

# The African Union's Fading Grip: Military Coups and the Erosion of Peace and Security

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**Abstract-** *The African Union (AU) inability to quell the resurging military coups that have taken over Africa, nine instances since 2020, signifies a deepening crisis in the continent of ensuring peace and security. Starting with Mali's dual takeovers to Niger's 2023 coup, these events have been met with suspensions and hollow communiques, which fail to stop the juntas signifying a crack in the AU's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Adopting Neorealism theory, this work explores the coup wave, African Union faltering mechanisms, political disunity, and resource constraints, establishing the strained role of Nigeria as a regional leader. The data collection includes: AU reports, news archives, and scholarly critiques. The crux of the article argues that the AU's irrelevance has harmed Nigeria, especially as it faces economic losses and threats from Niger's junta, while Africa's unity risks fragmentation amid rising foreign influence. The proposed reforms by the article involves not only funding, but addressing the root causes of the military coups like corruption, enforcing sanctions against coup plotters.*

**Indexed Terms-** *African Union (AU); Military Coups; Peace and Security; Nigeria; Neorealism; Institutionalism*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nine coups in five years: from Mali's double takeover in 2020 and 2021 to Niger's barracks revolt in July of 2023, Africa's democratic progress is being reversed by military coups. The elected governments of Africa have been toppled in quick succession, the military citing corruption, insecurity, and economic despair as the reason for removing democratically elected representatives of states. In 2002, The AU was created from the defunct Organization of African Unity (OAU), with a promise of a renaissance, an African where a constitutional change of power would be the

norm, and peace and security would be an integral aspect of the new order of a Pan-African Africa. The AU's response to juntas entrenched in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey is as predictable as ever: suspensions, communiques, and threats that are not backed by action. The failure of AU was never more evident like in July 2023, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, a key AU leader wielding significant power and leverage, declared the need to intervene militarily in Niger's coup to restore democratic rule. His message resonated among AU members as they trooped to Nigeria for support, but silence followed from Abuja as the junta vowed unpleasant retaliation. nothing happened and this weakened Tinubu's words and The AU's credibility (Akinkuotu, 2023). If the AU cannot act on its own words, who will take it seriously?

This is personal to Nigeria. Being the most populous and the cornerstone of Africa's stability, Nigeria has funded AU with funds and troops where many of its troops have died in missions from Liberia to Mali. Many successes have been recorded in the history of Nigeria's contribution to AU, the ousting of Gambia's Yahya Jammeh in 2017 by ECOMOG but as of today, Nigeria's border is being threatened by Niger's coup, Boko Haram lying in wait, while African Union grows unsteady. The unanswered question looms: Can we consider the AU important when it cannot curb the coup epidemic it was created to prevent? The inability of AU to check the re-emergence of military rule in Africa exposes how irrelevant it is becoming on its mandate of securing peace and security, a failure felt acutely by Nigeria, a nation caught between regional leadership and continental disillusionment.

This study unfolds in stages. The first stage accounts for the coup wave, where it traces its scope and a lukewarm reactions of AU, highlighting Nigeria's waning role in Niger. The second stage records why

AU is failing especially how its mechanisms are handicapped, its politics divided, how its resources are drained, and why leaders from AU democratic member states undermine it by hosting coupists at summits. Finally, it investigates the implication of AU failings: for Nigeria, the giant of Africa but a burdened giant; for Africa, a continent at risk of fragmentation. The article will draw data from AU reports, news archives, and scholarly critiques for its analysis. The article will draw its work from Nigeria's perspective within a broader crisis, seeking to answer the question of whether the AU can reclaim its purpose or if its dream of a peaceful Africa is declining.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study combines Neorealism and Institutionalism to analyze the African Union's (AU) weakening grip on peace and security amid rising military coups, focusing on Nigeria's constrained leadership. The key tenet of neorealism (Waltz, 1979) is its view that the international system is anarchic, and states pursue their interest at the international system by prioritizing sovereignty and self-interest, which explains why the AU is ineffective against the coups in Mali (2020, 2021) and Niger (2023). The reluctance of member states to intervene when juntas take over, as evidenced by the weak enforcement of the Lomé Declaration (2000), and the stalled 2023 Niger intervention by Nigeria reflects the AU inaction (Akinkuotu, 2023). While this is true, neorealism does not consider the domestic triggers of coups like corruption and insurgency.

