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Perpetual Transition: Mission Creep, Conceptual Drift and Political Capture in the Strategic Failure of International Stabilization in Somalia, 2007–2026

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Abstract:

Purpose of the Study: This study examines why successive African Union stabilisation missions in Somalia have failed to achieve lasting peace despite nearly two decades of intervention. It investigates how mission creep, conceptual drift, political capture, and financial fragility have undermined strategic objectives, perpetuated dependency, and prevented sustainable security, governance, and long-term social transformation.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative, interpretive single-case design using structured documentary analysis. It analyses African Union, United Nations, and government reports alongside policy papers, scholarly literature, and

contemporary institutional publications to examine the evolution of AMISOM, ATMIS, and AUSSOM and identify recurring strategic, political, and financial patterns across missions.

Findings: The findings reveal that Somalia's prolonged stabilisation failure stems from interconnected structural and political factors rather than inadequate military capability alone. Mission creep expanded mandates beyond available resources, while conceptual drift blurred peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and state-building objectives, reducing strategic coherence. Political capture transformed international missions into instruments of domestic and regional political interests, weakening operational independence. Persistent dependence on voluntary external financing created financial fragility, culminating in funding crises that threatened mission sustainability. Consequently, successive missions achieved temporary military gains but failed to consolidate governance, strengthen Somali institutions, or establish conditions necessary for durable peace and security.

Conclusion: The study concludes that sustainable peace in Somalia requires fundamental strategic reform rather than repeated mission rebranding. Success depends on clearly defined mandates, predictable financing, strengthened Somali ownership, and prioritising political settlement and institutional development alongside security operations to break the cycle of perpetual transition and dependency.

Keywords: *mission creep; conceptual drift; strategic failure; political capture; financial fragility; peace operations; Somalia; AMISOM; ATMIS; AUSSOM; al-Shabaab; counterterrorism; social transformation*

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1. Introduction

Somalia occupies a singular place in the recent history of international peace operations. Since March 2007, it has hosted a continuous African Union (AU) military presence renamed twice but never fundamentally reconceived. The AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) operated from 2007 to 2022; the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) from 2022 to 2024; and the AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2767, began operations on 1 January 2025 (UNSC, 2024; African Union, 2025). Across nineteen years, the mission has grown into the AU's largest undertaking, absorbing tens of thousands of troops, billions of dollars, and, by US accounting, the killing or wounding of some 8,000 AU personnel (USUN, 2025). Estimates of deaths alone vary from 1,483 to nearly 8,000, placing the operation among the deadliest in peace operations history (Kandie et al., 2025). Judged against this investment, the strategic return has been meagre.

That meagreness accumulated sharply as AUSSOM was meant to inaugurate a new phase. Between February and July 2025, al-Shabaab launched a major offensive across Middle Shabelle, Hiraan and Lower Shabelle, briefly seizing Balcad barely thirty kilometres from Mogadishu and attempting to assassinate President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (Muibu, 2024). By mid-2025, the group had reversed most territorial gains from the 2022–2023 counteroffensive. The pattern was numbingly familiar: territory liberated at cost, governance never consolidated, and insurgency returning once the external shield thinned.

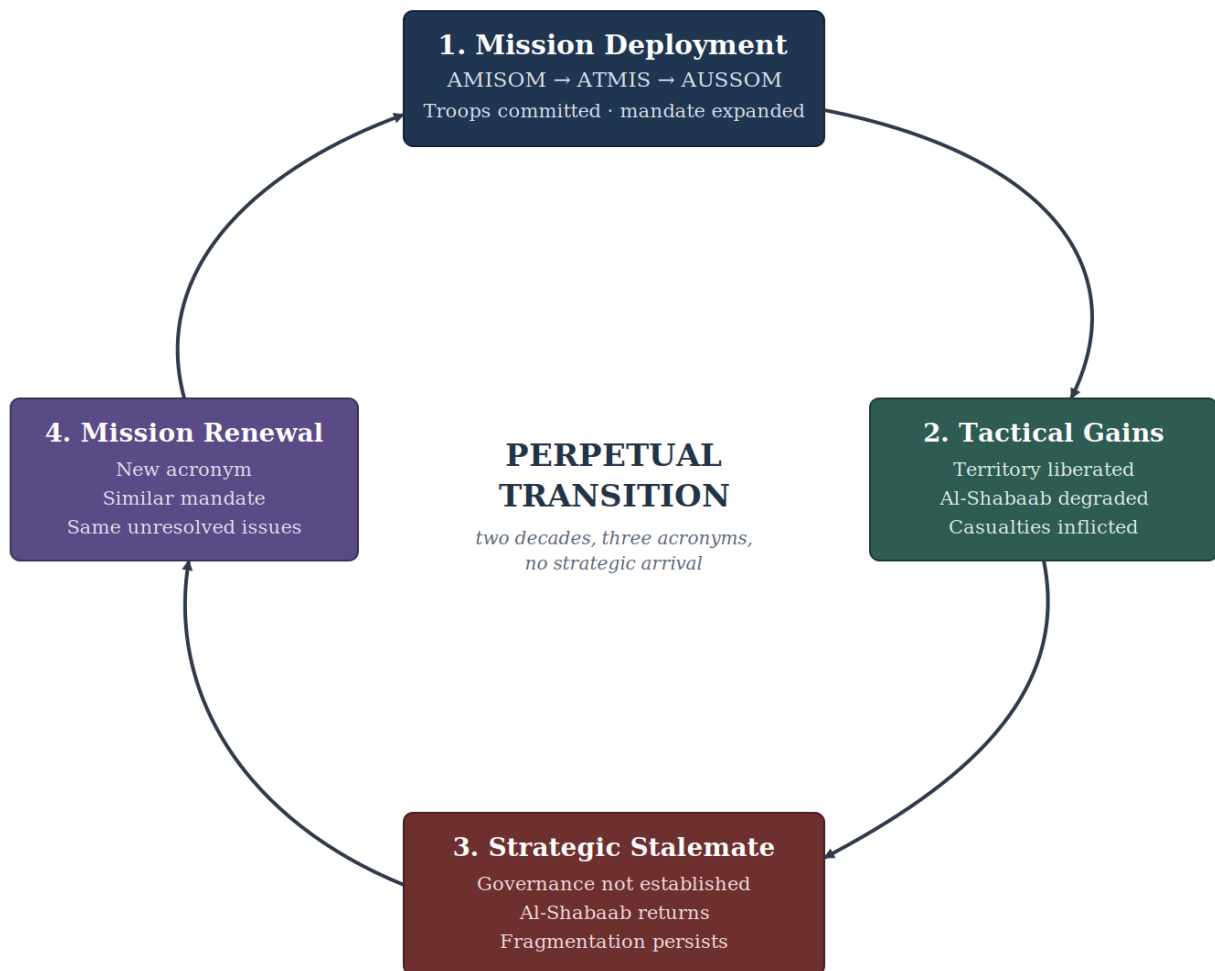
The financial architecture fractured in parallel. In August 2025, a US "pocket rescission" cancelled Washington's roughly one-quarter share of the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) budget (IPI, 2026). Then, on 1 July 2026, the US informed the AU it would neither fund UNSOS beyond 2026 nor support any AUSSOM mandate renewal retaining UN logistical support (Addan & Mohamud, 2026). Diplomats warned that withdrawal of this logistical spine could collapse the operation outright. Two decades of engagement thus approached a cliff—not because the threat was defeated, but because its principal sponsor's patience was exhausted.

