediation, where a third party, "without decision-making power" (Faget, 2008), facilitates discussions to improve relations between parties and foster a peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Mediation in this study, could be defined as a structured negotiation process facilitated by a neutral and impartial third party. This mediator, representing a state, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), or an International Organization (IO), aims to support the peaceful resolution of conflicts and guide the parties toward a sustainable or provisional agreement.

However, the effectiveness of mediation largely depends on the structural and institutional strength of the mediating organization. A fragile institution, lacking resources or subject to external influences, struggles to establish itself as a credible mediator. To analyze these limitations, this study draws on two main theories: international mediation theory and the institutionalist approach.

The theory of international mediation

The theory of international mediation highlights the role of external actors in conflict resolution and emphasizes the importance of the mediator's neutrality, credibility, and resources (Bercovitch & Houston, 1996). According to this approach, an effective mediator must be perceived as impartial and possess sufficient authority to influence the conflicting parties. A lack of resources or authority may render the mediator marginal compared to more influential actors, such as international powers or competing regional organizations.

Milena Dieckhoff (2016) identifies three forms of mediation: political, expert-based, and societal. Political mediation focuses on power dynamics and aims to end hostilities. Expert-based mediation relies on technical expertise to propose practical solutions. Lastly, societal mediation engages local actors to foster lasting peace. According to Dieckhoff, successful mediation should integrate these three dimensions while maintaining independence and managing the interests sometimes divergent of the parties involved.

The institutionalist approach

The institutionalist approach highlights the structural limitations of international organisations and their impact on the effectiveness of their action (Keohane, 1989). According to this theory, an organisation's ability to conduct effective mediation depends on several factors: financial resources, decision-making autonomy and the strength of its institutional mechanisms (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).

An organisation that suffers from a lack of its own resources and a high level of financial dependence on external donors will see its strategic autonomy reduced. This dependence can limit its room for action in mediation and restrict its ability to act quickly in the event of a crisis. Another institutional challenge is the lack of effective coordination between the various players involved in mediation. When an organisation struggles to establish itself as the central player in the process, contradictory decisions can emerge, slowing down negotiations and compromising the stability of the agreements reached.

These two theories provide a better understanding of the internal and external constraints that can limit the role of an international mediator. Applying these theories to the study of international mediations highlights the need to strengthen the institutional capacities of the organisations responsible for these processes.

2. Empirical review

The African Union has led several mediation initiatives on the African continent, but its efforts have often been limited by internal and external factors. An analysis of some previous mediations highlights these reoccurring challenges.

One of the most striking cases, was the post-electoral crisis in Côte d'Ivoire (2010). Faced with contested results between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara, AU sent a panel of heads of state to attempt mediation. However, its inability to impose a binding solution led to military intervention by France and ECOWAS, which resulted in Gbagbo's arrest (France 24, 2011).

Another case is that of the Darfur conflict in Sudan (2003). The AU deployed the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) to stabilise the region, but a lack of resources and logistical support undermined its effectiveness. Eventually, the mission was absorbed by the UN as UNAMID (UN-AU Hybrid Mission in Darfur), revealing the AU's structural dependence on international organisations (De Waal, 2007). This episode illustrates how difficult it is for the AU to impose its decisions in the face of external influences and prevent the conflict from escalating.

Similarly, in the crisis in the Central African Republic (2013), AU launched the Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique (MISCA) to restore order. But this initiative was quickly replaced by the UN-controlled MINUSCA, once again highlighting the AU's operational and financial limitations in conflict management (Tull & Simons, 2017).

Another significant case of the AU's inability to play a key mediation role was the Libyan crisis of 2011. During the insurgency against Mouammar Kadhafi's regime, AU attempted to play a mediating role, organising summits and sending diplomatic missions to promote a ceasefire.

Again, AU found itself marginalised when the international community, under the aegis of the UN and with the active support of NATO, intervened militarily in Libya (United Nations Security Council, 2011). NATO's intervention, with air strikes that led to the fall of Kadhafi, not only hampered the effectiveness of the AU's mediation efforts, but also exacerbated internal divisions within the pan-African organisation, with some member states supporting the ban on Kadhafi, while others still gave him diplomatic support (Ayala, 2011). This episode showed AU's dependence on external powers and how vulnerable the organisation was to more powerful external interventions.

These cases highlight the African Union's recurring difficulties in mediating conflicts in Africa: lack of resources, the influence of external actors and the absence of effective implementation mechanisms. Mali's crisis is part of this dynamic and reveals, once again, the structural and institutional limits of the AU in the face of a complex conflict where security and geopolitical issues and the interests of regional and international players come together.