Institutionalism (Keohane, 1984) complements this by highlighting the AU's internal flaws: The African Standby Force (ASF) remains non-operational by 2025 due to underfunding (e.g., \$60 million of \$400 million for the Peace Fund) and political disunity, as when Ghana hosted Burkina Faso's coup leader Traoré in 2024 despite suspension (Mensah, 2025). Neorealism reveals the barriers at the international system, while institutionalism exposes the weaknesses that exists within the state and the institutions of state, underscoring why juntas turn to Russia (e.g., Mali) while also Nigeria struggles as a burdened giant. Though Neorealism plays down on the importance of non-state actors and Institutionalism over-focuses on design of

institutions, their integration offers a robust lens for dissecting the AU's decline and Nigeria's plight.

## III. THE COUP WAVE: A GROWING CHALLENGE

Nine coups from 2020 to 2023 have unleashed a torrent of military coups across Africa, a stark reversal of the democratic consolidation that marked the early 21st century. Counting from 2020 alone, juntas have taken over the reins of power in seven countries, with each coup an enigma on the mandate AU has to upholding constitutional governance and securing peace. This section establishes this enigma as it scrutinizes the responses to junta takeovers, with a beaming insight into crucial role Nigeria plays but a frustrating one, which sets the stage to immensely investigate the waning relevance of AU.

On August 18, 2020, the wave began in Mali, where a group of soldiers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta ousted Mali's democratic president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta during a time of protest against the leadership due to corruption and a spiraling jihadist insurgency (Fornof, & Cole, 2020). On May 24, 2021, the same junta struck again, merely nine months from the first, removing the temporary civilian rule and cementing military takeover in the country. Both coups by Goita led to a predictable gesture by the AU, suspension, twice, with the Peace and Security Council (PSC) issuing calls for restoration, Goïta pivoted to Russia's Wagner Group for support (Amani Africa, 2022; France 24, 2022). On April 20, 2021, another junta seized power in Chad after his father, the president, died in the battlefield in a fight against terrorists. General Mahamat Idriss Déby coup was not really opposed by the AU with the AU citing stability over principle (Institute for Security Studies, 2021).

President Alpha Condé of Guinea was overthrown by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya on September 5, 2021, with a pledge to end years of autocracy. As predicted, ECOWAS followed by the AU, suspended Guinea from the Union but a determined Colonel Mamady Doumbouya paid no attention to the PSC communiqués (Peace and Security Council, African Union, 2021). In Sudan, the transition, which was already delicate, collapsed on October 25, 2021, when the civilian-military council was dissolved by General

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. This dissolution triggered street protests as well as AU's suspension of Sudan, it did not deter the general as power remained with the army (France 24, 2021). On January 24, 2022, in an atmosphere of security failures Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, a member of the Presidential Security Regiment, toppled President Roch Kaboré of Burkina Faso, and eight months later, September 30, 2022, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba was toppled by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. This led to Burkina Faso being suspended by the AU twice in one year which was strengthened by its redirected tie to Russia (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

On July 26, 2023, the coup waves hit Nigeria's doorstep when it hit Niger. The president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum, was detained by its own presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, who declared the government as junta, with the claim that the reason for the coup was the prevalent economic woes and Jihadist threats. On July 28, AU condemned the newly formed junta government and immediately suspended Niger from the union. The Nigerian president, Bola Tinubu, who was the sitting chairman of ECOWAS, threatened military action against the junta government of Niger especially as the coup was close to home with purpose of restoring Bazoum to power (Punch Newspapers, 2023). Deadline for military action passed, the troops were mobilized as Tinubu organized a meeting with Nigerian state governors bordering Niger, then stalled. The borders with Nigeria tensed as the junta dug in