This article treats that convergence not as coincidence but as symptom. Its central claim is that strategic failure is not primarily a consequence of insufficient resources, but of three interlocking pathologies. First, mission creep: the progressive accretion of mandate objectives without commensurate resources or strategic adjustment. Second, conceptual drift: the persistent failure to distinguish between peacekeeping, counterterrorism and state-building—incompatible strategic logics demanding different rules of engagement and metrics of success. Third, political capture: the subordination of the mission to the domestic-political calculus of the Federal Government of Somalia and competing regional and external agendas.

The argument's organising metaphor is perpetual transition. Each mission has been framed as a bridge to Somali security ownership: AMISOM would stabilise Mogadishu, ATMIS would hand over by December 2024, AUSSOM would complete handover by December 2029 (African Union, 2025). Yet the conditions for arrival—a capable Somali security sector and contained insurgency—have never been produced. The mission is always transitioning, never arriving, and each acronym change signals renewal without requiring reckoning. This article contends that renaming changed the label far more than the logic, and that the 2026 crisis is accumulated interest on two decades of deferred strategic choices.

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, it synthesises the 2024–2026 record into a single analytical narrative grounded in primary institutional documents. Theoretically, it integrates peace-operations scholarship, political-marketplace literature, and social-transformation frameworks usually kept apart. Normatively, it argues that the Somali case exposes the structural limits of externally financed, militarised stabilisation as an instrument of large-scale social change, and that breaking the cycle requires confronting the contradictions renaming has concealed.

Figure 1. The cycle of perpetual transition



Source: Author's conceptualisation, drawing on ICG (2026) and ISS (2025a).

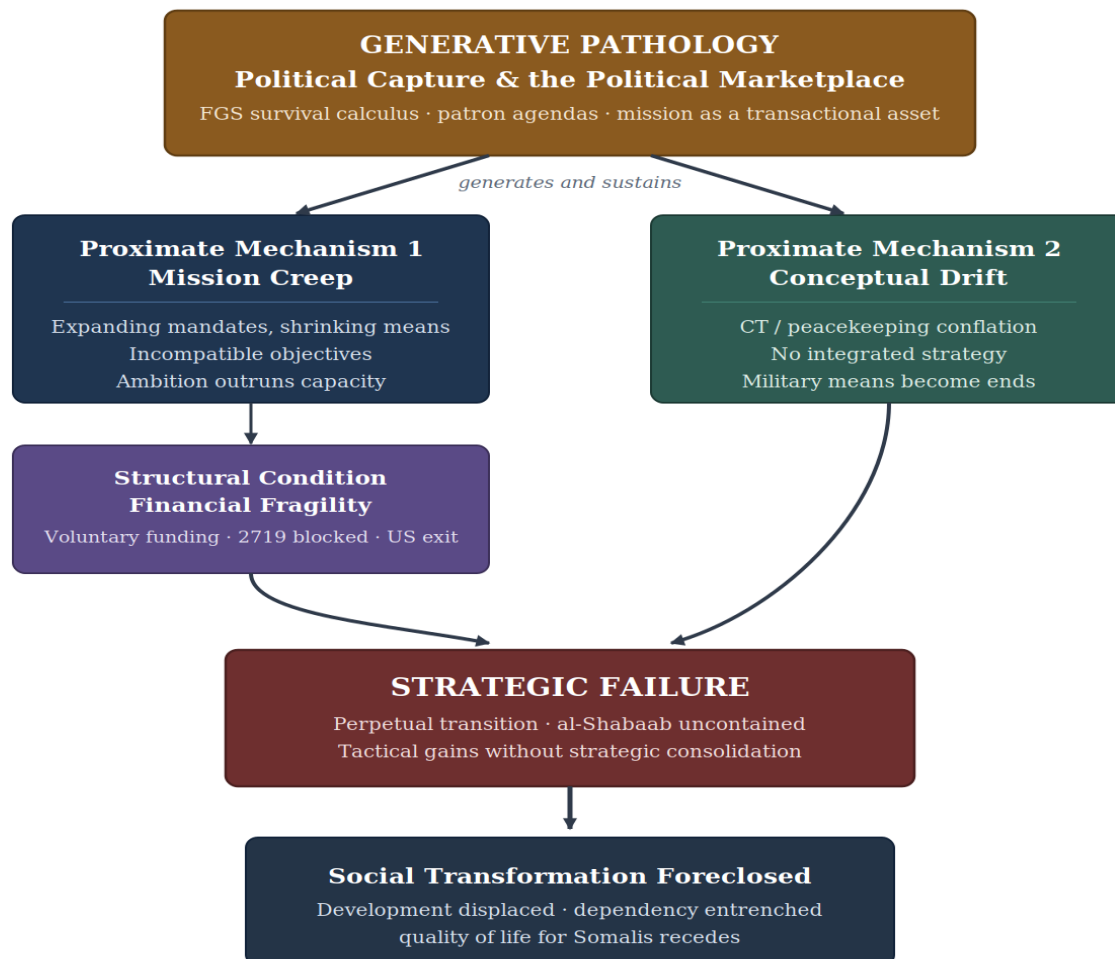
Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The framework advanced here rests on four propositions drawn from the peace-operations and peacebuilding literatures and integrated through a social-transformation lens. First, that strategic failure is analytically distinct from operational failure and must be diagnosed at the level of political outcomes, not battlefield results. Second, that mission creep is a structural, not merely

