

Regional Counter-Terrorism Cooperation and Stability in East Africa 2012–2022

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Abstract: The primary aim of this study was to assess regional counter-terrorism cooperation and stability in East Africa 2012–2022. Specifically, the study sought to: evaluate the role of regional cooperation counter-terrorism policies in enhancing stability in East Africa; to analyze the impact of regional cooperation counter-terrorism policies on stability in East Africa and to assess the effectiveness regional cooperation counter-terrorism policies on stability in East Africa. The study holds significance for security policymakers, practitioners, and scholars engaged in the field of security studies. It was guided by a conceptual framework grounded in Terror Management Theory, Network Theory, and Deterrence Theory. Methodologically, the study employed a descriptive research design and targeted a population of 79 participants, comprising of; East African Community secretariat, E.A Police Chiefs, The United Nations Office of counter-terrorism, EU and Civil society groups. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 66 participants. Data were collected through survey questionnaires. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis and presented in descriptive summaries. The study established that during the years from 2012 to 2022, the power of East Africa was dependent on the regional cooperation and the international support in the counter-terrorism domain that played the primary role in ensuring stability. The international community's direct financial assistance, technical support, and training programs allowed the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the regional security structures to perform excellently, thus reducing the impact of the shortage of local resources and at the same time strengthening the legal, institutional, and operational frameworks. On the other hand, support from AMISOM, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the East African Community (EAC) through joint military operations, intelligence-sharing, policy harmonization, and capacity-building, not only made but also enhanced the whole staff of the member states to interrupt, seal the borders, and deal with humanitarian needs of Al-Shabaab easily. The study recommended for: the development of sustainable funding mechanisms has to be the first and foremost priority. Although international financial support was very important, depending on the outside funding made the situation vulnerable when there were changes in the donor's commitment; there is a need to improve the collaboration between the institutions and the harmonization of their policies among the states. Different priorities in the countries and the differences in the capacity might sometimes limit the whole effectiveness of the cooperation between the regions. Furthermore, continuous investment in specialized training for intelligence, crisis management, and multi-border coordination is being constantly needed to keep the terrorists' adaptive strategies at bay; in addition, it is advised to bolster the intelligence-sharing networks and the technological infrastructure. The upgrade of surveillance systems, secure communication platforms, and real-time data integration will all enhance pre-emptive responses to the threat of terrorism. Lastly, it is necessary to formalize the coordination among donor agencies, AU/UN mandates, and regional meetings to ensure that the external help is not only in line but also in support of the strategies of the region, and thus, not creating either dependency or fragmentation.

Background to the Study

Between the years 2012 and 2022, East Africa was an area of turmoil where the continuous threat of Al-Shabaab caused heavy casualties, illegal crossings between countries, and socio-economic disorders in Somalia and neighboring countries. Therefore, counter-terrorism became a less negotiable and more important task that was made up of national and international governments and organizations coordinated strategies, policies, and actions to prevent, confront and neutralize terrorism (Omenma & Onyango, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021). Regional cooperation transformed this transnational problem into a source of collective resilience that allowed the countries to combine their scarce resources, exchange vital intelligence, and conduct military operations together through AMISOM and supporting training programs through IGAD and the African Union (Williams, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2023). The collaboration of all these parties converted the terrorists' networks into non-existing ones, reduced the number of places where they could hide, and even

helped them to change their tactics. As a result, political cohesion, security resilience, and sustainable stability in the region were greatly improved (Harper, 2022; Cannon & Fujibayashi, 2021).

