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Keywords: Africa, IGAD, South Sudan Conflict, African Solution to African Problems

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African Solutions to African Problems: A Critical Analysis of IGAD's Mediation in South Sudan (2013-2018)



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Abstract

The slogan 'African solutions to African problems' is a core tenet of the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), with the aim of promoting regional ownership of the organisation in the resolution of conflicts in Africa. This research paper examines the extent of this slogan in practice by analysing the role of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the South Sudan Conflict (2013-2018). By reviewing the analysis of the scholars, this paper evaluates IGAD's role within the framework of APSA. This paper argues that although IGAD played a significant role in South Sudan's peace negotiations, its effectiveness was constrained by institutional weaknesses, regional rivalries, and external dependence, limiting the achievement of its objectives. This paper highlights the gap between the concept of African solutions and on ground realities. The paper concludes that the 'African solutions to African problems' is still in progress as it needs stronger institutional coordination.

Keywords: IGAD, South Sudan Conflict, African Solution to African Problems

Introduction: The Normative Promise and Empirical Reality

The phrase "African solutions to African problems" was introduced by the Ghanaian economist George Ayittey (IE University, 2022). This formulation emerged in response to the crisis in Somalia in the early 1990s, when international actors, specifically the US and the UN, began imposing structural adjustments to control the situation in African states without having regard to the local conditions of these states. His argument at that time was that any long-term solution to the problems of Africa can only come within Africa, as whenever outside attempts are used to resolve African problems, they have regularly proven ineffective and even counterproductive because these initiatives, being externally imposed, do not resonate with the vested interests of those who are expected to implement them. Ayittey championed the concept of 'African solutions to African problems' arguing that the continent must move away from relying on foreign aid and external interventions to address its challenges.

The concept given by George Ayittey, founder of the Free Africa Foundation (1993) and advocate for the Ghanaian democratic transition, was constructive, rather than an argument to promote isolationism. He believed Africa possessed the means to solve its challenges using its own undervalued, traditional, and institutional resources.

This paper asserts that while IGAD's mediation shows the rising importance of African institutions in the resolution of the conflicts of the continent, it struggles to implement the peace



process, exposing a divide between theory and on-ground realities, caused by structural limitations, external dependence, and national interests of member states. Ultimately, “African solutions to African problems” is still a work in progress rather than accomplished reality.

Research Methodology

The present study examines the slogan of ‘African solutions to African problems’ and the on-ground realities, while examining the role of IGAD in the conflict of South Sudan. It is based on qualitative desk-based research methods. This research mainly relies on secondary sources such as Newspapers, books, academic journal articles, and reports published by international organisations and well-known think tanks. Relevant literature on the role of IGAD as a peace maker is reviewed to build the theoretical and conceptual background of the study. Additionally, reports and analytical briefs from reputable think tanks are examined to understand different viewpoints and criticisms regarding the role of the IGAD in South Sudan. These sources provided a link between theoretical discussions and practical mediation.

The African Peace and Security Architecture and IGAD’s Mandate

The African Union (AU) a continental body launched in 2002 as the successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), was a paradigm shift in continental governance. The OAU, founded in 1963 by 32 independent states amid the fervor of decolonization, with the mandate of eradicating colonization. To protect against external influence, The OAU was built on a rigid doctrine of non-intervention in members’ domestic affairs. However, this approach proved ineffective in addressing internal conflicts (African Union, [n.d.](#)).

The conflict management done by the organization of African union was notably weak. The organization failed to address important conflicts, including major Crises, such as long civil war between southern and northern Sudan that caused millions of deaths. When active, during its tenure the OAU preferred quite diplomacy, prioritizing state security over actual conflicts. Additionally, the organization lacked logistics capacity and had a weak normative framework, which hindered its ability to intervene in crises. This ineffectiveness led the African leaders to issue the Sirte Declaration, shifting the focus from political struggles to economic integration, leading towards the launch of the African Union (AU) in Durban, South Africa (Amoo, [n.d.](#)).