administrative, pathology. Third, that conceptual drift (the erosion of the boundaries between peacekeeping, counterterrorism and state-building) is the defining pathology of the contemporary “stabilisation turn.” Fourth, that externally financed interventions are prone to *capture* by host-state and patron interests in ways that reproduce, rather than resolve, fragility. Each is developed in turn.

These pathologies are not co-equal, and the framework specifies a causal ordering among them. The article’s analytical claim is that political capture is *generative*. Because the mission is captured (by the domestic-political survival calculus of the host government and by the transactional logic of a regional political marketplace), its mandate is permitted to expand without strategic discipline, and its strategic logics are kept deliberately blurred and militarised. Mission creep and conceptual drift are, on this account, the proximate mechanisms through which capture produces strategic failure, rather than free-standing causes of equal rank; chronic financial fragility is the structural condition that renders the resulting contradictions materially unsustainable. This ordering matters because it locates the point of leverage: technical fixes to mandate design or force levels will not arrest a dynamic whose root is political. The framework is therefore built from the proximate pathologies outward to their generative source, and the empirical analysis (Sections 6–9) follows the same path. Figure 2 represents this causal architecture.

Figure 2. *The causal architecture of strategic failure in Somalia*



Source: Author's conceptualization.

The figure's purpose is to distinguish this article's claim from the more familiar one that the three pathologies are parallel faults of equal rank. Capture sits upstream: it is what permits creep and licenses drift, and the arrows run in one direction only. Financial fragility enters not as a cause but as the structural condition that renders the resulting contradictions materially unsustainable, which is why the rupture of 2025–2026 appears at the end of the sequence rather than at its origin. Read this way, the diagram is also a claim about leverage: reforms pitched at mandate design or force levels intervene in the middle of the chain and leave its source untouched, which is why two decades of resource-and-firepower diagnoses have not broken the cycle.

Strategic failure in peace operations

Strategic failure in peace operations occurs when military interventions achieve tactical successes but fail to deliver sustainable political outcomes. In Somalia, African Union missions successfully recaptured territory, protected key institutions, and weakened al-Shabaab militarily, yet these achievements did not translate into lasting peace, effective governance, or a self-reliant national security sector (Tchie, 2022). Rather than addressing the underlying political and institutional

challenges, successive missions expanded their mandates and resources without resolving the fundamental disconnect between military operations and political transformation. Although AU interventions prevented the collapse of the Somali state, they fell short of their primary objective of creating a self-sustaining security and governance system capable of functioning without prolonged external support. Consequently, Somalia illustrates how operational success can coexist with strategic failure, where the maintenance of stability has replaced the achievement of durable peace and institutional resilience.

Mission creep: the expansion of mandates

Mission creep refers to the gradual expansion of a peace operation beyond its original mandate without corresponding increases in resources, capacity, or strategic direction. In Somalia, AMISOM evolved from a short-term mission focused on protecting the Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu into a multidimensional operation responsible for counterinsurgency, civilian protection, state-building, governance support, political reconciliation, and security sector reform across much of south-central Somalia (Ingiriis, 2020). While adapting mandates to changing conditions is often necessary, mission creep becomes problematic when expanding responsibilities exceed available resources and lack a coherent strategy linking military activities to long-term political objectives. Consequently, African Union missions were expected to defeat al-Shabaab, strengthen state institutions, protect civilians, support political processes, and simultaneously prepare for their own withdrawal, creating competing priorities that undermined their effectiveness and contributed to prolonged dependence on external intervention.

Conceptual drift: the confusion of strategic logics

Conceptual drift occurs when a peace operation gradually shifts away from its original purpose by combining objectives based on fundamentally different operational principles. In Somalia, African Union missions increasingly merged peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and state-building into a single mandate despite their contradictory requirements. Classical peacekeeping depends on consent, impartiality, and the limited use of force, whereas counterterrorism requires sustained offensive operations against armed groups, and state-building focuses on strengthening institutions and extending government authority. These competing objectives created strategic ambiguity, as the missions sought to defeat al-Shabaab militarily while simultaneously maintaining peacekeeping legitimacy and supporting state institutions (Albrecht & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2020). The result was a hybrid mission that lacked a coherent strategic identity, reducing its effectiveness in achieving sustainable peace. This finding aligns with the United Nations High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (2015), which cautioned against assigning counterterrorism roles to peace operations, and with Abdulhamid (2021), who argues that the growing "stabilisation turn" has blurred the boundaries between peacekeeping and warfare, with Somalia representing the clearest example of this conceptual contradiction.