The political and economic and social instabilities which have afflicted the Middle East and Central Africa and specific South Asian regions have created conditions which enable regional terrorism to expand its operational capacity (Pejic, 2020; Shiferaw & Assefa, 2022). The region has faced persistent difficulties with governance which combined with poverty and educational deficits and social exclusion produced conditions that enabled people to embrace radical beliefs and develop extremist movements (Ali, 2020; El-Said, 2019). The militant group al-Shabaab established its presence in Somalia because the country's government did not establish effective state institutions and there existed high youth unemployment rates which enabled the group to recruit members by utilizing local conflicts (Wanjohi & Kamau, 2023). The terrorist organization Boko Haram originated in Nigeria's northeastern region through its ability to attract support from marginalized groups which emerged from governmental failure to address their basic needs and community economic challenges (Ndlovu, 2021). The international community currently has achieved success in fighting these groups through military operations and peace-building initiatives however the groups persistently develop their digital recruitment and propaganda activities while establishing international partnerships (Dube & Gumede, 2021).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization which includes China and Russia and various Central Asian nations uses its Three Evils security partnership to combat terrorism through its focus on separate threats which include terrorism and separatism and extremism (Pejic 2020). The SCO uses intelligence sharing and joint military training and cybersecurity programs to protect against regional threats that especially affect Central Asia because of its location near Afghanistan. The SCO created its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure to support member states in their fight against terrorism through its base in Uzbekistan which operates for the purpose of building long-term stability in the region (Buronova 2024). Human rights organizations have discovered that some SCO member states use their counter-terrorism operations to silence political opposition.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) developed regional accords which include the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT) to address the increasing threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia. The convention enables member states to work together against terrorism financing while they develop stronger border controls and better intelligence exchange systems (Dube & Gumede, 2021). The Philippines Mindanao region has become a site where ISIS-affiliated groups operate which has led ASEAN to enhance its partnership activities with the United States and Australia as international allies. ASEAN needs to use its non-interference principle as a method to support member countries with their domestic counter-terrorism operations but this policy creates obstacles to effective intervention (Mohamed, 2020).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has dedicated its efforts to combat terrorist financing while it works to eliminate extremist groups from the Middle Eastern region. The GCC states, which include Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have increased their financial monitoring activities because of the region's importance as a strategic geopolitical area (El-Said, 2019). The GCC has conducted intelligence sharing operations while it participated in military missions to combat regional threats from al-Qaeda and ISIS through its operations in Yemen. The GCC member states face internal divisions that sometimes create obstacles to achieving a unified counter-terrorism strategy because national interests of the member states conflict with each other (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The African Union has developed a complete counterterrorism plan because it recognizes that extremist groups endanger the stability of African regions. The African Union operates its African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) to support research efforts and to establish a unified system that addresses security threats throughout the entire continent. The AU established the African Model Anti-Terrorism Law to standardize terrorist attack prevention regulations among its member states. The AU faces difficulties when it needs to implement its policies across the different political systems and economic conditions that exist throughout Africa (Shiferaw & Assefa, 2022). The AU Peace and Security Council has been crucial for sending peacekeeping forces to dangerous territories such as Somalia even though financial and operational obstacles restrict its complete effectiveness (Amnesty International, 2023).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) conducts counterterrorism operations to address the rise of extremist groups in West Africa which includes Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). ECOWAS established regional security frameworks which include the Political Declaration on Terrorism and the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (ECOWAS, 2013) to enhance border security through intelligence sharing and member state collaboration. The ECOWAS organization faces operational difficulties because its members lack necessary resources and they have different political priorities. The West African region faces an ongoing terrorism problem which ECOWAS aims to address through improved security systems (Ndlovu, 2021; Ali, 2020).

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development has been active in addressing regional terrorism, particularly because extremist groups have started to operate in the Horn of Africa. The IGAD strategy demands

member states to develop border security systems which will improve their ability to fight terrorism through intelligence sharing methods. The IGAD Security Sector Program (ISSP) operates as the main program which establishes intelligence-sharing networks while developing organizational abilities to conduct cybersecurity protection and terrorism detection activities (Shiferaw & Assefa, 2022). The program works together with the African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) to create unified strategies which will help solve terrorism problems by treating their fundamental causes including economic issues and government instability (Ndlovu, 2021). The implementation of IGAD policies becomes difficult because member states show different dedication levels while the organization lacks sufficient resources.

