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Pathways to Inclusive Growth: Overcoming Challenges in Emerging and Developing African Countries.

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Book of Proceedings

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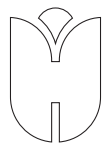

African Regionalism: Subregional Power Shifts and Their Impact on African Union Integration

Bukelwa Maphanga[1]

Abstract

This paper addresses the persistent gap between the African Union's (AU) ambitious goal of deep regional integration and its limited progress. While much scholarship attributes this stagnation to institutional weaknesses, structural constraints, and cultural heterogeneity, often in comparison with the European Union, this study identifies a neglected dimension: the impact of subregional power shifts on continental integration. This approach is novel because existing studies of AU integration overwhelmingly priorities institutional design, normative frameworks, or overlapping membership problems, while paying insufficient attention to how subregional power shifts structurally constrain wider continental cohesion. Using a neorealist framework, particularly Waltz's (1979) balance of power and Mearsheimer's (2014) offensive realism, it argues that instability within the AU's eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) undermines cohesion at the continental level. The analysis draws on updated 2024 GDP per capita and military expenditure data from the World Bank (2024) and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024), alongside alliance patterns within four politically and economically significant RECs: the Arab Maghreb Union, East African Community, Southern African Development Community, and Economic Community of West African States. Findings show that recurring rivalries within these four major regional blocs generate multipolar instability at the subregional level, which then spills over into AU decision-making.

Keywords*:* Regionalism, Regional Order, Neorealism, African Union, Balance of Power

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Introduction

The African Union (AU) was set with an ambitious goal of integration to the extent of a potential *"United States of Africa."* Despite numerous attempts to realize this goal, the AU has remained an intergovernmental organization of a largely ceremonious and symbolic nature, thus falling short of any supranational status. One reason for the persistence of the status quo is thought to be a reluctance or even unwillingness of the AU member states to pool their national sovereignties in a continental organization with effective executive, legislative, and judicial rights (Hartmann, 2020). The reluctance or unwillingness of AU member states is often the bedrock explanation that scholars immediately turn to in an attempt to explain the stagnated integration of the AU. There is a liberal perspective bias in many African scholarly works, and this is portrayed in the tendency to compare the African Union to the European Union (Welz, 2012). This limits the scope of explanations to structural and institutional lenses. As noted by Acharya (2012), "beyond formal institutions, regional orders can be based more or less around shared norms." Constructivism sheds light on ideational aspects of regional integration and how they impact the outcomes of goals and objectives set by regional organizations. Liberal and Constructivist perspectives have provided explanations to the stagnation of the African Union which, on one hand have aided in the development of real time policy prescriptions, and on the other hand have redirected the focal point from the true nature of the international system and its power dynamics that cannot be ignored.

African regionalism is quite unique from its counterparts in that it is made up of subregions within the wider region which adds layers to the context of integration. The Abuja Treaty of 1991 established the African Economic Community (AEC) and set the eight African subregional organizations as the pillars to realize the goal of an integrated Africa with an economic and monetary union (African Union Commission et al., 2019; Bach, 2016). This basically means that in order for regional integration to be realized, subregional integration must be realized first. The eight subregional organizations include the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community for Central African States (ECCAS), and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This paper will focus on four major subregional organizations i.e., the AMU, EAC, SADC and ECOWAS, as these are not only economic intergovernmental organizations,

but also possess political association provisions in addition to Regional Economic Community (REC) status. In attempts to explain the AU's stagnated integration, scholars often include the subregional context by highlighting the overlapping memberships of various African states to two or more subregions, an issue widely discussed in African regionalism scholarship (Bach, 2016). Take the example of the Democratic Republic of Congo for instance, who is part of SADC, ECCAS and recently joined the EAC. Membership overlaps signal split loyalties, and above all split interests, and expose the degree to which power dynamics, transactionalism and instrumentalism are at play within the subregional context of African regionalism. Although African regionalism has generated a substantial body of scholarship, much of this literature remains based on institutional, normative, or legalist analyses. Foundational contributions highlight the legacies of colonial boundaries, the challenges of sovereignty, and the continent's complex variety of identities and political traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Clapham, 1996; Bach, 2016). While these works illuminate important structural constraints, they often underplay the continuing relevance of material power asymmetries and competitive state behavior. Studies focusing on institutional inadequacies or overlapping REC memberships tend to treat these dynamics as coordination failures rather than as outcomes of deeper strategic rivalries among states.

At the same time, more recent scholarship on African regionalism has emphasized normative transformation, continental identity, and the role of the AU in peace and security governance (Murithi, 2008; Langan, 2018; Welz, 2012). These perspectives offer valuable insights into agenda-setting and institution-building but frequently assume that states share a baseline commitment to collective goals. What is comparatively understudied is how shifts in relative power, both economic and military, shape the incentives of subregional actors and in turn influence regional outcomes. By foregrounding balance-of-power dynamics, this study contributes to filling this gap and complements existing literature by examining how material capabilities and strategic alignments condition the AU's prospects for deeper integration. The first part of the paper demonstrates how realist perspectives, and more specifically neorealism, offer an alternative explanation to the lagging integrative process of the African Union. The second part will provide examples of the power shifts at play within each subregional organization. Next, the impact of the shifts in balance of power in the subregions on the integration of the wider region is demonstrated. In conclusion, a possible solution to the issue of stagnated integration in the African Union is offered.