Table 4. *Conceptual drift: the confusion of strategic logics*

Attribute	Peacekeeping	Counterterrorism	State-building
Core principle	Consent of parties	Use of offensive force	Institutional construction
Primary method	Monitoring; protection	Enemy-centric operations	Governance; service delivery

Attribute	Peacekeeping	Counterterrorism	State-building
Relation to host	Impartial	Adversarial (to enemy)	Partnership
Metric of success	Reduced violence	Enemies neutralised	Functioning institutions
Somalia application	Nominal	Dominant	Weak / neglected

Source: Author's conceptualisation, drawing on United Nations (2015) and Karlsrud (2019).

The table's final row carries the argument. Read across the upper four rows, the three logics are merely different, and a mission might in principle sequence them or choose among them. Read down the Somalia row, they are revealed to have been resolved in practice without ever being adjudicated in principle: the peacekeeping logic survives nominally, in the mission's self-description and institutional clothing; the counterterrorism logic dominates operationally; and the state-building logic, the only one of the three whose success would permit the mission to leave, is the one consistently neglected. The pathology is not that the mission chose the wrong logic. It is that it never chose, and that the default in the absence of choice is always the kinetic one, because that is the logic whose results are legible to the principals who fund it.

Political capture, the peacebuilder's contract and the political marketplace

Political capture occurs when external peace operations become shaped by the political interests of domestic and regional elites rather than by their intended stabilisation objectives. Soderbaum et al. (2021) argue that international interventions often develop implicit partnerships with incumbent governments, whereby external actors provide resources, legitimacy, and security while political elites maintain control without undertaking meaningful institutional reform. In the Horn of Africa, Kaldor and De Waal (2020) political marketplace framework further explains how external funding, troop contributions, logistics contracts, and security assistance become instruments of elite bargaining rather than genuine state-building. In Somalia, these dynamics have increasingly influenced the composition, financing, and strategic direction of African Union missions, with decisions over troop-contributing countries and mission priorities reflecting political negotiations rather than operational requirements. Consequently, peace operations have reinforced existing power structures instead of transforming them, allowing military effectiveness to coexist with strategic failure by embedding missions within the political systems they were intended to reform.

Hybrid political order and the local turn

The hybrid political orders perspective argues that stability in fragile states is shaped not only by formal government institutions but also by customary, clan-based, and religious systems that provide legitimacy and local governance. In Somalia, these include clan structures, *xeer* (customary law), councils of elders, and Islamic authorities, which have historically played central roles in conflict resolution and community governance (Warsame, 2024). The local turn in peacebuilding further emphasizes that sustainable peace depends on engaging these locally legitimate institutions rather than relying solely on externally designed state-building models (Bargues, 2020). African Union stabilisation missions, however, focused primarily on military operations and formal state institutions while giving limited attention to Somalia's hybrid political order. As a result, territories reclaimed from al-Shabaab were often not effectively consolidated through local governance and reconciliation, allowing insurgents to regain influence by exploiting

clan relationships and negotiating local alliances. This suggests that lasting stabilisation requires integrating formal state institutions with Somalia's indigenous governance structures to secure both political legitimacy and sustainable peace.

Reading the case through social transformation

These strands are integrated here through the concept of social transformation, understood, following this journal's framing, as the processes by which individuals and groups bring about large-scale social change with the aim of enhancing quality of life. This lens reframes the stakes. A stabilisation mission is not an end in itself; it is at best an enabling condition for the deeper transformation (of institutions, of the social contract, of the relationship between citizens and authority) that could lift Somalia out of protracted crisis. The three pathologies matter, ultimately, because they foreclose that transformation: they lock resources, attention and legitimacy into a militarised holding operation, entrench dependency, and reproduce the conditions of conflict rather than the conditions of change. The remainder of the article develops this argument empirically, returning in Section 11 to what a transformation-centred alternative would require.

Situating the Argument: The State of the Field

The literature on African Union stabilisation missions in Somalia consistently highlights the gap between military achievements and sustainable political outcomes. Tadesse (2023) demonstrates how AMISOM gradually expanded beyond its original stabilisation mandate while facing chronic financial constraints and dependence on troop-contributing countries. More recent studies by Afriyie (2026) conclude that military operations alone have been insufficient because insecurity persists where governance remains weak and political divisions unresolved. Complementing this perspective, De Waal (2020) argues that Somalia's governance is rooted in clan structures, customary institutions, and local authority systems rather than a strong central state, suggesting that externally driven state-building has overlooked existing sources of legitimacy. Broader peacebuilding scholarship further supports this view by emphasizing adaptive, locally owned approaches over externally imposed models. Critical analyses also show that the shift from traditional peacekeeping toward stabilisation and counterterrorism has blurred operational mandates and weakened mission effectiveness (Nyandong, 2023). While existing studies attribute Somalia's challenges to insurgent resilience, inadequate resources, or the limitations of external state-building, this article argues that these factors are interconnected through political capture, which perpetuates mission creep, conceptual drift, and financial dependence, thereby explaining why successive African Union missions continue to reproduce the same strategic shortcomings under different institutional names.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive single-case study design to examine the evolution of African Union stabilisation missions in Somalia from AMISOM to ATMIS and AUSSOM. Using structured documentary analysis, the study draws on primary sources, including African Union and United Nations resolutions, official mission mandates, Security Council reports, and European Union policy documents, complemented by peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, and publications from leading research institutions such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS),