African Union's mediation in Mali's crisis has been hampered by a number of factors. Lebovich (2013) analyses the local dynamics of jihadism in northern Mali, including the

relationship between jihadist groups and local communities. Charbonneau (2017) sheds light on the effects of UN peace keeping operations and international counter-terrorism operations on the possibilities for peace in Mali. In particular, he analyses how the French military intervention with 'Opération Serval' in January 2013 altered the balance of power on the ground, influencing AU's diplomatic initiatives.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is qualitative, combining a structured interview guide and documentary analysis. Interviews were conducted with African Union officials, in particular from the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, as well as with Mali stakeholders, including government officials, teachers and researchers. They enabled us to gather direct perceptions of the challenges of African mediation.

Documentary analysis was based on an examination of institutional reports, academic publications and press articles in order to supplement and verify information gathered during the interviews. Some data collected in French have been translated into English to facilitate their analysis and comparison with other sources.

This methodological approach is based on the hypothesis that the African Union's internal institutional constraints, in particular its lack of resources, poor coordination with ECOWAS and strategic differences between its member states, combined with external interference, have limited its effectiveness in mediating Mali's crisis. Analysis of these factors will enable us to assess the need for reforms to strengthen its role in conflict management in Africa and reach lasting compromises.

Institutional and legal framework of African Union mediation

The institutional and legal framework of the African Union's mediation dive into the foundations and mechanisms underpinning the organization's crisis management efforts. At first, this section examines the legal texts governing mediation, followed by the guiding principles that shape the AU's interventions and then highlights the key organs within the African Union involved in these processes, emphasizing their crucial role in conflict resolution.

1. Texts governing African Union mediation

The main legal framework for African Union mediation in African crises is the 2002 Protocol on the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council. This fundamental text provides AU with a broad mandate to manage crises in Africa, ensuring not only conflict prevention and management, but also post-conflict reconciliation and promotion of democratic governance (African Union, 2002). The PSC is therefore the main organ responsible for developing policies and implementing peace strategies, including peacekeeping and mediation operations.

Alongside this Protocol, several strategic documents have been adopted, such as the Action Plan for Peace and Security (2013-2020) and the Conflict Prevention Strategies, which

formalise an integrated approach to mediation combining preventive diplomacy, good offices, humanitarian aid and, if necessary, military intervention (African Union, 2013). This approach enables the AU to coordinate its actions with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and international organisations, a process framed by legal instruments designed to strengthen the complementarity between these actors.

The PSC Protocol emphasises that AU should work closely with regional and international organisations to enhance the effectiveness of its actions in conflict management (African Union, 2002, art. 16(2)).

In terms of international cooperation, AU relies on Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, which recognises the role of regional organisations in peacekeeping and authorises direct cooperation with the UN Security Council (United Nations, 1945, art. 52-54).

Specific partnerships strengthen the implementation of the African Union's mediation initiatives. The Africa-EU Partnership Agreement aims to promote a common approach to peace and security in Africa, in particular through financial and logistical support for mediation missions and peacekeeping operations (European Union & African Union, 2007). In addition, the UN-AU Cooperation Framework for Partnership on Peace and Security establishes coordination mechanisms between both organisations to improve conflict management in Africa by integrating the AU's diplomatic efforts into the UN peacekeeping architecture (United Nations & African Union, 2017).

2. Guiding principles for African Union intervention

AU intervenes in accordance with three major guiding principles of international law: sovereignty, subsidiarity and non-interference.

The principle of national sovereignty

The principle of sovereignty is fundamental in international relations, particularly for African countries which, following decolonisation, have made the protection of their political autonomy a pillar of their stability. This principle is enshrined in Article 3(b) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which stipulates respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of member states (African Union, 2000). It reflects the desire to protect African states from any external interference. This translates into a defence of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, except in extreme cases of massive human rights violations. However, the strict application of this principle has also limited the effectiveness of OAU, the forerunner of AU, in managing certain crises.

The principle of subsidiarity

The subsidiarity principle, as acknowledged in the PSC Protocol, is based on the idea that conflict management responsibilities should be assumed at the level closest to the crisis. In other words, the AU intervenes primarily when regional organisations, such as ECOWAS or IGAD, cannot adequately take charge of conflict management. This is emphasised in Article 16 of the PSC Protocol, which provides for cooperation based on complementarity between

the AU and regional organisations (African Union, 2002, art. 16). This means that the AU must play a coordinating and supporting role, ensuring that regional efforts receive the logistical, diplomatic or military support they need to be effective.