The AU’s constructive act, by introducing Article (4h), fundamentally shifted the regional paradigm from non-interference to non-indifference, granting the union the right to intervene in member states facing human rights violations, specifically genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (African Union, [2000](#)). The African Union is composed of key institutions, such as the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the African Union Commission, the Pan-African Parliament, and the Peace and Security Council. To ensure the pursuance of its long-term objectives, the AU operates through the agenda 2063, which serves as the strategic roadmap for continental development (African Union, [n.d.](#)).

The AU’s Normative Revolution

The African Union’s establishment in 2002 marked a fundamental shift in the continent’s approach to security, moving from the principle of non-interference towards non-indifference. This shift reflected a recognition that national sovereignty does not entitle the state to commit mass atrocities. This approach strengthens the concept of an African solution to African problems, advocating local ownership of security challenges. To make this reality, the AU adopted a 2002 protocol, creating the Peace and Security Council (PSC), to establish a permanent framework dedicated to peace, featuring a standby force, early warning system, and a panel of the wise, which

allowed the union to intervene in the member states in cases of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. This initiative brought the idea of “African solutions” to life, emphasising that the African people should resolve their matters on their own, as local or regional actors understand their situations better because they genuinely want peace to last, so they are the best ones to guide these efforts (African Union, [2002](#)).

History of IGAD

The intergovernmental authority on development IGAD is Africa's one of the most important regional economic communities. In 1986, the intergovernmental authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) was established, primarily focused on addressing environmental issues, recurring droughts, and promoting regional development. It was operated in the horns of Africa which is a territory with a prolonged history of devastating conflicts. However, after post-Cold War regional conflicts, member states revamped the organisation into an intergovernmental authority on development in 1996 with the addition of an important article 6, changing the mandate that added peace and security as a core priority of the authority (Magara, [2025](#)).

Article 6A explicitly provide a legal mandate to IGAD to prioritise the peaceful settlement of inter-and intra-state conflicts through dialogue. This empowers IGAD with the power and the authority to resolve conflicts through mediation when conflicts arise between the member states or within them. This represents an important shift of the mandate of non-interference to non-indifference as it allows the IGAD to intervene in the conflicts of the member states when there are any genocide, war crime and crimes against human rights (Intergovernmental Authority on Development [IGAD], [1996](#)).

Even though the mandate of IGAD has been changed after article 6A, IGAD has historically faced significant institutional limitations. The organization is composed of 8 member states and heavily really on the political will of them, with limited enforcement capacity, resources and fundings. Scholars argue that the IGAD operates as a political arena that serves as a platform for negotiation for influential member states rather than functioning as a fully institutionalised mediator (Magara, [2025](#)).

Historical Background of the South Sudan Conflict

South Sudan's civil war, which erupted in December 2013, is rooted not in ethnic strife alone but in weak state institutions and a lack of professionalized security forces. President Salva Kiir's accusations of a coup by Vice President Riek Machar triggered a political crisis, which escalated into ethnicized conflict due to militias organised around Personal loyalty rather than institutional authority. Ethnic mobilization, particularly by Nuer and Dinka militias, occurred because it was the fastest and most accessible way to organize forces amid institutional collapse.

After independence in 2011, political elites mismanaged the country's wealth, including shutting down oil production, leading to economic and governance crises. Kiir's “big tent” approach relied on patronage and corruption, further weakening political structures. As a result, political disputes defaulted to ethnic identity, turning militia groups into key actors in the war. Machar, lacking resources, relied on ethnic militias like the Nuer White Army to mobilize quickly.

The UN Mission in South Sudan has faced criticism for failing to protect civilians effectively. Similarly, U.S. pressure via sanctions has limited impact because peace agreements, such as the August 2015 ARCSS, were based on unrealistic assumptions: political rivals reconciling, sufficient funding for power-sharing, and the security of Juba under two distrustful armies. DE Waal emphasises that the African Union (AU) should lead the intervention. The AU has legal mechanisms under its Constitutive Act to address unconstitutional changes of government and to

intervene in cases of genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. He proposes a regional protection force to secure the capital, create safe spaces for civic and political dialogue, and facilitate nation-building.