International Peace Institute (IPI), and International Crisis Group (ICG). Data were analysed thematically through the theoretical lenses of strategic failure, mission creep, conceptual drift, political capture, and hybrid political orders to identify recurring patterns across the three missions. Evidence was triangulated across multiple sources to enhance credibility, while conflicting information was acknowledged and unsupported claims excluded. Although the study does not establish definitive causality, it provides a robust and theoretically grounded explanation of why successive African Union peace operations have achieved limited strategic success despite substantial international investment, while recognizing that recent developments surrounding AUSSOM remain subject to ongoing change.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Evolution of AU Missions in Somalia

The three missions are best understood not as a sequence of distinct interventions but as one continuous operation re-badged twice. Tracing their evolution reveals the pathologies accumulating across the arc; Table 1 summarises the sequence.

Table 1. *The evolution of AU missions in Somalia, 2007–2026*

Mission	Period	Troop ceiling	Core mandate	Outcome
AMISOM	2007–2022	~22,000 (peak)	Support the TFG; stabilise Mogadishu	Protracted engagement; mission creep; gains unconsolidated
ATMIS	2022–2024	~18,900	Phased transition and handover to SSF by Dec 2024	Transition stalled; follow-on mission requested
AUSSOM	2025–present	11,826 (incl. 680 police)	Support Somali-owned operations; handover by Dec 2029	Uncertain; same pathologies unresolved; financing rupture

Source: Author’s synthesis from UNSC Resolutions 2767 (2024) and 2809 (2025); The EastAfrican (2026); Military Africa (2026); Williams (2018).

Two features of the table repay attention. The first is the constancy of what matters against the variability of what does not: across three missions the adversary, the terrain and the dependence on external financing are unchanged, while the name, the acronym and the handover date are revised each time. The second is the direction of travel in force levels. AMISOM peaked at roughly 22,000 uniformed personnel; AUSSOM began with 11,826. The mission that inherited the largest accumulation of objectives was furnished with roughly half the troops of the one that began with the narrowest, which is the mandate–capacity gap of Section 6.2 stated as a single comparison.

AMISOM (2007–2022): the birth of a protracted engagement

Established by the African Union Peace and Security Council in 2007 and authorized by the United Nations Security Council, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was initially mandated to provide short-term support to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), protect key government institutions, and stabilize Mogadishu following the Ethiopian intervention (Pare,

2026). However, the mission evolved into a fifteen-year multidimensional operation with responsibilities extending beyond peace support to include counterterrorism, civilian protection, state-building, and support for political processes across south-central Somalia. Its troop strength expanded to approximately 22,000 personnel drawn primarily from Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti (Williams, 2023). Despite notable military successes against al-Shabaab, AMISOM consistently struggled to consolidate liberated areas through effective governance, as weak state institutions, political fragmentation, corruption, and unreliable financing undermined long-term stability. Consequently, the mission prevented the collapse of the Somali government but failed to establish a self-sustaining political and security system, illustrating the gap between operational achievements and strategic success.

ATMIS (2022–2024): the transition that was not

In April 2022, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) replaced AMISOM with the objective of facilitating a phased transfer of security responsibilities to the Somali Security Forces (SSF) by December 2024 (Sinko et al., 2026). The transition strategy envisioned a gradual drawdown of African Union troops while strengthening Somali institutions to assume full responsibility for national security. Although approximately 7,000 personnel were withdrawn and Somali forces assumed control of several forward operating bases, the conditions necessary for a successful transition were not achieved. Persistent attacks by al-Shabaab, inadequate institutional capacity, financial constraints, and regional political tensions undermined the handover process, forcing the Federal Government of Somalia to request a successor mission instead of completing the planned withdrawal (Afriyie, 2025). The resurgence of al-Shabaab following the ATMIS drawdown further demonstrated that security gains remained heavily dependent on the continued presence of African Union forces, highlighting that ATMIS represented a continuation of external stabilisation rather than a successful transition to sustainable Somali ownership (De Franco & Gelot, 2026).

AUSSOM (2025–): the same mission, a new acronym

The African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) was established on 1 January 2025 following approval by the African Union Peace and Security Council and authorization under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2767, with its mandate later extended to December 2026 through Resolution 2809 (Okereke & Gunaratna, 2025). The mission was designed to support the Somali Security Forces (SSF) in combating al-Shabaab, protecting key population centers, and implementing the Somali Security Development Plan through a phased transition toward full Somali security responsibility by 2029. Unlike its predecessors, however, AUSSOM began operations with a significantly reduced force of approximately 11,826 uniformed personnel compared to AMISOM's peak of about 22,000 troops, while inheriting virtually the same broad security and stabilization responsibilities (Moman, 2026). The mission also faced persistent funding uncertainties, unresolved disputes over troop-contributing countries, and financial liabilities carried over from ATMIS, limiting its operational effectiveness from the outset. Consequently, many analysts viewed AUSSOM as a continuation of previous African Union missions rather than a fundamentally new stabilization strategy, with longstanding structural challenges remaining largely unresolved.