The principle of non-interference

The principle of non-interference is another cardinal principle that guides the AU's interventions. This principle stipulates that the AU must respect the right of Member States to manage their internal affairs without external interference. However, in situations of massive human rights violations or crimes against humanity, the AU has been able to adjust its approach.

The introduction of the principle of non-indifference in the Constitutive Act of the AU in 2002, in particular in Article 4(h). This allows the organisation to respond to critical situations, even without the consent of the local authorities (African Union, 2000, art. 4(h)). This principle demonstrates the AU's flexibility to intervene in serious crises while balancing the imperatives of national sovereignty.

3. Key African Union organs involved in crisis mediation

The African Union has several organs specialised in the management and resolution of conflicts in Africa. These institutions were created to ensure a rapid and coordinated response to crises affecting the continent, namely:

The Peace and Security Council (PSC)

Established by the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, adopted in 2002, the PSC is composed of 15 member states elected for a two- or three-year term. Its primary role, as defined in Article 6 of the Protocol, includes conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Additionally, under Article 7, the PSC is empowered to make decisions on military interventions and impose sanctions in cases of unconstitutional changes of government (African Union, 2002).

The African Union Commission

In addition to the PSC, the African Union Commission (AUC) plays a crucial role in implementing decisions and coordinating mediation efforts. Its Department of Political Affairs, Peace, and Security (PAPS) is responsible for executing negotiation initiatives and facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties (African Union, 2021). According to Article 10 of the PSC Protocol, the Commission is tasked with organizing good offices missions and providing logistical support to designated mediators. It also collaborates with regional organizations and international partners to enhance dispute resolution capacities at the continental level (African Union, 2002).

The Panel of the Wise

Another key organ in the AU's mediation efforts is the Panel of the Wise, established in 2007. According to Article 11 of the PSC Protocol, it consists of five distinguished African

figures known for their expertise in diplomacy and conflict management. Its role is primarily advisory: it analyzes ongoing crises, issues recommendations, and facilitates communication between opposing parties. The Panel of the Wise relies on its moral authority to defuse tensions and propose solutions based on dialogue and negotiation (Nantulya, 2016).

The Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC)

The Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) also participates in the decision-making process by preparing meetings of the Executive Council and the PSC. It is made of ambassadors of member states accredited to the AU, and its role, as defined by Article 8 of the PRC Rules of Procedure, is to provide technical expertise and facilitate coordination among member states (African Union, 2022). Thus, it plays a crucial role in crisis management upstream of decision-making by higher organs.

Although the institutional and legal framework of the African Union's mediation establishes the normative foundations of its intervention, it does not necessarily guarantee its effectiveness on the ground. The mediation in Mali's crisis has revealed significant limitations that go beyond texts and principles. Indeed, the AU's ability to conduct effective mediation largely depends on the internal dynamics of the organisation as well as external influences that weigh on its actions. It is therefore essential to examine the internal and external constraints that have hindered its role to better understand why it struggles to establish itself as a key actor in resolving the Malian crisis.

Results and Discussion

The African Union's mediation in Mali's crisis faced a range of internal and external constraints that hindered its effectiveness. It is worth noting that internal constraints refer to structural and institutional challenges within the AU itself, while external constraints stem from the influence of other international actors and geopolitical dynamics shaping the response to the crisis. These obstacles weakened the AU's ability to take a leading role in resolving the conflict.

1. Internal Constraints

One of the key challenges the African Union encountered in managing Mali's crisis was its limited institutional capacity. The principles of national sovereignty and subsidiarity constrained the organization's ability to intervene effectively. The subsidiarity principle grants Regional Economic Communities (RECs), particularly ECOWAS, a primary role in conflict management, thereby limiting the AU's direct involvement and complicating coordination with regional partners. This challenge was acknowledged by H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, former Chairperson of the AU Commission, who stated: "We have also attempted a similar approach in the Central African Republic and other member states, but with limited success. Based on the principle of subsidiarity, our Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have been very active in some conflicts, notably in South Sudan and Mali" (Mahamat, 2021). His remarks highlight the AU's struggle to assert its leadership in the face of more engaged

regional organizations. In Mali's case, ECOWAS took the lead in negotiations, relegating the AU to a more consultative role.