Finally, the conflict has regional destabilising effects, impacting Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan, and consumes significant diplomatic, political, and humanitarian resources in East Africa (Noel & de Waal, [2016](#)).

IGAD's Mediation Role: Mechanisms, and Outcomes

When the violence broke out in South Sudan, IGAD responded quickly to the violence. The summit held on the 27th of December 2013 was a reaffirmation that the organisation was committed to resolving the South Sudan conflict. IGAD, acting under the AU's border peace and security agenda initiated the mediation under the framework of APSA (African Peace and Security Architecture). The initial active role played by the organization was highly praised for its quick response and timeliness, showcasing how the speed advantages of geographic closeness can lead to faster emergency management.

The mechanisms used by the organisations in the South Sudan conflict were shuttle diplomacy, summit diplomacy, facilitation, power mediation and at times coercion. Magara, in his document, analysed that the strategies used by IGAD to resolve the conflict shifted from conventional mediation to overt politics as the process was dominated by the IGAD heads of state and IGAD leaders prioritised elite-centric bargaining. Despite being criticised, this elite-centric method provided the necessary political stabilisation needed at that time (Magara, [2025](#)).

The first major success of IGAD's mediation was the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS). A framework of power sharing was established in this agreement, in which a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGONU) was created with Kiir as president and Machar returning as vice president (International Crisis Group, [2016](#)). Although IGAD achieved a major diplomatic win by forcing both sides to the table, the agreement struggled with implementation from day one. The agreement faced a chaotic start, characterized by distrust between the president and vice president, paired with conflicts and violence, hindered progress.

In July 2016, approximately one year after the agreement collapsed, when fighting broke out in Juba, the capital, forcing Machar to flee, the transitional government formed by the agreement was dissolved. This breakdown severely damaged IGAD's credibility, highlighting the fragility of its mediation efforts, and the limitations of its enforcement powers. This promoted the bloc to initiate a revitalization process to rescue the Peace efforts. This effort resulted in 2018 in which revitalization agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed. Although this was signed on the framework of 2015, it introduced new mechanisms for compliance, most notably the revitalised Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC).

IGAD's involvement in the South Sudan peace process extended far beyond mere mediation of the agreement. The IGAD South Sudan office (IGAD-SSO) was created, which established a presence of the organisation in South Sudan, directly supporting implementation, coordination, and sustained high-level engagement. Under this, unprecedented numbers of meetings were held in South Sudan, which demonstrates the convening power and the ability of the organisation to sustain high-level engagement (Magara, [2025](#)).

Critical Analysis: Structural and Political Limitations of IGAD'S Mediation

While the role and efforts of IGAD in resolving the South Sudan conflict were a showcase of African-led mediation, rather it's better to call it an African solution to the African problems, critical analysis

of some scholars reveals that there were some limitations that restricted the organisation's effectiveness.

Institutional Deficiencies

The most persistent critique concerns IGAD's institutional weaknesses. With regards to the structure of IGAD, it shows dysfunctional characteristics that affect the efficiency of the organisation. One of the structural defaults is the concentration of power around the heads of the state and government.

IGAD is composed of four organs, including IGAD's assembly of heads of state and government, the council of ministers, the committee of ambassadors and the Secretariat (De Klerk, [2007](#); Bereketeab, [2012](#)). The Secretariat is bureaucratic and technocratic in nature and except for this, all three organs are political in nature, which strongly influences IGAD's efficiency. The IGAD's reliance on personal leadership between leaders rather than established institutions often results in paralysis. Because of this dependence, some consider IGAD as a club of heads of state (Apuuli, [2015](#); Mengisteab, [2014](#)). This often led the critics to say that "THE IGAD is only as strong as the leaders of the member states allow it to be (Apuuli, [2015](#); Mengisteab, [2014](#); Mengisteab & Bereketeab, [2012](#), as cited in Bereketeab, [2019](#)).