(Nigerian Tribune, 2023). At the height of the Niger tension, another junta from Gabon struck, with General Brice Oligui Nguema ending the 55-year reign of the Bongo family after the election. The junta faced no real opposition as AU suspended Gabon from the union (Gbadamosi, 2023; Obangome, 2023)

Since the 1970s, the frequency of the coup remains unseen like in the past 5 years, nine coups in under five years, which signals a crisis. The causes of these coups vary: Mali and Burkina Faso's point to insurgencies, Niger and Guinea to governance rot, Chad and Gabon to succession and electoral fraud. Though the causes might be an understandable trigger but the pattern of military rule never changes:

militaries exploit public discontent, it topples civilians, and defy continental censure for the coup. The normal sequence of protocol at AU is suspension, PSC statements, and calls for dialogue which has not even seen a reversal of even a single takeover. Mali's Goïta rules on; Niger's Tchiani disregards ECOWAS sanctions, as evidenced by continued trade through Benin; Burkina Faso's Traoré shrugs off AU edicts. An arm of AU, the African Standby Force, which is charged with a quick response for emergencies, is an unrealized legal framework, leaving regional bodies to shoulder the burden.

Nigeria's deep involvement further heightens the importance of the situation. Kano is just 200 kilometers from Niger's coup which can disrupt trade routes and security as Boko Haram, a terrorist group, looms as a cross-border specter. ECOWAS, through Tinubu's threats and echoed by the AU PSC on August 10, 2023, raised hopes of action, yet AU afterward allowed for regional solution that waned out (Mushoriwa, 2024). A direct contrast with the Nigerian past: in 1990, ECOMOG, led by the Nigerian troops, quelled the civil war in Liberia; in 2017, it ousted Gambia's Jammeh with 7,000 soldiers (Reuters, 2023). Nigeria, today, might hesitate when it is called upon especially as it deals with domestic insurgency, and the AU has no spine. The coup wave thrives, exposing a continental body too weak to act, Nigeria and Africa remain exposed to ongoing instability.

#### IV. WHY THE AU FALTERS: CRACKS IN THE FRAMEWORK

The African Union's (AU) failure to reverse the nine coups since 2020 is not a fluke, it reflects systemic fractures in its Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). APSA falters in three key areas despite being created to address these crises like Mali's or Niger's. The AU falters in three areas: operational mechanisms, political cohesion, and financial capacity. This section will explore these cracks by establishing how Nigeria's continental ambition continues to fade as AU stumbles.

##### *4.1 Broken Mechanisms: A Toothless Arsenal*

APSA's centerpiece, African Standby Force (ASF), was created to deploy rapidly against threats like coups. ASF was conceived in 2003 with a 25,000

troops commitment across five regional brigades by 2010. By 2025, this specialized agency of the AU remains non-operational (Amani Africa, 2025). This non-operational nature of this military wing of the AU has left it without an enforcement mechanism mostly due to lack of funding, Logistical hurdles, and training gaps. The AU PSC urged “all measures” to restore order following Niger’s junta seizing power in July, 2023, but since there is an unformed standing military of the AU, ASF, it left Nigeria’s ECOWAS-led threats hollow (Amani Africa, 2024). The suspensions of Mali in 2020, Niger in 2023, carry no enforcement weight because the juntas do not fear, neither are they concerned about being suspended, coupled with the fact that AU lacks muscle. APSA has another tool, The Panel of the Wise, that advise the AU on conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding but wields no binding power, its report remains neglected and unacted upon (Ngandu, 2017). The Nigeria’s glory of the past of deploying 12,000 troops to Liberia in the 1990s exposes and condemns this inaction, underscoring a continental body unfit for crisis.