This dynamic led to inconsistencies in the approaches adopted by different organizations, resulting in sometimes conflicting and ineffective interventions. The lack of a unified strategy weakened the credibility of the AU's mediation, with some local and international stakeholders perceiving the organization as a marginal player rather than a decisive force capable of imposing lasting solutions.

Additionally, the failure of various stakeholders to honor their commitments under peace agreements, particularly the 2015 Algiers Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, further undermined the AU's effectiveness. According to the *Independent Observer's Report on the Implementation of the Peace Agreement in Mali (2019)*, out of 78 specific commitments identified, only 18 had been fulfilled in 2019, compared to 20 in 2018. Among the unfulfilled commitments were crucial elements, such as the participation of women in the implementation process, as outlined in the July 2018 Roadmap and UN Security Council Resolution 2480 (June 2019). These setbacks led to a gradual deterioration of the peace process, culminating in 2023 with the resumption of hostilities by northern Malian separatist groups following the withdrawal of MINUSMA.

Amid rising tensions, Government of Mali cited a "change in posture by certain signatory groups" and accused the Algerian authorities who led the mediation of "acts of hostility and instrumentalization of the agreement" (Le360 Afrique, 2024). These accusations reflected a deep rift between key stakeholders, making the effective implementation of the agreement virtually impossible.

Moreover, the African Union's financial dependence on external partners has been a major obstacle to its autonomy. In 2015, approximately 72% of its budget came from external sources, a situation criticized by then-AU Chairperson Robert Mugabe: "More than 70% of our budget comes from outside. This is not sustainable!" (Jeune Afrique, 2015). While the European Union, the United States, the World Bank, and other partners funded key operations, including \$750 million for peacekeeping missions, the AU covered only 28% of its own budget.

To reduce this dependency, the AU adopted a reform in 2015 aimed at increasing member state contributions, with the goal of funding 100% of its operational budget, 75% of its program budget, and 25% of its peacekeeping missions in 2021 (African Union, 2015). A 0.2% import levy was introduced in 2016 to support this initiative, but implementation was slow. By the end of 2016, only 25 out of 54 member states had fully paid their contributions (Kagame, 2017). The AU Commission's 2016 Annual Report revealed that member state contributions accounted for only 32% of total revenue, while external partners covered 67% (African Union, 2017).

This financial reliance has particularly impacted peacekeeping missions. Over 90% of the AU's peace and security budget was funded by the African Peace Facility (APF), a mechanism financed by the European Union (Anyadike, 2016). Scholar Paul D. Williams

warned: “If Africa cannot find sustainable, predictable, and flexible sources of funding, issues of credibility, local ownership, and sustainability will arise” (Williams, 2016).

In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2719 in 2023, allowing the UN to cover 75% of the AU's peacekeeping operations, with the AU funding the remaining 25% (United Nations, 2023). However, this measure further ties AU missions to UN decision-making, as each operation requires case-by-case approval from the Security Council, limiting the AU's autonomy. Additionally, strict UN financial regulations may restrict the flexibility needed for interventions tailored to local realities.

With these constraints, many voices are calling for greater financial independence. As Francine Muyumba puts it: “We must be able to make decisions freely. In emergencies like Ebola, we need the resources to act swiftly without waiting for foreign funding” (Jeune Afrique, 2015). This ongoing dilemma between stable funding and strategic independence remains crucial for the AU, especially in crisis management, such as in Mali.

Another major challenge is the lack of experienced mediators within the AU. Unlike the United Nations, the AU does not have a pool of pre-trained and specialized mediators. An AU official explained: “Although the African Union has a Mediation and Dialogue Division, it does not directly carry out mediation missions. Its mandate is mainly to provide logistical and technical support to mediators appointed by the AU Commission Chairperson” (Interview, 2024). This means that the Mediation and Dialogue Division assists mediation teams but does not take a direct role in negotiations.

Similarly, a senior official from Mali's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation noted: “The African Union supported ECOWAS's mediation efforts, which led the process. The AU Commission provided technical and logistical support to the negotiations and appointed a High Representative to coordinate interactions between regional and international actors” (Interview, 2024). As a result, the AU often plays a supporting role rather than a leading one, contributing to a division of labor among international actors that limits its direct influence.

Finally, the AU's mediation efforts in Mali have also been hindered by conflicting national interests among its member states. Countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Burkina Faso each pushed their own mediation initiatives, undermining a unified AU approach. Algeria, traditionally regarded as the main mediator in the conflict in Mali, faced competition from Libya, which sought to expand its influence in the Sahel. Later, Burkina Faso and Morocco also became involved, driven by their own regional ambitions (Sogodogo, 2022). This diplomatic rivalry fragmented mediation efforts and weakened the AU's position, preventing it from imposing a coherent and unified strategy.

Sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and the African Union on Mali have exposed major divisions among member states, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of mediation efforts. Following the coups of August 2020 and May 2021, ECOWAS and the AU adopted punitive measures aimed at pressuring the junta to restore constitutional order. On January 9, 2022, during an extraordinary summit in Accra, ECOWAS decided to impose sanctions on Mali's

transitional authorities. These measures included closing land and air borders between Mali and ECOWAS countries, as well as suspending all commercial transactions with Bamako, except for essential goods such as medicines, medical equipment, COVID-19-related products, petroleum products, and electricity. Additionally, ECOWAS froze Mali's assets in central and commercial banks across the region and suspended financial assistance from regional institutions, including the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development and the West African Development Bank (ECOWAS, 2022).

However, the enforcement of these sanctions was hindered by disagreements among member states regarding their severity and effectiveness. Guinea, itself under military rule following a coup in September 2021, refused to comply with ECOWAS measures and maintained trade with Mali, notably by keeping the port of Conakry open for Malian goods. Algeria, which shares a long border with Mali and plays a key diplomatic role in the region, advocated for a more conciliatory approach. These divisions weakened the impact of the sanctions and undermined the AU's position. While the regional organ sought to apply maximum pressure, Mali managed to circumvent some restrictions by strengthening economic ties with neighboring countries that did not align with the sanctions.

While the Internal constraints of the African Union have largely hampered its role in the Malian crisis, it is essential to consider external constraints as well.

2. External Constraints

The AU's role as an indirect mediator in Mali has been significantly influenced by international actors, who have often shaped the priorities and solutions put forward. External powers, including the UN, the European Union, France, and Russia, have not only affected the AU's ability to lead negotiations but also limited its strategic independence.

In March 2012, following a military coup in Mali, the AU strongly condemned the unconstitutional overthrow of the government and suspended Mali from the organization, in line with its democratic principles. This suspension came at a time when Malian rebels continued their offensives despite international condemnation of the ousting of President Amadou Toumani Touré (Al Jazeera, 2012).

Given the scale of the crisis and the regional security risks, the AU sought broader international support to restore order in Mali. It specifically called for the involvement of key regional players such as Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, and Chad to prevent the Sahel from becoming "a Saharan Afghanistan," as stated at the time by H.E. Thomas Boni Yayi, then President of Benin and Chair of the African Union (Berthemet, 2012). The AU also lobbied for a UN Security Council resolution that would allow Western powers to address the logistical and financial shortcomings of African armies engaged in Mali's stabilization efforts.

As a result, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2085 (2012), authorizing the establishment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). The mission's primary goal was to help Mali restore its territorial integrity

following the occupation of the north by Islamist groups. The resolution stated that AFISMA should "take all necessary measures to help rebuild the capacity of Mali's defense and security forces and assist Bamako in reclaiming the northern regions of its territory," while respecting "international humanitarian and human rights law" as well as "Mali's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity" (UN, 2012).

The AU was tasked with providing biweekly reports on AFISMA's deployment and activities, particularly before any military operations. The Security Council stressed the importance of refining military planning and required the UN Secretary-General to validate preparations before launching any operations (UN, 2012).

Regarding international support, the resolution called on member states especially those in the Sahel as well as regional and international organizations to provide coordinated assistance to AFISMA. It also "invited Malian transitional authorities and all Mali's stakeholders to fully support AFISMA's deployment and operations," ensuring its security and freedom of movement (UN, 2012).

On the financial front, the resolution established a trust fund, funded by member state contributions, to support AFISMA and train Malian forces. The UN Secretary-General was also instructed to organize a donor conference to mobilize the necessary resources. Finally, the resolution planned for the establishment of a multidisciplinary UN presence in Mali to support efforts on the ground (UN, 2012). However, the jihadist offensive in January 2013 accelerated the need for French intervention, shifting international priorities.

In January 2013, France launched Operation Serval to halt the advance of jihadist groups towards southern Mali following the fall of Konna. This military intervention drastically altered the crisis dynamics. While the AU had been advocating for an African-led solution through AFISMA, backed by ECOWAS and the UN, the French intervention quickly took center stage (Wikipedia, 2013). The AU was forced to retroactively endorse the intervention, highlighting its reliance on external powers for the stabilization of its member states. This shift exposed the AU's limited influence, as it had to adapt to priorities set by foreign powers particularly France in handling Mali's crisis.