The East African Community (EAC) has responded to regional terrorism through a mix of legislative, strategic, and operational efforts, which require member states to work together. The EAC Peace and Security Protocol, which began in 2013, has created pathways for member states to enhance border security and combat extremist financing and share intelligence operations (Wanjohi & Kamau, 2023). The EAC focuses especially on controlling terrorist movement through cross-border activities and weapon trafficking, which includes monitoring the al-Shabaab terrorist group. The EAC counter-terrorism programs face operational problems because of the organization non-interference rule and its weak enforcement system, which creates a need for development of better systems that promote joint operations between member states (Mohamed, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The joint operations of the African Union Mission in Somalia and the Security Sector Programme in the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development are examples of regional counter-terrorism mechanisms that have made a difference in the fight against terrorism in the East African region (International Crisis Group, 2021). However, the East African countries still suffered from the Al-Shabaab threats, which were persistent and adaptive from 2012 to 2022. These threats were evidenced by the occurrence of terrorism acts like the Westgate Mall siege in Nairobi where 67 people died, the killing of 148 students in Garissa University, and even ongoing cross-border incursions (Harper, 2022).

The geospatial aspect of the problem has been a major contributor to the terrorists' success in carrying out these attacks. Intelligence sharing was poor, there was a lack of coordination between the various government agencies, and the national political priorities were not aligned along with judgment on the issue of porous borders that allowed the militants to move around and even get settled in some cases (Omenma & Onyango, 2020; Cannon & Fujibayashi, 2021).

The ability of Al-Shabaab to recruit, change its tactics, and cause insecurity that displaced people and made the region lose its socio-economic stability was facilitated by the lack of collaboration due to political tensions among the countries involved, lack of funds, and the slow process of legal harmonization for extradition and prosecution (Williams, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2023). This study thus focused on the influence of regional cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism on stability in East Africa during the period 2012-2022 and pointed out integrated approaches to overcome these persistent gaps.

General Objective

To assess regional counter-terrorism cooperation and stability in East Africa 2012–2022

Specific Objectives

To evaluate the role of regional cooperation counter-terrorism policies in enhancing stability in East Africa.

To analyze the impact of regional cooperation counter terrorism policies on stability in East Africa.

To assess the effectiveness regional cooperation counter-terrorism policies on stability in East Africa.

Theoretical Review

This section covers a review of the; Network theory, the Deterrence theory and Game theory.

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory is associated with Thomas Schelling and Albert Wohlstetter; the theory is a framework rooted in the field of international relations and strategic studies (Power, Madsen & Morton, 2020). The framework of deterrence theory helped in comprehension and control enemy behavior during counter-terrorism operations.

Game Theory

This is a theoretical framework for analyzing strategic interactions among rational decision-makers developed by Neumann in 1944. The theory provides insights into how individuals or groups make decisions that depend on the choices of others. Key assumptions of game theory include rationality, complete information

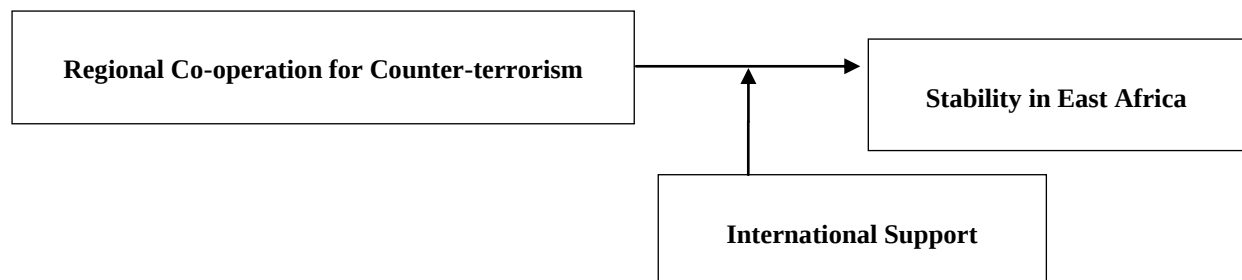
and the idea that players will act in their own best interests (Huka, Gacheru & Alio, 2020). The theory helped the study identify conditions which made cooperation between states possible because it revealed three essential factors which included shared interests and mutual benefits together with trust among participating states.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is an organized structure of interrelated concepts or ideas that provides a foundation for understanding, analyzing, and interpreting a specific topic or phenomenon (Peterson, 2018).