Realism in Regional Orders

The ambiguity of the international system has given rise to various debates about its exact nature and how its main actors interact and perceive each other. Contemporary theories have emphasized approaches different from the classical rhetoric of power dynamics by citing that state interaction is beyond just power and interest. Illuminating the layers present in the ambiguous nature of international politics, although useful in bringing clarity to the "black box," does not supersede the overarching nature of power and what it stands for in global politics. Classical realism emphasizes the true nature of states as being dependent on their capabilities and power to further their interests for survival. This Darwinian approach is often criticized as being one dimensional, and although that is true, many scholars cannot offer theories that minimize the effect of power relations in the international system.

Realist perspectives are based on the 'anarchic' nature of the international system which creates this "survival of the fittest" atmosphere in the absence of a central authority that dictates and regulates. Herein lies the point of contention: how can realism be applied to regionalism when its basic assumption is anarchism? According to Copeland (2012), "to build a workable realist theory of regional conflicts that can apply across time and space, we must assume that regional actors look only to the impact of extra-systemic great powers on their local power levels and trends, and not to commitments by such powers to insert their own forces into the region from the outside." This implies that for realist theory to apply within regional orders, the impact of extra-regional actors must be held as indirectly rather than directly interfering in internal regional affairs. With this in mind, which realist theory then applies in the African regional context? Neorealist perspectives of international political theory offer an explanation of balance of power which adds a dimension of methodological validity that classical realist theory lacks. Kenneth Waltz asserts that "because of the 'self-help' nature of the system, states do not have a world government to resort to in a situation of danger, but they can only try to increase their capabilities relative to one another through either internal efforts of self-strengthening, or external efforts of alignment and realignment with other states" (Waltz, 1979). In the post-colonial era, African states needed to engage in effective nation-building strategies following independence from great powers, and this meant engaging in internal and external balancing, as described by Waltz, for development and ultimately for survival. Offensive realism, pioneered by John Mearsheimer, "describes states as power maximizers that maximize their relative

power aiming at regional hegemony" (Mearsheimer, 2014). This is an important description of power dynamics as it points out the ultimate goal of power-seeking states. It also outlines the degrees of stability in relation to power polarity in the system: the more unipolar, the more stable the system tends to be. According to this strand of hegemonic stability theory, multipolarity enables instability as powers contend to promote their own interests.

The neorealist balance of power theory offers a strong explanation of power dynamics in an anarchic system. Within the regional context, one must assume that the role of extra-regional powers comes in as one that further influences the external balancing element of the balance of power, and thus only indirectly affects outcomes of decisions made within regional affairs. This can be observed in the Anglo-Francophone divide in West Africa, where post-colonial ties with either Britain or France indirectly influence states' foreign policy orientations. All this then brings us to a more pressing question: how exactly does balance of power impact regional integration? It is not the balance of power as such, but rather the shifts in balance of power that destabilize integrationist incentives. Brigitte Weiffen describes "power shifts" as one of the major stress factors that impact regionalism and can bring either negative (disintegration) or positive (resilience) outcomes (Nolte & Weiffen, 2020). The European Union remained resilient through the rise and fall of the bipolar international system, but the same cannot be said in the African region. Power shifts have been present mainly in the subregional context of African regionalism in the form of state-state rivalry and have caused spill-over effects into the wider regional context. Multipolarity may have strengthened the EU, but the same cannot be said for the African Union experience.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach grounded in neorealist theory, focusing on balance of power dynamics and hegemonic stability concepts (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). Neorealism is chosen for its explanatory power in contexts where state behavior is heavily influenced by competition for relative gains rather than absolute gains, which is central to understanding AU member state interactions. The study uses secondary data from the African Union Commission et al. (2019) to assess integration performance, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2024) for military expenditure as a proxy for security capability, and World Bank's (2024) national account for GDP per capita to capture economic strength. Alliance patterns are derived from

documented diplomatic and security alignments within and across RECs. These indicators i.e., economic capability, military capability, and alliance behaviors, are widely recognized in international relations scholarship as robust measures of state power (Waltz, 1979; Acharya, 2012). Although this study employs quantitative indicators such as GDP per capita and military expenditure, the analytical approach remains qualitative. The indicators are not used for statistical modelling but rather for interpretive comparison, allowing the identification of patterns of internal and external balancing across cases. The analysis is therefore qualitative in the sense that it relies on theory-guided interpretation of secondary data, diplomatic alignments, and historical trajectories to explain how shifts in power affect integration outcomes. This aligns with established qualitative comparative methods, where numerical data serve as empirical anchors for conceptual assessment rather than for econometric inference.

