



International Organisations and the Peaceful Settlement of Territorial Disputes in Africa: Lessons from the Bakassi Peninsula Crisis

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Abstract

The persistence of territorial disputes continues to pose significant challenges to peace, security, and regional integration in Africa despite the existence of international and regional mechanisms for conflict management. This paper examines the role of international organisations in the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes in Africa through an analysis of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. Drawing exclusively on secondary data obtained from international legal instruments, judicial decisions, official documents, scholarly publications, and policy reports, the study evaluates how international law and multilateral institutions contributed to preventing the escalation of the dispute into a prolonged interstate conflict. Anchored in Liberal Institutionalism, the paper argues that the peaceful settlement of the Bakassi dispute resulted not from judicial adjudication alone but from the interaction of international law, preventive diplomacy, sustained political commitment, and coordinated institutional implementation. The paper demonstrates that the International Court of Justice provided legal certainty regarding territorial sovereignty, while the United Nations, through diplomatic engagement and the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission, facilitated the implementation of the Court's judgment and reduced the risk of renewed hostilities. The paper concludes that durable settlement of interstate territorial disputes in Africa requires an integrated approach that combines judicial settlement, diplomacy, political leadership, institutional coordination, and human security considerations. The Bakassi experience offers valuable lessons for strengthening Africa's continental peace and security architecture and demonstrates the continuing relevance of international organisations in promoting peaceful interstate relations within a rules-based international order.

Keywords: Bakassi Peninsula; International Organisations; Peaceful Settlement of Disputes; International Court of Justice; Territorial Disputes.



1. Introduction

Territorial disputes have remained one of the most persistent sources of interstate tension in Africa despite the continent's extensive network of regional and international institutions established to promote peace, security, and cooperation. Since political independence, numerous African states have experienced disagreements over territorial sovereignty, maritime boundaries, and the interpretation of colonial-era treaties, many of which have threatened regional stability and sustainable development. Although only a limited number of these disputes have escalated into full-scale interstate wars, their recurring nature continues to undermine diplomatic relations, economic integration, border governance, and human security across the continent. Thus, the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes has become an important component of Africa's collective security architecture and an enduring concern within international relations scholarship.

The persistence of territorial disputes in Africa is closely associated with the colonial construction of state boundaries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Boyd, 1979; Potekhin, 2024; Samsoudine Sadio & Ba, 2025). The partition of Africa by European colonial powers produced artificial political boundaries that frequently disregarded existing ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and historical realities. These colonial boundary arrangements, many of which were negotiated without the participation of indigenous populations, were subsequently inherited by newly independent African states under the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* (Al Banna, 2024). While the doctrine was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1964 to minimise interstate conflicts arising from competing territorial claims, it also institutionalised numerous ambiguities embedded within colonial treaties and boundary agreements (Asiwaju, 1985; Brownlie, 1979). Rather than eliminating disputes, the preservation of inherited boundaries often transferred unresolved colonial contradictions into the post-colonial African state system.

Within this context, international organisations have increasingly assumed important responsibilities in preventing, managing, and resolving interstate disputes. The establishment of the United Nations (UN) after the Second World War fundamentally transformed the international legal order by institutionalising the peaceful settlement of disputes as a cardinal principle of international law. Articles 2(3) and 33 of the United Nations Charter require states



to resolve disputes through peaceful means, including negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and other diplomatic procedures before resorting to the use of force. These provisions were reinforced by subsequent developments in international law, including the growing authority of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as the principal judicial organ of the UN responsible for adjudicating disputes between sovereign states (Shaw, 2021; Merrills, 2017).

Regional organisations have complemented these global mechanisms by developing institutional frameworks specifically designed to address Africa's unique conflict environment. The transformation of the OAU into the African Union (AU) in 2002 marked a significant shift from the principle of non-interference towards a more proactive approach to peace and security. Through institutions such as the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Panel of the Wise, and the Continental Early Warning System, the AU expanded its capacity to support preventive diplomacy, mediation, and conflict management across the continent (Williams, 2018). Similarly, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), have increasingly contributed to regional peacebuilding through mediation initiatives, confidence-building measures, and preventive diplomacy.

Despite these institutional developments, opinions remain divided regarding the effectiveness of international organisations in resolving African territorial disputes. Liberal institutionalist scholars argue that international organisations reduce uncertainty, facilitate cooperation, strengthen compliance with international law, and provide neutral platforms through which disputes can be resolved peacefully (Keohane, 1984; Hurd, 2019). From this perspective, institutionalised dispute settlement reduces the likelihood that interstate disagreements will escalate into military confrontation. Conversely, realist scholars contend that international organisations remain constrained by state sovereignty, political interests, and unequal distributions of power, thereby limiting their capacity to influence state behaviour where vital national interests are involved (Mearsheimer, 1994). This debate raises an important question concerning the conditions under which international organisations can successfully facilitate the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes within Africa's complex political environment.

The Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon provides one of the most



instructive cases for examining this question. Unlike many African territorial disputes that have remained unresolved or periodically relapsed into violence, the Bakassi dispute ultimately culminated in one of the most comprehensive examples of judicially supervised conflict resolution on the continent. Originating from conflicting interpretations of colonial treaties, competing sovereignty claims, strategic maritime interests, and valuable natural resources, the dispute generated prolonged diplomatic tensions and intermittent military confrontations that threatened peace within the Gulf of Guinea. However, rather than degenerating into prolonged armed conflict, the dispute was eventually resolved through a combination of judicial adjudication by the International Court of Justice, diplomatic engagement under the auspices of the United Nations, bilateral negotiations between Nigeria and Cameroon, and institutional monitoring through the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission. The eventual implementation of the Green Tree Agreement further demonstrated the importance of sustained international supervision in facilitating compliance with legally binding decisions.

Although the Bakassi dispute has attracted considerable scholarly attention, existing studies have largely concentrated on its historical origins, the legality of the International Court of Justice's judgment, the political implications of Nigeria's transfer of sovereignty, or the humanitarian consequences experienced by displaced populations (Aghemelo & Ibhasebhor, 2006; Anyu, 2007; Baye, 2010). Much of the existing literature provides fragmented assessments of individual institutions while paying insufficient attention to the complementary relationship between judicial settlement, preventive diplomacy, political negotiation, institutional monitoring, and post-conflict confidence-building. This represents an important gap in the literature because contemporary territorial disputes increasingly require integrated institutional responses rather than reliance upon a single dispute resolution mechanism.

Against this background, this paper examines the role of international organisations in the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes in Africa through a critical analysis of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. Rather than providing another historical narrative of the dispute, the paper evaluates how international legal institutions, diplomatic mechanisms, and multilateral organisations collectively contributed to preventing conflict escalation, facilitating peaceful implementation of judicial decisions, and promoting regional stability. The paper argues that the successful settlement of the Bakassi dispute was not solely



the consequence of the International Court of Justice's judgment but resulted from the interaction of international law, preventive diplomacy, sustained political commitment, institutional coordination, and long-term implementation mechanisms. At the same time, the Bakassi experience demonstrates that judicial decisions alone cannot guarantee sustainable peace unless accompanied by effective political leadership, humanitarian protection, local acceptance, and continuous institutional engagement.

1.1 Historical Background to the Bakassi Peninsula

The Bakassi Peninsula dispute occupies a unique position in Africa's post-colonial interstate relations because it illustrates how colonial boundary-making, competing interpretations of international treaties, and post-independence state succession combined to produce one of the continent's most protracted territorial disputes. Although the dispute eventually became a legal contest between Nigeria and Cameroon before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), its origins extend far beyond the post-colonial period. Rather than emerging from contemporary political disagreements alone, the crisis evolved through successive historical phases involving pre-colonial political authority, European imperial competition, colonial boundary delimitation, and the complex inheritance of territorial obligations following African independence. Understanding these historical foundations is therefore indispensable for appreciating why the dispute proved resistant to bilateral diplomacy and ultimately required multilateral institutional intervention.

Before European colonial expansion, the Bakassi Peninsula formed part of an interconnected socio-economic environment dominated largely by the Efik Kingdom of Old Calabar (Nair, 2025). Historical evidence suggests that the peninsula was inhabited predominantly by fishing communities whose economic activities centred on maritime trade, fishing, and commercial exchanges extending across the Gulf of Guinea. Political authority within the region was exercised through indigenous institutions that regulated trade, resource utilisation, and social relations rather than through rigid territorial boundaries characteristic of the modern state system (Asiwaju, 1985; Umanah Ekong, 2026). Sovereignty was understood principally in terms of political allegiance, commercial influence, and communal relationships rather than exclusive territorial jurisdiction. This pre-colonial reality would later be fundamentally transformed by European colonial powers, whose introduction of fixed territorial boundaries



redefined existing political and geographical arrangements.

The origins of the modern dispute can be traced to the intensification of European imperial rivalry during the late nineteenth century. Following the *Berlin Conference* of 1884–1885, European powers accelerated the partition of Africa through bilateral agreements that frequently ignored indigenous political structures and local patterns of settlement (Umanah Ekong, 2026). In the case of Bakassi, Britain and Germany sought to delimit their respective spheres of influence along the Gulf of Guinea primarily to safeguard commercial interests and secure strategic access to maritime resources. The Anglo-German Agreement of 11 March 1913 consequently became one of the most significant legal instruments shaping the subsequent territorial controversy. The agreement transferred authority over the Bakassi Peninsula to German Kamerun by redefining the boundary along the Akpakorum (Akwayafe) River and extending the maritime boundary into the Gulf of Guinea. Although intended to resolve colonial administrative questions, the treaty simultaneously generated ambiguities regarding the precise interpretation of boundary descriptions and the extent of territorial jurisdiction (Brownlie, 1979; Prescott & Triggs, 2008).