Independent Variables

Dependent Variable



Research Methodology

The study was guided by a descriptive research design. The research design helped the study capture the current state of collaborative efforts among countries, the existing counter-terrorism strategies in place, and the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders involved.

The study targeted officials from key regional security institutions, including the East African Community, the African Union, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, who were involved in the development, coordination, and oversight of regional counter-terrorism strategies and security frameworks.

The research also focused on national-level security practitioners such as military personnel, counter-terrorism police units, intelligence officers, and border security officials, since they were responsible for translating regional agreements into operational action within member states.

Target	Population	Percentage
EAC Secretariate	25	31.6%
EAC Police Chiefs	3	3.8%
UN office on counter-terrorism	10	12.7%
EU	5	6.3%
Civil Organizations	36	45.6%
Total	79	100%

Source: Researcher (2025)

The study used purposive sampling to select senior security officials and regional security coordinators and policy makers who worked at the East African Community and African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development because these respondents had expert knowledge about developing and executing regional counter-terrorism policies.

The researchers used stratified sampling methods to achieve equal representation between three security sectors, which included military, police, and intelligence services, to study how different sectors perceive their cooperation effectiveness and stability results.

Nassiuma (2000) mathematical formular was used to select a random sample of 261 individuals from a total population of 750 through basic random sampling.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

n = sample size;

N = population size;

e = error margin which is 0.05

$$n = 79 / 1 + 79(0.05)^2$$

$$n = 79 / 1 + 0.1975$$

$$n = 79 / 1.1975$$

$$n = 66$$

The project utilized standardized questionnaires and interview schedules as its data collection instruments. The Likert scale, which extends from 1 to 5, measured employee agreement with the statements presented in the questionnaire. There were two sections to the questionnaire. While the second segment contained questions depending on the study's objectives, the first section concentrated on the respondents' general information.

Data Collection Techniques and Procedures

The data collection process started by getting an authorization letter from the University and a research permit from NACOSTI. These two letters were attached to the questionnaire and administered to the respondents via email. The main objective of these letters was to increase respondent confidence, response rate and the quality of the responses. The research team conducted telephone calls and personal visits to complete the questionnaire process. The study also conducted interviews with top officials from each of the targeted groups.

The research study gathered its data through both primary and secondary methods which provided complete and trustworthy evidence for the research. The researchers collected primary data to obtain direct information from people who participated in regional security collaboration efforts. The research team conducted key informant interviews which targeted senior officials and policymakers from the East African Community, African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development along with national security agencies. The research team used structured questionnaires to assess operational security staff members while focus group discussions gathered information from security experts and civil society practitioners to understand their combined viewpoints. The researchers chose these methods because they would achieve deep study results which would show both qualitative research findings and measurable research data.

Researchers gathered secondary data for their study by examining official policy documents and regional counter-terrorism frameworks and joint operation reports and academic literature, which provided historical and contextual and analytical information about the study period.

Data Analysis

The study analysis through an inductive–deductive thematic analysis method which began with open coding to identify text elements followed by axial coding to group codes into larger categories and ended with selective coding to create main themes that matched study goals and theoretical foundations. The software enabled researchers to access coded content from various participants which allowed them to examine the relationship between different themes. The research team used verbatim quotations from sources to strengthen their interpretations which established credibility and transparency and confirmability for their research results.

The researchers employed a standardized document analysis method to assess secondary data which included policy documents and regional reports and AU and UN resolutions and donor reports and peer-reviewed publications. The researchers selected documents which were published between 2012 and 2022 because they showed direct connections to regional counter-terrorism cooperation and stability in East Africa.

The researchers study used content analysis to investigate the texts by studying their established patterns and emerging trends and their repeated themes. The researchers identified key indicators which included funding trends and terrorist incident frequency and legal reforms and institutional developments and they organized these indicators into specific categories.

Findings

Response Rate: a 75.9% response rate demonstrates high stakeholder participation because they showed their commitment to fighting terrorism through joint efforts which are essential for maintaining regional peace. The 75.9% response rate indicates strong data reliability which proves the results can be applied to other situations without any major impact from missing responses.