#### *4.2 Political Disunity: A House Divided*

An important act of the AU, Constitutive Act, bans unconstitutional change of power (Article 4p) but its unwillingness like in the time of OAU to muster troops in countering the coups paralyzes its action (AU, 2000). This unravels the AU’s political fabric under competing interests and outdated norms. Member states strongly protect their independence. When Mali’s leaders turned to Russia’s Wagner Group after 2020, the African Union (AU) was cautious, worried about damaging relations (Siegle, & Eizenga, 2021). AU bent its rule in 2021 when Chad experienced a military coup, it tried to prioritize stability over democracy when it did not sanction Chad, a precedence that emboldened other coupists (Lizzo, 2023). AU’s political problems is compounded by the fact that AU member states undermine its stance by inviting the coup masterminds to summits in their states: Burkina Faso’s Ibrahim Traoré attended a 2024 ECOWAS trade summit in Ghana, while Mali’s Assimi Goïta joined Senegal’s regional talks, despite suspensions (Mensah, 2025; Millecamps, 2024). The juxtaposing position AU showcases its hypocrisy by welcoming coupists on one hand while condemning them on the

other.

Nigeria’s role exposes this rift. Dealing with Boko Haram, the country prioritizes its own survival over AU changes. Meanwhile, Tinubu’s 2023 threat to intervene in Niger faded due to the AU’s lack of action, as reported by Dersso (2023). The PSC’s consensus model is on gridlock since other states like South Africa and Kenya are busy prioritizing their regions. The inability of AU troops from the 54 member states to counter the nine coups reveals a fragmented political will like the continent itself.

#### *4.3 Resource Starvation: A Bankrupt Vision*

Funding cripples the AU’s ambitions. The AU had a \$605 million budget in 2023 but was only able to raise a fraction of the money while relying on the EU, and European member states’ contributions of \$307 million to foot the bill which represented more than 60% of the total budget (Obwoye, 2024). Only \$60 million of the ambitious \$400 million was raised by 2023 for the Peace Fund, launched in 2016 to bankroll security operations across Africa like an ASF deployment (Institute for Security Studies, 2023). Nigeria views its \$19.5 million contribution in 2023, which, if continuously given to the AU, would support an empty organization (George and Angbulu, 2023). Compare this to Nigeria’s contribution to ECOWAS, for example, in 2016, Nigeria committed to bankrolling Gambia’s intervention with more than 50% of the more than \$300 million that was required and contributed majority of the 7,000 troops needed, a feat the AU can’t replicate (Ripples Nigeria, 2016). AU’s overreliance on Western donations ties its hands in achieving its dire objective of funding anti-coup missions, but the reverse is the case, Juntas persist as the AU struggles with funding shortages.

This lack of funding affects Nigeria heavily. Its military is already strained by insurgencies; it can’t single-handedly support a continent-wide force. Still, the AU’s reliance on outside money like the EU, and European member states contribution of \$307 million, weakens African control (Obwoye, 2024). Coups have been turned to geopolitical chess moves that the AU cannot counter, as evidenced by Mali’s pivot to Russia, Niger’s defiance, and Burkina Faso’s anti-Western tilt, which exploit this weakness.

## V. NIGERIA'S LENS: A LEADER CONSTRAINED

Nigeria and the AU are in some way, antithesis of the other. Nigeria has an ECOMOG legacy that include stabilizing Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Gambia, which establishes the point that an African-led security outfit works. On the other hand, the AU shackles this potential especially for the Niger coup, a stone's throw away from Kano, demands a robust AU, but Nigeria's 2023 intervention bid faltered without continental backbone (Akinkuotu, 2023). Nigeria's Boko

Haram and banditry problems are domestic factors that have hindered its role to push for an AU reform, yet its investment demands more. The mechanical, political, and financial AU cracks, leave Nigeria a frustrated giant, its regional triumphs dimmed by a union too weak to fight coups.

## VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA AND THE CONTINENT

The failure to stop the series of coups across Africa from 2020 by the African Union has changed Nigeria's security situation and puts Africa's unity at risk. As the juntas seized power amid the AU's faltering relevance, coups from Mali to Niger, has put a cost burden on Nigeria, a regional powerhouse, while signaling a perilous trajectory for the continent. This section examines these implications, weaving Nigeria's stakes into Africa's broader crisis.

### 6.1 NIGERIA'S BURDEN: A GIANT UNDER PRESSURE

The crisis facing AU is not just a long-term concern for Nigeria; it is a concern at its doorstep. The Niger coup of July 2023, which is barely 200 kilometers from Kano, has disrupted trade to the tune of 13-billion-naira every week, with Nigeria having made 177-billion-naira worth of trade the previous year as a result of Nigeria-Niger border closure (Babatola, 2023). The junta's defiance of AU's suspension and ECOWAS sanctions will only emboldened Boko Haram, thereby fostering instability in Niger. While Nigeria have contributed in a single year, \$19.5 million, to the AU, the investment has really amounted to nothing since the AU still defers to regional efforts during the time of crisis to check it alone. The military intervention threat in August 2023

by President Tinubu was quickly backed up by ECOWAS members, who mobilized 5,000 troops, but AU's silence left it as Nigerian burden. The plan was aborted when logistics faltered (Akinkuotu, 2023).

This reverberates a tale of a feigning glory. Nigeria's triumph with ECOMOG: the 12,000 troops in Liberia (1990-1998), and 7,000 in Gambia (2017) have proved that an African-led security outfit can work. The account of today tells a different story with its 223,000-strong army, although stretched by domestic insurgency, cannot shoulder the weight of the continental load (Premium Times, 2023). The AU's failure has necessitated Nigeria to combat in two fronts, at home and in the region, while the juntas next door openly ridicules its obligation. Nigeria's leadership ambition is dimmed because it is too weak to act despite Nigeria economically, politically, and militarily, paying to fund AU that delivers very little.

### 6.2 CONTINENTAL RISKS: FRAGMENTATION AND DEPENDENCY

Across Africa, the AU's decline resonates more profoundly. The nine combined coups, along with an invitation from Ghana to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to attend a trade summit in its country, or Senegal's regional talks, erodes the AU's moral and practical authority (Modern Ghana, 2025; Millecamps, 2024). These acts embolden the military to commit more coups since the suspensions from AU means an invitation, why fear the AU? Democracy shrinks as the juntas expand, it shrinks even more as Mali and Burkina Faso makes deals with Wagner, a Russian armed rebel, and Niger flirting with Russia, trading African unity for foreign patronage (France 24, 2022). AU envisions a "peaceful and secure" continent which is the AU's Agenda 2063, but this rings hollow when coups spread unchecked (Institute for Security Studies, 2023).

AU depend on regional blocs to fill the void it cannot fill at the center. Nigeria leads ECOWAS and flexes its muscle in Gambia, yet its sanctions on Niger is bypassed through the Benin's port, which shows its limit (Africa News, 2023). The SADC and the EAC leave gaps in its enforcement power but is limited for lacking the AU's scope of influence. Without a strong

central African Union, external actors influence will only but increase. The France 5,000 troops in the Sahel, China funds \$60 billion in infrastructure, and the UN's \$2.4 billion commitment to fund aid operations dwarfs the AU's Peace Fund (Zhang, 2021; Reuters, 2023).

The dependence of AU'S agencies on external actors' fractures its autonomy and decision-making powers, turning it into a chessboard for global powers while juntas thrive.