Although there are some advantages to this structure of the organization, such as it enables IGAD to engage with the global counterparts. Through the assembly, for example, the IGAD can engage directly with partners like the EU and other international bodies. This streamlines decision-making and avoids the complications often faced by individuals and bilateral negotiations.

But with these advantages there are many disadvantages to this structure, which include the lack of participation, representation and accommodation of citizens' interests and wishes. There are no system and mechanism which provides a platform to the citizens to express their views, wishes, opinions, and interests. Which we can say is a fundamental failure to realise the deeper promise that the slogan "African solutions to the African problems" implied (Bereketeab, [2019](#), p. 5).

External Actors and Hybrid Mediation

Another weakness of IGAD is its dependence of external actors for the fundings. This involvement of external actors in regional conflicts of the Africa contradicts the principle of "African solutions" and creates a dependence trap. This reliance on the external actors does not inherently negate the value of African-led mediation, but this dependence does create significant challenges regarding its autonomy and agenda-setting capacity. One of the implications is the "ownership and agency" as it is very common for the donors to impose conditions on the designs of the project, and these external actors have their own interests and priorities which influence the outcomes of the negotiation. This leads the critics to argue that IGAD has abandoned its mandate as a regional guardian, and now it functions as a conduit for foreign powers' agendas in the region.

Intraregional Rivalries

One of the reasons that obstructed mediation of IGAD in South Sudan conflict was intraregional rivalries. In July 2026, when the war broke out, Machar was forced to flee from Juba (Chol, [2016](#)). Neighbouring countries didn't allow him to enter their states. Sudan, which was initially alleged to support Machar, declared that it would not allow Machar to launch a war from its land. Euthopia deported him to South Africa (International Crisis Group, [2016](#)). Kenya also deported its spokesperson to Juba (Agence France-Presse, [2016](#)). At the same time, Uganda was seen to support Kiir military. According to scholars, this mediation by the organization was characterized by

inconsistencies, contradictions, and policy shifts. One interview characterized this mediation as a chaotic "circus", where strategic posturing replaced good-faith bargaining.

Absence of a Regional Hegemon

A third major obstacle often identified in assessments of IGAD is the lack of a central hegemon capable of guiding the peace process decisively. Unlike ECOWAS and SADC, where Nigeria and South Africa, respectively, provide dominant leadership, IGAD operates without a dominant state to guide the bloc. Bereketeab notes this absence leaves the organization without a "big brother to whip the rest" and heightens regional competition, which results in policy gridlock.

Ethiopia has long positioned itself as a regional stabilizer, by utilizing its diplomatic and military strength to dominate bodies like IGAD. However, according to the analysis of Bereketeab, this assertive, long-term dominance, which included over a decade of unchallenged IGAD chairmanship and key institutions of IGAD occupied by Ethiopians, is often viewed by neighbouring states as a source of tension rather than cohesion. This led to resentment among member states, and several member states ceased paying their membership fees, feeling that the organisation was serving Ethiopia's narrow national interests, rather than genuine regional integration.

Furthermore, Ethiopia's role in the South Sudan mediation was ambivalent, as the IGAD chair managed peace talks while battling internal, ethnic unrest involving the Nuer, an ethnic group to which Riek Machar belongs and which resides in Ethiopia's Gambel region, which borders South Sudan. These domestic pressures, combined with risks to its own federal structure, forced Ethiopia to adopt a cautious stance, sometimes a hesitant position, reinforcing perceptions that IGAD lacked a strong, decisive leader to drive a resolution. Yet, attributing IGAD's institutional shortcomings exclusively to the lack of a regional hegemon is analytically limiting (Bereketeab, 2019).

32 of 36

Based on Magara's argument, hegemonic peace-making is inherently problematic because a dominant actor may impose settlements reflecting its own strategic interests rather than those of the affected communities. This approach creates unsustainable peace processes, which often produce exclusionary outcomes lacking both legitimacy and sustainability, closely mirroring criticisms of the post-Cold War liberal peace model, which was often condemned for imposing foreign economic and governance structures with little regard for local conditions.