Thematic Analysis Results

Regional Co-operation

The research shows that East Africa regional partnerships which started between 2012 and 2022 developed from their first bilateral security agreements into complete multilateral systems which operated through AMISOM and IGAD and EAC frameworks. The intelligence-sharing program extended its scope to cover terrorist financing activities and recruitment operations and cross-border fighter movements and methods for stopping upcoming attacks from occurring. Williams (2021) shows that AMISOM security system design enables military forces to take back territory which reduces Al-Shabaab terrorist operational strength. Cannon and Fujibayashi (2021) show that Horn of Africa countries established security cooperation systems which limited terrorist groups from operating their bases.

The United Nations Office on Counter-Terrorism official observed that;

“The passing of intelligence through regional channels instead of remaining at the national level made it very difficult for the Al-Shabaab cells to plan and conduct attacks without being noticed.”

However, consistent with Omenma and Onyango (2021), uneven legal harmonization and institutional mistrust limited full intelligence integration, as reflected in the remark that;

“The completeness of sharing it was contingent on political ties at that time.”

The joint law enforcement teams improved their ability to deter criminals through their unified efforts in making arrests, handling extradition procedures, and sharing criminal records. The research results match the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025) statement which showed that cross-border partnerships stop illegal trafficking activities and terrorist financing operations. A police chief confirmed that;

“It was possible for people to carry out an attack in one country and then simply disappear to another country; but because of the joint investigations, that escape route was closed.”

Stability in East Africa

The period between 2012 and 2022 shows that regional counter-terrorism partnerships developed throughout East Africa which helped sustain their political stability. Research on regional security governance indicates that security organizations which share information about threats and work together with their partners will minimize the chances of security emergencies turning into political unrest (Williams, 2018; Dersso, 2020).

The East African Community (EAC) framework enabled institutions to establish stronger resilience through their safety assessments and shared operational method for decision-making which helped them control terrorism-related errors.

As one EAC Secretariat official noted;

“Countries' cooperation lessens the likelihood of the political crisis connected to security issues blowing up because there is a common perception of the threats and a joint action.”

This finding aligns with literature suggesting that regional security regimes enhance state legitimacy by projecting unified authority. The regional stability of the region depends on two factors which include supranational coordination and domestic political will according to evidence that different countries implemented policies at different times due to their own national priorities.

International Support

Military collaboration under African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was central to restoring territorial and governance stability in Somalia and neighboring states. The empirical analyses conducted by Williams in 2018 and Hansen in 2019 demonstrate that joint offensives succeeded in breaking Al-Shabaab's control over territory and operational systems and their financial resources, which created opportunities for government control to reestablish itself. A military commander observed;

“The joint forces' presence made it impossible for Al-Shabaab to use the large towns, and that immediately resulted in less violence and more security for the people.”

One EAC official made the statement that

“Without consistent international financing, AMISOM would not have maintained its operational tempo; funding gaps could have led to withdrawals or operational stagnation.”

Military operations received funding through this financial support which enabled better cooperation between member states because national forces used the same resources to maintain their operational capabilities. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and various sources indicate that AMISOM depended on external funding for its operations with the EU's African Peace Facility providing financial support which included troop allowances starting at US\$1,028 monthly before reductions occurred. The EU established a stipend limit of US\$822 in 2016 which resulted in donor fatigue because TCCs like Burundi and Kenya and Uganda threatened to withdraw while Ethiopian forces partially retreated which enabled Al-Shabaab to regain control of territory.

The study's findings prove that international support operated as an essential requirement for AMISOM to function because donor funding provided the necessary resources for troop movements and logistical needs and military equipment. The mission required permanent international support to maintain its capacity for extended joint operations.

Summary

The examination of their military partnership, intelligence exchange, policy development coordination, skill enhancement activities, and financial support shows their role in decreasing Al-Shabaab threats while creating stability for political, social, and economic systems. The assessment uses regional and international stakeholders' opinions to define the relationship between causal factors and operational patterns which determined the alliance's success in protecting regional security.