### 6.3 FUTURE SCENARIOS: A CONTINENT AT A CROSSROADS

Two paths loom. If the AU remains ineffective as it has been of late, the emergence of juntas can widen into countries like Cameroon or Côte d'Ivoire that are rife with unrest. The giant of Africa, Nigeria, has seen an increase in number of attacks steadily on the rise from 124 incidents in 2018 to 1,031 incidents in 2022, risks a domino effect, as over 1,400 of its porous borders are gateways to instability (Ojewale, 2024; Oyedokun, & Jossy, 2025). Africa might be splintered into regional fiefdoms, ECOWAS in the west, SADC in the south, EAC in the east, ECCAS at the center, and UMA in the north, thereby abandoning continental unity for localized fixes while leaving the AU as a continental shell. Alternatively, an AU that is fully funded, with a robust military that can deter coups, evidenced by Nigeria's past successes in military interventionism which suggests a well-resourced African solution works. Yet, without Nigeria pushing reform, distracted by its own crises, this hope fades.

The stakes are existential for Nigeria because a failing AU means Niger-like threats that is accompanied by economic loss, insurgent spill over, and a tarnished regional crown. The stakes for Africa is a slide toward division and dependence, the dream of self-reliance lost to military boots and foreign hands. The AU's resolve is not the only thing being tested by the coup waves, but the continent's future.

### CONCLUSION: RELEVANCE AT STAKE

African Union's inability to stem nine military coups from Mali's 2020 double strike to Niger's 2023 upheaval, casts a long shadow over its relevance as a

guarantor of peace and security. This is not to say that the AU have had no successes, its leadership in leading Africa to receive 945 million vaccines and its work on ensuring African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a reality (Moffat, 2022). When the juntas seize power, the format of AU's address never changes, suspensions pile up, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) issues toothless edicts, and democratic states like Ghana and Senegal welcome the coupists who overthrow democracies to summits, disregarding AU directives (Mensah, 2025; Millecamps, 2024). The president of Nigeria threatened Niger with a military intervention, rallying ECOWAS, yet the effort saw no reawakening on the AU for backup, its African Standby Force a phantom, with its severely limited budget (Akinkuotu, 2023). The AU's 2002 commitment to prevent unconstitutional rule has faltered, enabling juntas to consolidate power and the AU's credibility frayed.

The concept of reform reintroduces a lifeline. The Peace Fund's budget of \$400 million should be funded by a commitment by every member state. According to the Statista Research Department (2024), Africa's GDP is \$3.1 trillion; if every member state commits to contributing just 0.1% of its GDP, \$3.1 billion could be raised, sufficient to cater to the AU's needs and reduce reliance on Western handouts, thereby arming the Standby Force with African sweat. AU should shun coup leaders, not salute them at events, enforcing suspensions with trade and diplomatic freezes. The victories of Nigeria's ECOMOG in Liberia and Gambia prove that an African-led security system works when resourced, but only with political will (Reuters, 2023). Dealing with the coup leaders is however, not enough to address the growing junta leadership increase in Africa, it is essential to address the root causes of what triggers these coups: corruption, insecurity, rise in jihadism, and economic despair. If the underlying issue is not addressed effectively, AU will continue to be hollow without change, which makes regional blocs like ECOWAS outpace it, or Africa will align more with France, Russia, and the UN, losing its soul to outsiders.

From Nigeria's perspective, this is keenly felt. While Nigeria has demonstrated its commitment to the African Union with substantial contribution, such as

the \$19.5 million donated in 2023, its troops bloodied in past missions, yet Niger's junta challenges it from across the border by closing it, Boko Haram feeding on the chaos. The glory of Nigeria's regional crown, forged in Gambia, and Liberia dims as the AU falters, leaving it to fight alone. The mechanisms are not the only facet tested by the coup waves, it challenges African unity as well.

The AU must rise by committing 0.1% of each country's GDP to fund their operations, staying united and resolute, or Nigeria, and the continent, may turn away, abandoning a union of ideals for one of irrelevance. Tinubu's unfulfilled threat echoes a broader plea: if not now, when?

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