State- State Rivalry in African Subregions

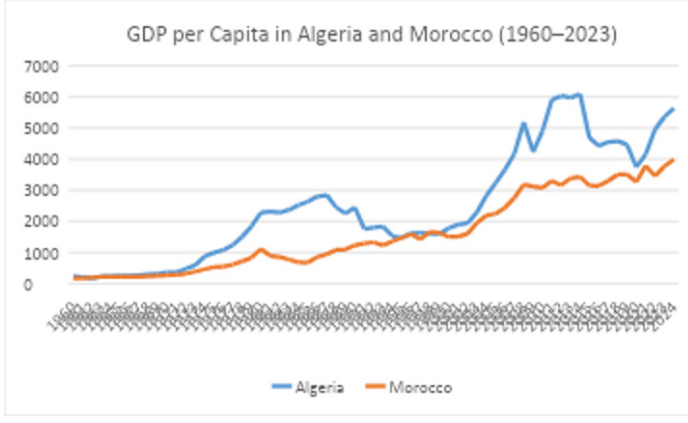
There have been numerous stress factors that have affected each subregion of Africa and have functioned as points of contention between member states, resulting in subregional rivalries that shape the outcome of subregional integration. The African Union cites the subregional organizations as the pillars of integration, implying that the goal of integration in the wider organization depends on how firmly each subregion can achieve integration before the African Union achieves the same objective. The strategy here is simple: an approach of achieving integration through smaller levels and phases, a gradual process that potentially addresses the heterogeneity of the African region and hopefully pools subregions toward a common goal. From a liberal perspective, this strategy is logical, as liberals view "cooperation" as the ultimate goal of actors in the international system. This is all good and well, but as noted above, such approaches overlook the overarching dynamics of power and interest. With this in mind, one can see how ambitious an objective the AU set for itself and how placing this objective in the hands of the subregional RECs added an additional layer of difficulty.

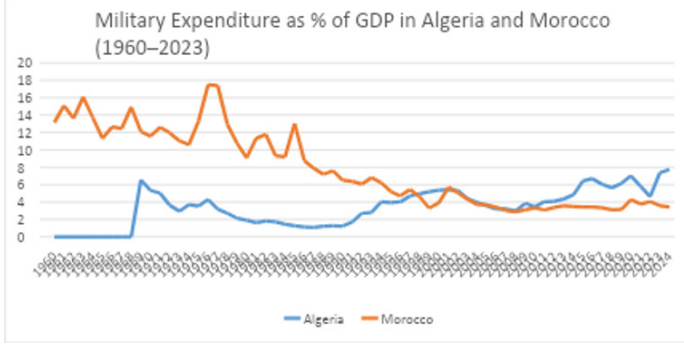
In this section, showing the balance of power shifts at play within each subregion helps illuminate the extent to which they have impacted the integrationist prospects of the wider regional organization. To portray internal balancing, comparative graphs of GDP per capita and military expenditure as a percentage of GDP among rival states within each subregion are used. External balancing is shown through the alliances formed by rival states.

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)

The North African subregional organization, the Arab Maghreb Union, was founded in 1989 and was largely initiated by Morocco and Tunisia. Its member states include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. It is important to note that Egypt is not a member of the AMU, though it is a member of CEN-SAD. "The government in Cairo did apply for, but was refused, membership in 1994" (Møller, 2009).

The AMU is known as the least active of all subregional organizations, as the crisis surrounding the Western Sahara question has exposed deep rivalry between two of the largest states in the subregion: Algeria and Morocco. "As these two countries are each other's archenemies, it is small wonder that the AMU is extremely weak, bordering on complete insignificance" (Møller, 2009). Tunisia is seen as a Moroccan ally because it has refused to recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), while Libya and Mauritania have recognized it alongside Algeria. These split alliances reflect the external balancing dynamics between the two rival states. The following charts show the GDP per capita and the military expenditure as % share of GDP for Algeria and Morocco from 1960 to 2023.





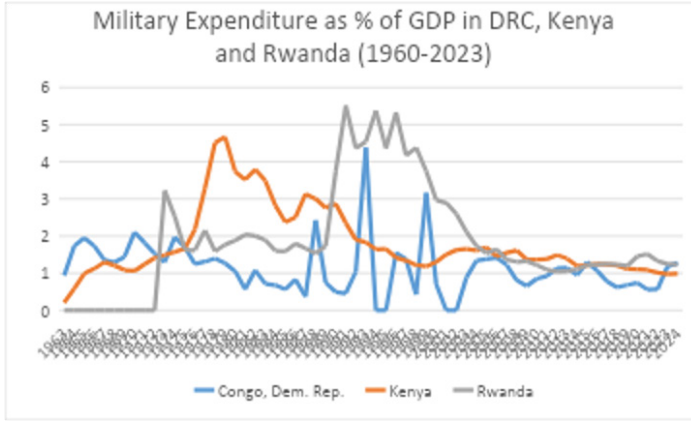
The Algeria-Morocco evidence points to a sustained rivalry that constrains cooperation within the AMU. Internal balancing refers to the ways in which states build capabilities at home through economic growth, fiscal resources, and military effort. Morocco's steadier rise in GDP per capita suggests a broader and more diversified base of state capacity, whereas Algeria's per-capita income moves with hydrocarbon cycles that finance punctuated increases in military spending. External balancing captures how states seek to strengthen their position through partnerships, procurement channels, and diplomatic backing. Morocco's deepening ties with the United States, the European Union, and Gulf partners, and Algeria's enduring links to Russia alongside attempts at diversification, reduce the costs of readiness while reinforcing opposing alignments around Western Sahara.