In 2014, France replaced Operation Serval with 'Opération Barkhane,' a broader military mission covering the entire Sahel region, thereby reinforcing its military presence (France Télévisions, 2022). This increased militarization of the response had significant repercussions for the AU. Initially advocating for a diplomatic and peaceful resolution, the AU found its mediation efforts sidelined. It was forced to revise its strategies to align with the security-driven approach imposed by France, thereby limiting its decision-making power and independence from major global actors.

Foreign influence further intensified with the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement between Mali's government and northern armed groups. While the AU participated in the mediation process, the agreement was primarily driven by international players such as France and the UN (International Crisis Group, 2017). The AU was relegated to a supporting diplomatic role,

lacking real influence over the negotiations or their implementation. Control over the discussions slipped away from the AU, weakening its ability to shape the peace process.

The recent coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021 further complicated the AU's efforts. Following the ousting of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020 and the overthrow of the transitional government in May 2021, the AU once again suspended Mali. It called on Malian military to "urgently and unconditionally return to their barracks and refrain from further political interference." The AU also emphasized the need for "an unimpeded, transparent, and swift transition to democracy," warning that failure to comply would lead the Peace and Security Council to impose "targeted sanctions and other punitive measures" on those obstructing the transition. (African Union, Peace and Security Council, 2021).

However, these suspensions were quickly undermined by international reactions. France, in particular, pressured the junta by suspending certain forms of military cooperation within 'Opération Barkhane' and demanding a swift return to constitutional order. Meanwhile, the UN, through its peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), continued supporting efforts for political transition while insisting on the need for long-term stability.

In December 2021, the arrival of the Russian paramilitary group Wagner in Mali marked a decisive shift in foreign involvement. The agreement between Mali's government and Wagner introduced a military approach completely beyond the AU's control (L'Événement - Mali, 2021). Wagner's presence heightened regional and international tensions, with alleged human rights abuses such as the Moura massacre in March 2022 sparking global condemnation. The growing Russian influence also complicated the AU's relations with Western powers like the European Union and the United States, which saw Wagner's role as a direct challenge to their strategic interests in the region.

Finally, interventions by the UN and the European Union significantly impacted the AU's ability to lead mediation efforts. The UN's MINUSMA, deployed in 2013, operated with a stabilization mandate but often pursued priorities different from those of the AU. Despite the AU's involvement in some discussions, it never had real control over MINUSMA's decisions. Similarly, the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) focused primarily on counterterrorism and military training without coordinating with the AU. As one Malian researcher noted in an interview on September, 2024, "The lack of coordination with other actors and limited resources have often undermined the AU's efforts." This fragmentation of international responses diluted the coherence of crisis management efforts, forcing the AU to align with externally dictated strategies and diminishing its role in mediation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Crisis in Mali has exposed the structural, institutional, and strategic weaknesses of the African Union. Despite its efforts to play a central role, its effectiveness has been hindered by disagreements among regional and international actors, as well as internal tensions among its member states. The AU's reliance on external funding, particularly from the European Union and the United States, has undermined its independence. The growing involvement of

external players such as France, the UN, and Russia has further limited the AU's autonomy and weakened its role as a mediator. The lack of a unified strategy and the failure to implement lasting solutions have reinforced this inefficiency, exacerbated by rivalries between North and West Africa.

To strengthen its role in managing future crises and achieving sustainable compromises, the African Union must undertake several key reforms. First, financial autonomy is crucial for enhancing its sovereignty and reducing dependence on external actors. The AU must encourage its member states to make regular financial contributions and establish mechanisms to ensure stable funding, including local fundraising initiatives. It could also promote voluntary contributions from African citizens to help finance peacekeeping operations across the continent. Second, strengthening collaboration with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) would allow the AU to assert itself as the primary actor in crisis management. To achieve this, revisiting the principles of national sovereignty and subsidiarity, along with the implementation of gradual sanctions, would encourage a more effective approach and better coordination with these organizations, ensuring stronger adherence to peace agreements.

Furthermore, the AU must enhance its human resource capacities by training specialized mediators and establishing a Pan-African Academy for Peace and Security to develop a pool of qualified conflict-resolution experts.

Finally, redefining its relationships with global powers and increasing its influence within international institutions such as the UN would help bolster the AU's legitimacy and impact on the global stage.

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