3.2. Mission Creep: The Progressive Expansion of Mandates

From limited intervention to comprehensive engagement

The evolution from AMISOM to ATMIS and subsequently AUSSOM demonstrates a persistent pattern of mission creep, whereby each successive mission inherited the broad objectives of its predecessor while introducing additional responsibilities without resolving existing challenges. AMISOM expanded from a limited stabilisation mission into a multidimensional operation encompassing counterterrorism, civilian protection, governance support, and state-building (Kabandula, 2026). ATMIS retained these functions while adding the responsibility of transferring security to the Somali Security Forces (SSF), whereas AUSSOM preserved the same objectives and introduced greater emphasis on flexibility, Somali ownership, and a phased transition extending to 2029 (Hussein et al., 2025). Consequently, mission mandates continued to accumulate rather than evolve strategically, resulting in increasingly complex and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. The missions were simultaneously expected to defeat al-Shabaab, protect civilians, strengthen state institutions, support political processes, and prepare for their own withdrawal, despite these objectives requiring different operational approaches and political conditions. This accumulation of responsibilities diluted strategic focus, overstretched available resources, and reduced the effectiveness of African Union stabilisation efforts by prioritising mandate expansion over coherent and achievable long-term objectives.

Table 2. *Mission creep across three missions*

Dimension	AMISOM	ATMIS	AUSSOM
Core mandate	Support TFG; stabilise	Transition to SSF	Support Somali-owned operations
Added objectives	Offensive ops; state-building; civilian protection	Handover; capacity-building	As ATMIS + “flexibility”
Troop levels	~22,000 (peak)	~18,900	11,826
Financing model	Voluntary contributions	Voluntary contributions	Voluntary; Res. 2719 hybrid blocked
Strategic clarity	Low	Low	Low

Source: Author’s synthesis.

The mandate–capacity gap

Mission creep became particularly evident in AUSSOM, which inherited the extensive mandates of AMISOM and ATMIS while operating with significantly fewer troops and persistent funding shortages. This created a substantial gap between mission objectives and available resources, limiting the mission's ability to achieve lasting security and political stability. The combination of reduced capacity, unreliable donor funding, and dependence on external logistical support weakened operational effectiveness and reinforced a cycle in which under-resourcing contributed to poor performance, further reducing donor confidence and long-term mission sustainability.

The political functions of mission creep

Mission creep has persisted because it serves the political interests of key stakeholders rather than reflecting a purely operational necessity. An expansive mission mandate provides the Federal Government of Somalia with international legitimacy and continued external support, offers troop-contributing countries financial and diplomatic benefits, and enables international donors to demonstrate commitment to regional stability without direct intervention (Marsai & Szalai, 2021). As a result, successive African Union missions have retained increasingly broad mandates despite limited effectiveness, suggesting that mission expansion is driven by political incentives rather than strategic priorities. Consequently, mission creep has become a product of political capture, allowing structural weaknesses to persist across AMISOM, ATMIS, and AUSSOM (Amani Africa, 2026).

3.3 Conceptual Drift: The Confusion of Strategic Logics

Counterterrorism versus peacekeeping

African Union missions in Somalia have increasingly blurred the boundaries between peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and stabilization, creating significant conceptual ambiguity. Although AMISOM, ATMIS, and AUSSOM were established as peace support missions, they evolved into offensive counterinsurgency operations against al-Shabaab while retaining the principles of peacekeeping. This contradiction undermined mission coherence, as peacekeeping requires impartiality and consent, whereas counterterrorism depends on offensive military action. The resulting emphasis on military operations, coupled with reported abuses and limited accountability, weakened public trust and provided al-Shabaab with opportunities to strengthen its local support and recruitment (Gelot & Khadka, 2025).

The absence of an integrated strategy

Although Somalia's stabilization frameworks emphasize integrating military operations with governance, reconciliation, service delivery, and counter-radicalization, implementation has remained heavily focused on military action. African Union missions have prioritized visible battlefield achievements, such as recapturing territory and degrading al-Shabaab, while political and institutional reforms have received comparatively limited attention (Abdulhamid, 2021). This imbalance has weakened long-term stabilization because military gains were not consistently followed by effective governance or reconciliation. As a result, short-term military successes often took precedence over sustainable political consolidation, allowing insecurity to persist and limiting the missions' overall strategic effectiveness.

The confusion of means and ends

A major consequence of conceptual drift is the tendency to equate military achievements with strategic success. In Somalia, African Union missions have measured progress primarily through territory reclaimed and al-Shabaab fighters neutralized, while insufficient attention has been given to governance, reconciliation, and institution-building. Consequently, military gains have often proved temporary, as liberated areas lacked effective governance and were later reoccupied by al-Shabaab, particularly during the 2025 offensives in Middle Shabelle and Hiraa (Addan & Mohamud, 2026). This emphasis on military outcomes over political consolidation has prolonged

the cycle of instability, demonstrating that lasting peace cannot be achieved through force alone but requires sustainable governance and legitimate state institutions.

3.4 The Financial Architecture of Failure

If mission creep and conceptual drift are the strategic pathologies, the mission's financing is where they become materially unavoidable. The financial crisis of 2025–2026 is not a discrete misfortune but the accumulated material consequence of two decades of strategic and conceptual failure, the point at which the contradictions could no longer be papered over. Table 3 assembles the mission's financial position as it stood in mid-2026.

Table 3. *The financial architecture of AUSSOM, 2025–2026*

Item	Amount	Notes
AUSSOM troop/police budget (Jun 2025–Jul 2026)	~US\$166.5m	Only a fraction raised; prior-year figure reported at ~US\$190m
Arrears inherited from ATMIS	~US\$93.9m	Owed to troop-contributing countries
US assessed contributions to UNSOS	~US\$2bn (since 2007)	Support to end after 31 Dec 2026
US bilateral support to TCCs	~US\$1.6bn (since 2007)	In addition to UNSOS contributions
UNSOS annual budget	~US\$500–537m	US ~25% share cancelled by Aug 2025 rescission
EU package (April 2026)	€75m	Military component; EU is largest single supporter (~€2.8bn cumulative since 2007)
Res. 2719 hybrid model	Not triggered	Council unable to adopt, 12 May 2025; US objected that UN share would exceed 90%

Source: Author's synthesis from Amani Africa (2026); European External Action Service (2026); IPI (2026); Reuters (2026); Security Council Report (2025); USUN (2024, 2025). Figures are drawn from in-year reporting and should be read as indicative; where sources diverge, the range is reported.