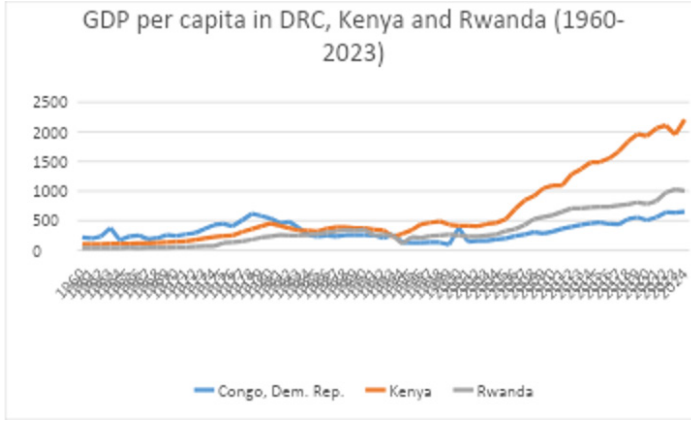
Taken together, these internal and external moves generate competitive parity with alternating advantages rather than an accepted subregional leader, which leaves the AMU operating in a fragile multipolar setting. Under such conditions, integration initiatives carry high audience and sovereignty costs and are easily interpreted as concessions on core status questions. The resulting institutional paralysis therefore follows from the logic of rivalry, reinforced by internal and external balancing and sustained by the unresolved Western Sahara dispute, rather than from an institutional design alone.

The East African Community (EAC)

Founded in 1967, four years after the OAU, the EAC's three founders i.e., Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, were partners that gradually became rivals. The organization collapsed in 1977 after disputes over representation and security, with Kenya seeking greater institutional weight, Uganda pressing Tanzania over opposition sanctuaries, and Tanzania and Kenya aligning against Idi Amin. The EAC was re-established in 2000 and later enlarged to include Rwanda and Burundi in 2007, South Sudan in 2016, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2022. In 2024 the EAC also admitted Somalia, extending the bloc's coastline and security perimeter while adding another fragile member to an already complex landscape. Enlargement has made existing rivalries more visible because conflict dynamics in the eastern DRC involve cross-border mobilization and the active interests of Rwanda and Uganda, with Burundi also implicated in the security spillovers. As a result, the DRC has often found itself isolated within EAC deliberations on security, while Kenya and Tanzania continue competing over trade corridors, port access, and standards regimes that shape the region's economic center of gravity. These patterns reflect internal balancing

through growth, fiscal capacity, and military effort, and external balancing through shifting partnerships with extra-regional actors and security providers. The comparative trajectories of GDP per capita and military expenditure for Kenya, Rwanda, and the DRC, presented in the charts below, show how these rivalries map onto material capabilities and help account for uneven integration outcomes within the EAC.





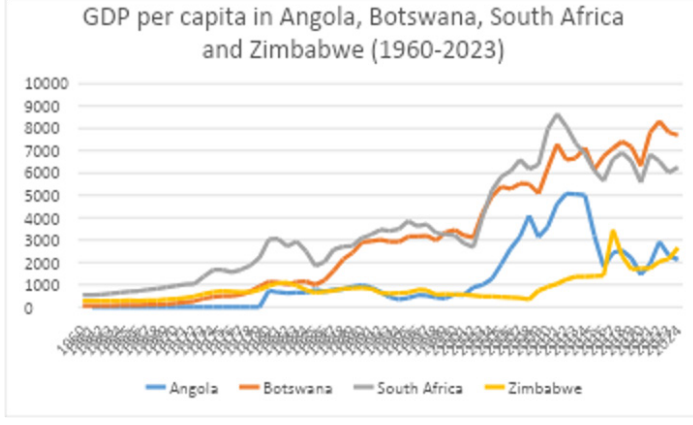
The EAC time series point to a rivalry structure in which both internal and external balancing shape uneven integration outcomes, and in which the balance of power has shifted in two clear phases. In the first phase, during the original EAC, Kenya acted as the central subregional power and was rivalled primarily by Uganda and Tanzania. In the second phase, after the EAC was re-established in 2000, Rwanda's rise altered the subregional center of gravity, and Kenya and Rwanda developed a close alignment in economic and security affairs, particularly around corridor competition and positions linked to the eastern DRC. Kenya's GDP per capita rises