The Flawed Design and Implementation of Peace Agreements

The fourth and final critique of IGAD's role is related to the design and implementation of the peace agreements, specifically the R-ARCSS. Detractors argue that IGAD's R-ARCSS prioritised top-down elite power-sharing at the expense of addressing deeper structural drivers of conflict or fostering meaningful reconciliation. As noted by Craze and Marko (2022), this architecture favoured short-term political fixes over lasting change. Furthermore, by centring on elite bargaining, the process sidelined civil society, women's groups, and community organisations, undermining the agreement's long-term sustainability and overall legitimacy.

The R-ARCSS implementation process has also been fraught with challenges and has experienced notable delays and significant setbacks. Despite the establishment of the R-JMEC to oversee compliance, continued violence, repeated delays, and persistent mistrust between the parties have been seen. The peace process has been complicated by the proliferation of new rebel factions, the fragmentation of armed groups, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. As noted by Bereketeab, the process, which at best can be described as the 'old' camouflaged as 'new', is unlikely to yield significant peace results.

Rethinking Success-Failure: Platformization as an Alternative Lens

Even though the criticism of IGAD is justified, it can be used to conceal their works. Magara is the possible alternative analytical paradigm, which rethinks IGAD not as a fixed institution but a moving political conversation space. Platformization embraces the emergent, adaptive nature of IGAD, which operates on improvisation, reconfiguration, and negotiation.

In this respect, the value of IGAD is its convening power. The organisation has held a record eight meetings between heads of state and government on South Sudan in one and a half years, as Aly Verjee notes. This skill to establish a room in which political action can take place is essential where expediency and manoeuvrability are of greater importance than legality.

The notion of entanglement provides additional knowledge. Instead of hampering the process of making peace, the thick network of relationships between actors in a region and conflicts can facilitate it.

The Pan-African Solidarity Norm: Rhetoric/Reality.

The engagement of IGAD is a case in point of the Pan-African solidarity standard that focuses on African-led reactions. The leaders are using more and more IGAD to boost the idea of trying Africa first, and peace deals are symbols of continental independence. The work of IGAD was based on the maximum of African solutions, as one of the respondents reported.

However, to be an African solution is not just a matter of geography. It needs common values and political aspirations that are guided by the past experiences of Africa. There are challenges to the solidarity norm. Funding, diplomacy, and policy frameworks are external actors that still influence peace processes. Jonathan Fisher asserts that such attempts usually reproduce outwardly created archetypes of stability and statehood as opposed to a common African vision.

Conclusion: Reimagining African Solutions.

The mediation of South Sudan by IGAD gives a precise insight into African Solutions to African Problems. The slogan is a valuable normative desire toward African agency and ownership. The speed of convening, maintaining high-level involvement, and brokering significant deals such as the R-ARCSS are just some of the indications of the ability of African institutions that IGAD exhibits.

There has been limited implementation of this, however, due to institutional shortcomings, intraregional conflicts, lack of a coherent hegemon, and poor peace agreement structure. The reliance on external financing and participation of foreign actors is a constant complication to the story of African-led solutions.

The case of South Sudan is an indication that African organisations are not necessarily ineffective, but they are not yet as well prepared to handle complex conflicts on their own. It is neither/nor but a hybrid model of African leadership with international assistance that is the most effective one. This model takes into consideration both the advantages and disadvantages, but uses external resources, keeping African proprietorship.

Finally, the term "African Solutions to African Problems" must be interpreted as a developing project. It can be successful by means of building institutional capacity, improving coordination in APSA, minimising its reliance on the outside world, providing space for participation by civil societies, and developing enforcement frameworks. It also involves practical admiration of political dynamics that form conflict mediation.

The case of South Sudan has some valuable lessons. Although not bringing lasting peace, IGAD has facilitated peace through mediation, provided a space of political dialogue, maintained contact

with political actors, and provided checks and balances. The concept of platformization provides a viable analogy for the measurement of peace-making in politically fueled environments. The case of IGAD begs the question of replacing the approach to institutions as fixed units with platforms as pathways of political bargaining and regional change.

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