Assembled in one place, the figures make a point that no single line conveys. The mission's own troop and police budget is dwarfed by the logistics package that sustains it, and that package is dwarfed in turn by the cumulative American contribution to it. The instrument is therefore not principally a Somali or even an African expense but an American one, which is why a decision taken in Washington on grounds of domestic budgetary priority can terminate an African Union operation that no African body has voted to end, and why the question of ownership examined in Section 9.3 is not merely rhetorical. The arrears line makes the corollary concrete: the debt is owed to the troop-contributing countries whose soldiers do the dying, and it stood at US\$93.9 million

before AUSSOM had deployed a single soldier of its own. A mission that cannot pay the governments that staff it is not well placed to demand strategic discipline from them.

The Resolution 2719 hybrid model and its obstruction

The long-term sustainability of African Union peace operations in Somalia has been undermined by chronic financial uncertainty. Although UN Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023) established a framework allowing up to 75% of AU peace operation costs to be financed through UN assessed contributions, its implementation for AUSSOM failed because the Security Council could not reach agreement on the proposed funding arrangements (Afriyie, 2025). Consequently, AUSSOM continued to rely on unpredictable voluntary donor contributions, perpetuating the financial instability that had affected both AMISOM and ATMIS. The failure to operationalize this financing mechanism exposed the continued dependence of African Union missions on external political decisions, limiting their capacity to plan and implement long-term stabilization efforts.

Chronic instability, arrears and the pocket rescission

AUSSOM has continued to face severe financial and logistical constraints due to its reliance on voluntary donor contributions. The mission inherited significant unpaid reimbursements to troop-contributing countries from ATMIS while failing to secure sufficient funding for its operational budget, weakening troop morale and long-term sustainability (Albrecht & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2020). At the same time, reductions in funding for the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), which provides essential services such as logistics, medical support, transport, fuel, and communications, further constrained mission operations (IPI, 2026). These financial and logistical shortcomings have limited AUSSOM's operational capacity and undermined its ability to implement effective long-term stabilization efforts.

The US withdrawal of July 2026: a critical juncture

The sustainability of AUSSOM was further threatened in July 2026 when the United States announced that it would end funding for the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) after 2026 and oppose any future mission mandate that depended on UN logistical support (Bargues, 2020). Given that AUSSOM relies on UNSOS for essential logistics, including transport, medical services, communications, and supplies, the decision placed the mission's operational viability at serious risk. The United States justified its position by arguing that, despite substantial financial investment over nearly two decades, Somalia had not achieved sustainable security or institutional self-reliance, while the African Union warned that the funding withdrawal would significantly undermine the mission's operational effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

The EU lifeline and the limits of relief

The European Union remained AUSSOM's largest financial supporter by committing €75 million through the European Peace Facility in 2026 to cover troop reimbursements and non-lethal equipment, bringing its cumulative support to African Union missions in Somalia to nearly €2.8 billion (De Franco & Gelot, 2026). However, this funding addressed only part of the mission's financial needs and did not resolve the broader logistical and operational challenges created by the withdrawal of other major donors. Consequently, AUSSOM continues to rely on fragmented and

voluntary external financing, leaving the mission financially vulnerable and limiting its ability to achieve sustainable long-term stabilization.

Financial fragility as a structural condition

AUSSOM's greatest financial challenge is not simply inadequate funding but its dependence on unpredictable, voluntary external contributions. Unlike a stable financing model based on assessed contributions, the mission relies heavily on discretionary donor support that can be reduced or withdrawn at any time, making long-term planning difficult. This financial fragility has limited the mission's ability to invest in sustainable political stabilization and governance, forcing it to prioritize short-term military operations that produce immediate results (De Waal, 2020). Although emergency financial assistance from partners such as the European Union has provided temporary relief, it has not addressed the underlying structural weakness of the mission's financing architecture. Consequently, AUSSOM remains vulnerable to donor decisions, undermining both its operational effectiveness and its long-term sustainability.

3.5 Political Capture and the Political Marketplace

The FGS's unprecedented control

A distinguishing feature of AUSSOM is the increased influence of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) over the mission's composition, strategic priorities, and deployment. The FGS has exercised significant control over the selection of troop-contributing countries, the direction of mission activities, and the use of the mission to reinforce domestic political legitimacy and international support. From the perspective of De Waal (2020) political marketplace theory, AUSSOM has increasingly become a political asset through which security assistance, financial resources, and diplomatic influence are negotiated. Similarly, Barnett and Ingiriis (2020) peacebuilder's contract framework suggests that international partners have tolerated this arrangement because maintaining a cooperative government has often taken precedence over enforcing meaningful reforms. Consequently, political capture has reduced the mission's independence and contributed to the persistence of mission creep and strategic failure.

The politicization of troop contributions

The politicization of troop contributions illustrates how political considerations have increasingly shaped AUSSOM's operations. During the mission's establishment, the Federal Government of Somalia influenced the selection of troop-contributing countries, with decisions reflecting diplomatic and sovereignty disputes rather than operational requirements. Ethiopia, a major contributor to previous African Union missions, was initially excluded because of tensions over its 2024 agreement with Somaliland before relations later improved and cooperation resumed during the 2025 offensive against al-Shabaab (Kabandula, 2026). This episode demonstrates that political calculations can override military priorities, creating uncertainty in force generation, reducing operational effectiveness, and allowing regional political interests to shape the mission's strategic direction.