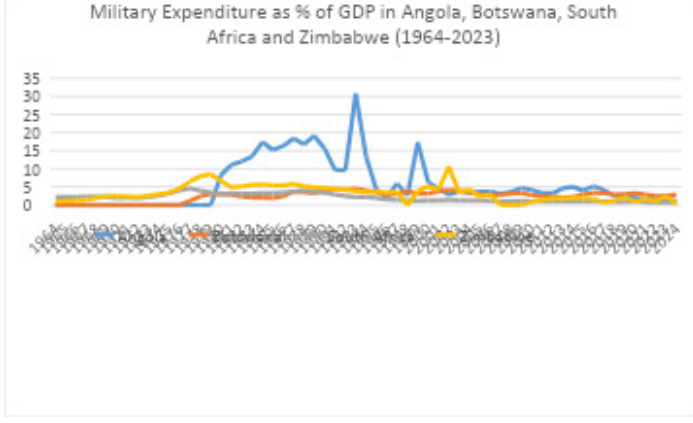
steadily from the mid-1990s and accelerates after 2003 with reforms, the expansion of services, and large infrastructure, while Rwanda's income collapses in 1994 and then increases robustly with post-genocide reconstruction and institutional consolidation. The DRC's trajectory remains volatile because of the Congo wars, recurrent violence in the East, and weak fiscal capacity, which leaves a wide gap by the time of its EAC accession in 2022; Somalia's admission in 2024 adds another layer of security complexity. Military expenditure as a share of GDP follows perceived threats, with Rwanda's burden rising in the late 1990s and 2000s and then easing as internal security consolidates, Kenya maintaining a moderate but capable posture with modest increases around the 2011 intervention in Somalia and subsequent counter-terrorism demands, and the DRC showing erratic ratios constrained by a narrow tax base and reliance on external support. Overlapping memberships reinforce this multipolar setting: Ethiopia, which is one of the AU's most influential states, sits outside the EAC within IGAD, while both Kenya and Uganda straddle the EAC–IGAD divide. These cross-cutting commitments, which are common across Africa's RECs, complicate coalition patterns and raise the costs of credible coordination. As a result, Rwanda and Uganda remain deeply involved across the border, Kenya and Tanzania continue to compete over corridors and standards, and the DRC is often isolated within EAC security deliberations. Under these conditions, EAC institutions struggle to pool high-salience security issues because cooperation can be read as a concession on sovereignty, whereas economic measures that limit issue linkage move more readily. This configuration supports the argument that subregional power shifts and rivalry, expressed through internal and external balancing and reinforced by overlapping RECs, spill over to stall deeper regional integration.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC)

The apartheid regime in South Africa posed a persistent threat to neighboring states, and several sought external protections during the early twentieth century. This threat encouraged subregional cooperation, and the newly independent states of the region, led by Zambia and Zimbabwe, formed the Front-Line States in 1980 with the objective of ending apartheid and supporting liberation movements. The fall of the apartheid regime in 1994 coincided with the end of the Cold War, which had affected Southern Africa more than most other regions, and helped to shift the focus from liberation to regional security cooperation and economic coordination. SADC was established in 1992, building on and eventually replacing the Front-Line States, and today includes Angola, Botswana, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of

Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. South Africa is widely viewed by extra-regional actors as the putative subregional hegemon, although actual hegemony has been constrained by the presence of rivals with comparable strength in specific dimensions, especially Angola in hard power and Zimbabwe in political-military networks, and by the lingering distrust of South Africa's perceived economic dominance. These rivalries have been visible in the handling of the Namibian transition in 1990, in the interventions surrounding the DRC crises since the late 1990s and mid-2000s, and more recently in competing approaches to security and mediation within the Great Lakes. South Africa has often found support from Botswana and Namibia, while Zimbabwe and Angola have coordinated on key security questions, including their positions toward Kinshasa. Against this background, the comparative trends in GDP per capita and military expenditure among South Africa, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Botswana help to illustrate how internal and external balancing has shaped SADC's pattern of cooperation and contention.