The cooperation among regions within the AMISOM, IGAD, and EAC frameworks greatly improved the effectiveness of joint military operations. The sharing of intelligence, collaboration in law enforcement, and coordinated military operations made it very difficult for Al-Shabaab to control territories and move across borders. At the same time, through the unifying of policies and establishing training programs, the institutions' and the personnel's readiness were increased. Moreover, the sharing of resources and drawing up of joint strategies were the advantages of cooperation, which made it possible for the member countries to act together in the face of security threats. However, among varied national priorities, not well-developed institutional capacities, and sometimes miscommunication in coordination, the regional cooperation was still a source of sustained multi-state action against terrorism.

The international support that came in various forms between 2012 and 2022 was very important for the process of counter-terrorism in East Africa. Support in terms of money, technical help, international training for the soldiers, and cooperation between nations made it possible for the military troops of AU and UN to operate along with the quick construction of new places where regional counter-terrorism would be conducted. The mandates of the United Nations and African Union gave very specific strategic directions; this kept the donor resources matched with the needs of priority areas as well as disallowing any multiplication of the same resource. The assistance further solidified the collaboration of sharing information and intelligence, improved legal and policy frameworks, and filled the gap of resources among East African countries thus boosting the power of regional counter-terrorism efforts.

Conclusion

The study concluded that during the years from 2012 to 2022, the power of East Africa was, on one hand, the regional cooperation and on the other hand, the international support in the counter-terrorism domain that played the primary role in the situation stability. The international community's direct financial assistance, technical support, and training programs allowed the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the regional security structures to perform excellently, thus reducing the impact of the shortage of local resources and at the same time strengthening the legal, institutional, and operational frameworks. On the other hand, support from AMISOM, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the East African Community (EAC) through joint military operations, intelligence-sharing, policy harmonization, and capacity-building, not only made but also enhanced the whole staff of the member states to interrupt, seal the borders, and deal with humanitarian needs of Al-Shabaab easily.

The results have shown that the security situation was multi-faceted, political, social, and economic were the domains of influence, and that security improvements were most evident when the couples of deep regional cooperation and strategically international engagement were used. In spite of the challenges like financial shortages, coordination problems, and different priorities among the nations, the research emphasizes that the security of East Africa in the long run relied on the combination of external support with the effective and diversified regional collaboration, thus, the crucial interdependence between the international participation and the regional counter-terrorism mechanisms is pointed out.

Recommendations of the Study

The study's conclusions bring forward numerous proposals to support the regional counter-terrorism activities and keep the East Africa region stable. The development of sustainable funding mechanisms has to be the first and foremost priority. Although international financial support was very important, depending on the outside funding made the situation vulnerable when there were changes in the donor's commitment. The countries in East Africa together with the regional institutions could look for ways like pooled funding arrangements, regional security levies, or public-private partnerships to keep AMISOM and the related security frameworks always operational.

There is a need to improve the collaboration between the institutions and the harmonization of their policies among the states. Different priorities in the countries and the differences in the capacity might sometimes limit the whole effectiveness of the cooperation between the regions. The difference in the response to terrorism will be minimized and the insurgents will not have the opportunity to exploit the situation if standard operational protocols, legal frameworks, and joint planning are set up. Moreover, incorporating regular

joint exercises and simulations might help create a more seamless operational interoperability among military, police, and intelligence agencies.

Third, the study emphasizes the significance of human resource development and capacity-building. Continuous investment in specialized training for intelligence, crisis management, and multi-border coordination is being constantly needed to keep the terrorists' adaptive strategies at bay. The knowledge transfer from international partners should be included in such programs to impart the skills within the regional structures, thus making it a long-term sustainable process.

Fourth, it is advised to bolster the intelligence-sharing networks and the technological infrastructure. The upgrade of surveillance systems, secure communication platforms, and real-time data integration will all enhance pre-emptive responses to the threat of terrorism. The combination of tech investments with legal and operational agreements on information sharing can certainly reduce the chances of delays or miscommunication across borders.

Strategic alignment of international support with regional priorities is crucial, even though international aid has boosted regional collaboration, lack of alignment in priorities or support at times have been the factors to lose consistency. It is necessary to formalize the coordination among donor agencies, AU/UN mandates, and regional meetings to ensure that the external help is not only in line but also in support of the strategies of the region, and thus, not creating either dependency or fragmentation.

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