Geopoliticisation and the fragmentation of ownership

AUSSOM has increasingly become influenced by competing external powers pursuing different security interests in Somalia. Countries such as Türkiye, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States have expanded their military and security involvement through troop training, military assistance, air operations, and bilateral defence partnerships (Kaldor & De Waal, 2020). While these interventions have strengthened Somalia's security capacity in some areas, they have also complicated coordination, introduced competing regional interests, and weakened the principle of African-led stabilization. Consequently, the growing reliance on bilateral security partnerships risks fragmenting the mission's strategic direction and undermining the coherence and long-term sustainability of AUSSOM (Kandie et al., 2025).

The 2025 Offensive as Diagnostic

The 2025 al-Shabaab offensive exposed the persistent weaknesses of African Union stabilization efforts in Somalia and demonstrated the combined effects of mission creep, conceptual drift, and political capture. Launched shortly after the ATMIS drawdown, the offensive enabled al-Shabaab to recapture large areas of Middle Shabelle, Hiraan, and Lower Shabelle, re-establish positions near Mogadishu, and reverse many of the territorial gains achieved during earlier military campaigns (Marsai & Szalai, 2021). The offensive revealed that previous military successes had not been supported by effective governance or lasting political consolidation, allowing insurgents to regain control once external forces were reduced. Al-Shabaab further strengthened its position by engaging local clan leaders and negotiating non-aggression agreements, while government responses were constrained by political considerations that sometimes overrode sound military strategy (Moman, 2026). Despite a joint counteroffensive involving Somali forces, African Union troops, and international air support, the conflict ultimately returned to a military stalemate, reinforcing the conclusion that lasting peace cannot be achieved through military operations alone without effective governance, political reconciliation, and sustainable state institutions.

3.6 Implications for Social Transformation

The limits of the liberal-peacebuilding model

The experience of African Union peace operations in Somalia demonstrates the limitations of externally driven liberal peacebuilding approaches that prioritize the construction of a centralized state through military intervention and institutional reforms. Despite nearly two decades of international support, sustainable peace has remained elusive because stabilization efforts have largely overlooked Somalia's existing systems of local governance based on clan structures, customary law, and religious institutions (Muibu, 2024). As argued by Nyandong (2023), Somalia has not lacked governance but rather a strong centralized state, while local institutions have continued to provide legitimacy and conflict resolution. The limited engagement of African Union missions with these hybrid governance structures has weakened long-term stabilization, allowing al-Shabaab to exploit local grievances and establish influence in areas where formal state institutions remained absent. Consequently, sustainable peace in Somalia requires greater integration of local governance systems into national peacebuilding and stabilization strategies.

The cycle of militarised engagement and the foreclosure of change

The cycle of perpetual transition has significantly constrained prospects for sustainable social transformation in Somalia. Repeated military interventions, followed by strategic stalemate and renewed mandates, have diverted resources away from governance, development, and reconciliation, which are essential for long-term peace and improved quality of life (Okereke & Gunaratna, 2025). This prolonged dependence on external security assistance has weakened the capacity of Somali institutions to become self-reliant and accountable while perpetuating insecurity, displacement, and humanitarian challenges. If financial and logistical support for AUSSOM continues to decline, the risk of renewed instability will increase, further undermining state legitimacy and delaying meaningful social and economic development (Tadesse, 2023). Consequently, breaking this cycle requires shifting from externally driven military stabilization toward sustainable governance, local ownership, and inclusive peacebuilding initiatives.

Toward a transformation-centred alternative

The findings suggest that sustainable peace in Somalia requires a shift from militarized stabilization toward a model of negotiated hybrid stability that places political reconciliation, local governance, and community legitimacy at the center of peacebuilding. Rather than prioritizing territorial gains, this approach emphasizes collaboration with clan elders, customary institutions, and religious leaders to strengthen locally legitimate governance while supporting the Somali state (Tchie, 2022). It also advocates linking military operations to political reconciliation, devolving governance to trusted local authorities, and measuring success through sustained stability, effective governance, and community acceptance rather than battlefield victories alone. Although implementing such an approach presents significant challenges, it offers a more sustainable alternative to repeated military interventions by addressing the political and institutional factors that have perpetuated conflict and limited the effectiveness of successive African Union missions in Somalia.

4. Conclusion: Beyond the Renaming of Missions

Between 2007 and 2026, African Union peace support missions in Somalia evolved from AMISOM to ATMIS and AUSSOM, yet failed to achieve their central objective of establishing a self-sustaining security and governance system capable of maintaining stability without prolonged external support. This study demonstrates that the strategic shortcomings of these missions cannot be explained solely by inadequate funding or military capacity but rather by the interaction of three interconnected challenges: mission creep, conceptual drift, and political capture. Successive missions expanded their mandates while resources declined, blurred the boundaries between peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and state-building, and became increasingly influenced by domestic and regional political interests. These structural weaknesses limited the ability of military gains to translate into lasting political stability and institutional development.

The findings further reveal that financial uncertainty and dependence on external donors compounded these challenges, while the 2025 al-Shabaab offensive highlighted the inability of successive missions to consolidate territorial gains through effective governance and reconciliation. The study therefore argues that sustainable peace in Somalia requires a fundamental shift from externally driven, militarized stabilization toward a politically grounded approach that

prioritizes local legitimacy, governance, and reconciliation alongside security interventions. This includes establishing clear and achievable mission mandates, strengthening coordination between military and political objectives, ensuring predictable and sustainable financing, and promoting genuine Somali ownership through engagement with both formal state institutions and locally legitimate governance structures. Without such reforms, future stabilization efforts are likely to replicate the limitations of previous missions, prolonging Somalia's cycle of insecurity rather than achieving durable peace and social transformation.

5. References

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