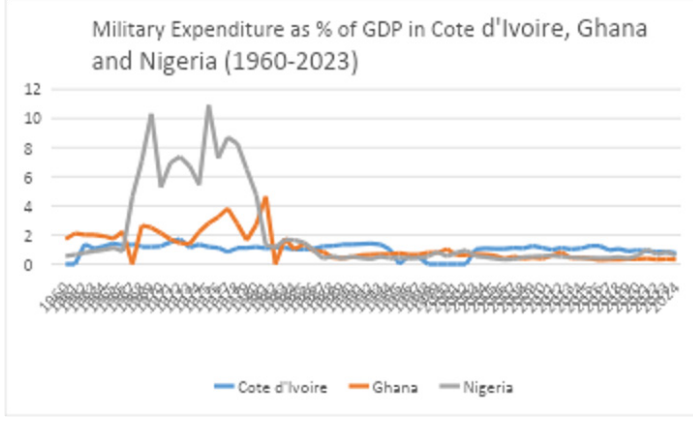


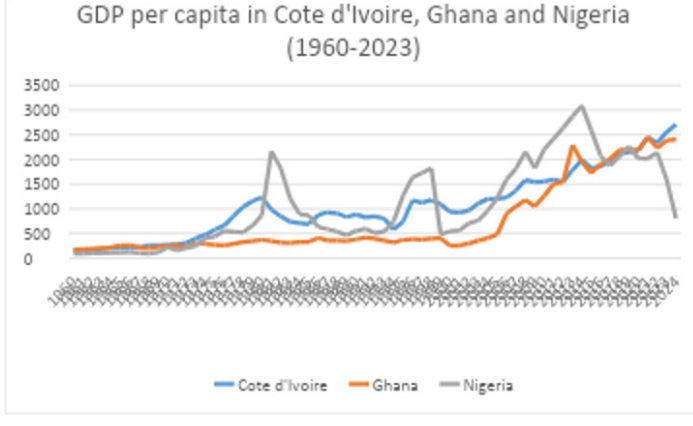
The SADC series begin in 1964 because consistent GDP and defense data for the four comparators are available from that point, which captures the late colonial period, the liberation era, and the post-apartheid transition. The GDP per capita paths indicate that South Africa and Botswana consolidate the largest and most stable income bases in the subregion, while Angola and Zimbabwe show sharper swings that are linked to oil cycles and prolonged political-economic crises. The military-expenditure shares show a different hierarchy: Angola's defense burden rises with wartime mobilization and oil-financed procurement during and after the civil war, which sustains a hard-power profile that is higher than its income path would suggest; South Africa's share declines through the democratic transition and stabilizes at lower levels consistent with a strategy that relies on a diversified economy and technological edge rather than sustained high defense ratios; Botswana maintains a modest but steady burden, which supports professionalization and close cooperation with South Africa; Zimbabwe's burden spikes around the intervention in the DRC in the late 1990s and then falls as fiscal collapse constrains capacity. From a neorealist point of view, these patterns show internal balancing along different dimensions, with Angola maximizing coercive capability through resource rents and South Africa maximizing influence through economic preponderance and selective modernization. External balancing remains visible in the alignment patterns observed around Kinshasa, where Angola and Zimbabwe have coordinated positions and South Africa has often moved with Botswana and Namibia. The net effect is competitive parity across economic and military dimensions without an accepted hegemon, which helps explain why SADC's security cooperation advances episodically and why integration relies on issue areas that minimize sovereignty costs, while high-salience security questions are managed through ad hoc coalitions outside formal SADC mechanisms.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

Established in 1975, ECOWAS brought former British and French West African territories into a single framework for economic and political cooperation, yet the Anglophone–Francophone cleavage persisted through parallel monetary arrangements: UEMOA among mostly Francophone members using the CFA franc and the West African Monetary Zone among primarily Anglophone states. Today the bloc comprises Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, while Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger formally left in January 2025 and now coordinate

through the Alliance of Sahel States. ECOWAS acknowledged the withdrawals and introduced transitional measures that maintained recognition of travel documents and some free-movement provisions during a grace period, which demonstrated how security realignments and overlapping monetary regimes complicate efforts to pool sovereignty. Within this context, Nigeria remains the material anchor of the region, Ghana continues to exercise outsized institutional influence in WAMZ and ECOWAS arenas, and Côte d'Ivoire serves as the UEMOA pole, so rivalry and coalition building often pivot around these three states even as Sahelian exits reshape the broader security perimeter. The charts that follow compare GDP per capita and military expenditure for Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire to illustrate how internal balancing through growth and fiscal effort, together with external balancing through monetary and security alignments, structures competition and conditions integration outcomes in West Africa.





The ECOWAS series show a rivalry structure in which Nigeria anchors the material hierarchy but does not convert that weight into uncontested hegemony, while Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana shape coalition politics through economic performance and institutional influence. Nigeria's GDP per capita improves unevenly with oil-price cycles and domestic shocks, and its military burden remains moderate, which fits a strategy that relies on scale and episodic security projection but is constrained by fiscal volatility and internal demands. Côte d'Ivoire's income path converges after the mid-2010s as post-crisis recovery, export diversification, and infrastructure investment raise capacity, and its defense effort stays low but steady, consistent with a growth-first internal balancing strategy backed by UEMOA's monetary anchor and French security ties. Ghana's trajectory reflects democratic consolidation and macro reforms that lift income from the mid-2000s, punctuated by adjustment episodes, while defense outlays remain contained to preserve fiscal space and diplomatic flexibility. These patterns help explain why alliance behavior has periodically shifted away from automatic deference to Nigeria and toward coalitions centered on Côte d'Ivoire, with Ghana acting as a pivotal player within ECOWAS itself. The Sahelian exits deepen this dynamic by shifting security salience northward and reducing the leverage that sanctions and collective defense once provided, which leaves monetary alignments (UEMOA vs. WAMZ) and corridor competition as the principal venues for external balancing. In this setting, internal balancing through growth and fiscal capacity rather than sustained high defense ratios provides the most credible foundation for regional influence, and it helps account for the stop-start character of integration as states trade off market access against concerns about asymmetry and sovereignty.

To synthesize the empirical patterns discussed across the four subregions, Table 1 below summarizes the comparative power configurations shaping the dynamics of African regionalism. Drawing on updated 2024 economic and military indicators alongside documented alliance behaviors, the table consolidates how internal and external balancing interact within each REC.

Regional Economic Community	Dominant Rivalries & Alignments	Relative Economic Capability (GDP per Capita, 2024)*	Relative Military Capability (Military Expenditure, % GDP, 2024)*	Effects on Regional Integration
Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)	Algeria vs. Morocco; Tunisia generally aligns with Morocco; Libya & Mauritania recognise SADR, supporting Algeria's position	Algeria leads modestly (5,722), Morocco slightly lower (~4,200), Tunisia mid-range, Mauritania & Libya lag	Algeria highest (6.1%), Morocco moderate (4.1%), Tunisia & Mauritania low	Western Sahara dispute locks AMU in chronic paralysis; no functional institutions; rivalry prevents even basic economic coordination
East African Community (EAC)	Kenya–Rwanda alignment vs. DRC; Kenya–Tanzania trade corridor competition; Uganda oscillates between blocs	Kenya strongest (2,470), Rwanda rising performer (1,040), DRC lowest (~650); Tanzania strong but inward-leaning	DRC highest (2.7%), Kenya & Rwanda moderate (1.3, 1.2), Tanzania low	Economic asymmetry + security rivalries produce unstable multipolarity; corridor competition undermines customs & monetary union goals
Southern African Development Community (SADC)	South Africa vs. Angola; Zimbabwe aligns with Angola; Botswana often supports SA	South Africa strongest (5,975), Botswana competitive, Angola volatile mid-range (3,320), Zimbabwe low & unstable	Angola highest (4.9%), Zimbabwe fluctuates, SA low (1.1%), Botswana low	Angola's hard-power parity constrains SA's legitimacy; mistrust weakens collective action & delays SADC security cooperation
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)	Nigeria vs. Ghana & Côte d'Ivoire; UEMOA–WAMZ monetary divide; Sahel withdrawals shift centre of gravity	Ghana (~2,570) ≈ Côte d'Ivoire (~2,520) > Nigeria (2,270, declining); Sahel states lowest	Côte d'Ivoire (1.1%), Nigeria moderate (0.8%), Ghana low (0.5%)	No accepted hegemon; monetary bifurcation + security crises fragment the bloc; Nigeria's inconsistent leadership weakens cohesion

Table 1. Power Configurations and Integration Constraints Across Four African Subregions.

The Effects of Shifts in Balance of Power on Regional Integration

The link between balance of power and regional integration has to do with the level of stability/ instability that the international system, or in this case the regional system holds. This implies that balance of power brings about an outcome of stability or instability within a system, and in turn the level of stability or instability determines the outcome of integration or disintegration. To put this into perspective it is important that we define what exactly is meant by the term "stability" in this case. The term stability in international politics is usually associated with the level of peace present in a system, or the level of endurance of a system even in the absence of peace. If we take a classic dictionary definition, the term stability is defined as "the state or quality of being stable, especially resistance to change, deterioration, or displacement; constancy of character or purpose; and reliability or dependability." This definition describes the term 'stability' to be associated with 'performance, resistance and reliability', which is important to be able to link the concept of a stable system with how it is resistant to change, dependable and reliable. This helps us link the phenomena of unstable multipolarity to the concept of regional integration. Regional integration can be gauged by evaluating the resistance and performance of an established regional organization. This implies that the more stable a system essentially is, the more well integrated it is. As mentioned above, the balance of power shifts signals a multipolar system which is prone to instability according to realist and neorealist theory. The shifts in balance of power within the subregions of Africa have led to stagnated integration within the subregions and in turn within the wider regional organization- the African Union. The African Regional Integration index shows the performance of each African Union member states by tracking their individual levels of trade, free movement of people, infrastructural cooperation, and macroeconomic integrative initiatives. Below is a chart that shows each member state's performance according to the African Regional Integration index (2019).

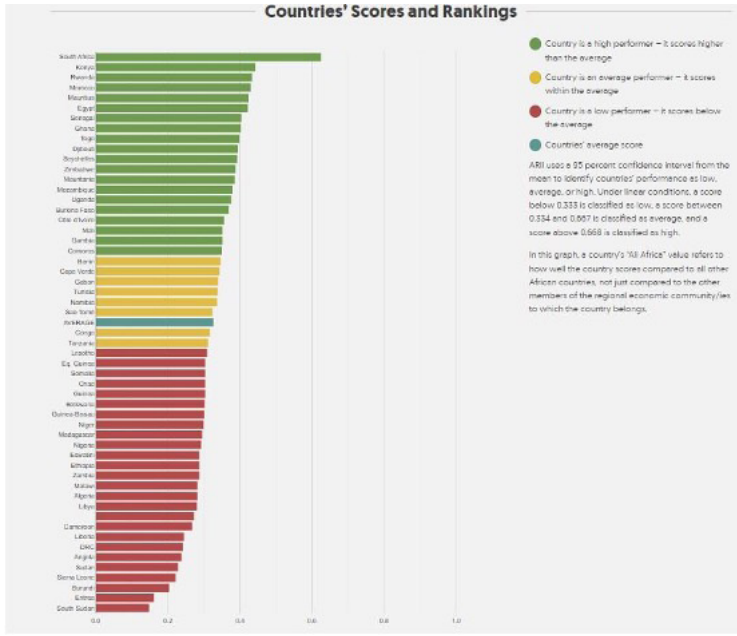


Figure. The African Union (AU) individual Member States integration scores as of 2019.
Source: https://www.integrate-africa.org/rankings/all-africa/

The integration index scores above show clear disparities between rivalling member states of each subregion. Morocco is significantly more well- integrated than Algeria in the AMU, Kenya and Rwanda is clearly more committed to the continental integration project than the DRC, in the EAC. In the SADC subregion South Africa is the most well- integrated state overall, and scores significantly higher than Angola, Zimbabwe and even Botswana. The reluctance of Nigeria to advance its integrationist incentives is clearly shown in the score index above, where Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are considered as being a part of the high performing countries. All these disparities indicate is that the ambition of the AU project to integrate the African region through its subregional pillars is a task impossible to achieve without the subregions being well- integrated themselves.

Prospects for an African Hegemon

Neorealism outlines a supporting theory to Robert Keohane's Hegemonic Stability theory, which points out to the pooling power of a regional hegemon. There is, however, a crucial point to remember here, "even though hegemony may

be based on power, it also requires the ability to persuade the other members that the hegemon's wishes correspond to the common interests, which presupposes a certain commonality of values." This implies that hegemony works like a two- sided coin i.e., a regional hegemon's strength isn't as strong as its capabilities alone but is also as strong as the recognition it receives from other states. Herewith in lies the crucial answer to the question of why there is not an African regional hegemon. As the African Integration Index (2019) has shown in the previous section, South Africa has been recognized by extra- regional powers to be an African regional hegemon. Rivalling South Africa with this descriptor is Nigeria, but as indicated above within the index, Nigerian incentives towards integration are significantly lower than that of South Africa. Although South Africa seems to have pioneered the continental integration project by showing its commitment as a high performer, its subregional rivalry is a great hindrance to its attainment of such a status. "While South Africa's leadership is fully accepted on the global stage, acceptance in Africa is lower. Far from being seen as a benevolent hegemon, South Africa is viewed by some other African states as a selfish hegemon bent on advancing its narrow economic interests at the expense of less developed African countries." This suggests that the prospects of an African regional hegemon are slim to say the least, but the solution to the stagnated integration is the power of a regional hegemon to pool or subordinate all other powers and set regional status quo.

Conclusion

Subregional rivalries and the resulting multipolar instability constitute a structural impediment to deeper African Union (AU) integration. While institutional and normative approaches explain important aspects of Africa's integration challenges, the comparative evidence across the AMU, EAC, SADC, and ECOWAS demonstrates that shifts in the balance of power, which are manifested through internal and external balancing, alliance realignments, and entrenched state-state rivalries, are central to understanding why integration has stalled. Neorealism highlights these dynamics as inherent to a regional environment where states prioritize relative advantage over collective gains (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014), resulting in institutional paralysis whenever integration is perceived to impose sovereignty costs or redistribute influence among competing subregional powers. The updated comparative indicators support this conclusion. In the AMU, the deadlocked Algeria-Morocco rivalry over Western Sahara precludes meaningful cooperation. In the EAC, the Kenya-Rwanda alignment and the DRC isolation sustain a fragmented multipolar environment marked by security competition. In SADC, Angola's hard-power profile and Zimbabwe's political-military networks constrain South Africa's leadership. In ECOWAS, Nigeria's material weight fails to translate into hegemony amid the rising Côte d'Ivoire-Ghana influence and the continually widening Anglophone-Francophone divide. These patterns show that the AU's supranational aspirations remain unattainable without resolving the subregional power configurations that undermine coordination and trust.

For the AU to advance its integration agenda, three interlinked steps are necessary. First, strengthening REC-level conflict management mechanisms would possibly help stabilize subregional rivalries before they spill over to the continental level. Second, policies that outline economic convergence, particularly through industrial cooperation, infrastructure harmonization and macroeconomic coordination, would reduce asymmetries that drive competitive balancing. Third, leadership at the continental level must combine material capability with legitimacy and shared values (Acharya, 2012), a way which recognizes that hegemony in Africa cannot be sustained through dominance alone but must be grounded in consent. Without addressing these foundational power realities, African regional integration will continue to advance in rhetoric more than in practice. A stable and more coherent African regional order depends on reconciling subregional power shifts with continental institutional ambitions, ensuring that the pursuit of relative gains does not permanently eclipse the collective goal of a more integrated and resilient African Union.

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