The outbreak of the First World War shortly after the conclusion of the 1913 agreement further complicated the territorial status of the peninsula. Germany's defeat resulted in the partition of Kamerun between Britain and France under the League of Nations Mandate system, later converted into the United Nations Trusteeship arrangements after the Second World War. During this period, Britain administered Southern Cameroons separately from Nigeria despite maintaining close administrative and economic linkages between the two territories. The continued absence of comprehensive physical boundary demarcation meant that colonial administrative practices often diverged from treaty provisions, thereby reinforcing uncertainties regarding sovereignty over the peninsula. These inconsistencies created competing historical narratives that both Nigeria and Cameroon would later invoke in support of their respective territorial claims.

The transition to independence during the late 1950s and early 1960s transferred these colonial ambiguities to the newly sovereign African states. Nigeria attained independence in 1960, while the reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Republic of Cameroon in 1961 fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape surrounding the peninsula. Both states



inherited colonial boundary arrangements through the principle of state succession, yet differing interpretations of the legal status of colonial treaties produced conflicting understandings of territorial sovereignty. Nigeria consistently argued that effective administration, long-standing occupation, and the historical allegiance of the indigenous population strengthened its claim over Bakassi. Cameroon, by contrast, maintained that the 1913 Anglo-German Treaty and subsequent international legal instruments unequivocally vested sovereignty in Cameroon. These competing legal and historical interpretations transformed what had previously been an administrative ambiguity into an interstate territorial dispute governed by international law (Shaw, 2021).

The significance of the Bakassi Peninsula extended beyond questions of historical title and legal sovereignty. From the 1970s onwards, growing awareness of the peninsula's strategic and economic importance substantially intensified bilateral tensions. The Gulf of Guinea had emerged as one of Africa's most important maritime zones because of its abundant fisheries, strategic shipping routes, and expanding offshore hydrocarbon reserves. Control over Bakassi therefore carried important implications for maritime jurisdiction, exclusive economic zones, resource exploitation, and national security. As a result, territorial sovereignty became closely intertwined with economic interests, increasing the political sensitivity of any negotiations concerning the peninsula (Prescott & Triggs, 2008).

Efforts to resolve the dispute through bilateral diplomacy produced only limited progress. Several agreements negotiated between Nigerian and Cameroonian leaders, including the Yaoundé II Declaration of 1971, the Maroua Declaration of 1975, and subsequent bilateral discussions, attempted to clarify maritime boundaries and reduce tensions. However, disagreements regarding the legal validity, constitutional status, and domestic ratification of these agreements prevented the emergence of a durable settlement. Political changes within both countries further complicated implementation, as successive governments adopted differing positions regarding the legitimacy of earlier diplomatic commitments (Akindele & Ate, 1983).

The deterioration of relations during the late twentieth century reflected the cumulative effects of these unresolved historical and legal disagreements. Military confrontations, including the 1981 border incident and the escalation of armed clashes following Cameroon's occupation of



parts of the peninsula in 1993, demonstrated the increasing inability of bilateral negotiations to prevent conflict escalation. Although neither government sought a full-scale interstate war, repeated military incidents heightened nationalist sentiments, undermined mutual trust, and threatened stability within the Gulf of Guinea. At the same time, the humanitarian consequences of the dispute became increasingly apparent as local communities experienced insecurity, displacement, and economic disruption. The conflict therefore evolved from a boundary disagreement into a multidimensional political, legal, humanitarian, and diplomatic crisis requiring broader international engagement.

Cameroon's decision to institute proceedings before the International Court of Justice in 1994 marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the dispute. Rather than continuing to rely exclusively upon bilateral negotiations, the parties increasingly accepted that judicial settlement under international law offered the most credible avenue for achieving a definitive resolution. This transition from political confrontation to legal adjudication fundamentally altered both the character of the dispute and the mechanisms through which it would eventually be resolved. It also demonstrated the growing willingness of African states to utilise international judicial institutions in managing complex territorial disagreements, thereby reinforcing the normative significance of peaceful dispute settlement within the contemporary international system.

The conflict was neither an isolated bilateral disagreement nor an inevitable consequence of ethnic or nationalist rivalries. Instead, it reflected the interaction of colonial treaty-making, incomplete boundary demarcation, competing interpretations of international legal obligations, strategic resource interests, and evolving post-colonial state formation. These historical dynamics explain why purely political negotiations proved insufficient and why international legal and institutional mechanisms ultimately became central to the peaceful resolution process. The Bakassi experience therefore provides an important historical foundation for evaluating the legal principles and institutional frameworks that subsequently shaped one of Africa's most significant examples of peaceful territorial dispute settlement.

1.2 Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative documentary research design based exclusively on secondary



data. Data were derived from authoritative documentary sources, including the Charter of the United Nations, judgments of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the Constitutive Act of the African Union, the Green Tree Agreement, official reports of the United Nations and the African Union, treaties, government publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other credible scholarly materials relating to the Bakassi Peninsula dispute and interstate conflict management in Africa. These sources were subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes concerning the historical evolution of the dispute, applicable international legal principles, institutional interventions, implementation challenges, and broader implications for peaceful territorial dispute settlement in Africa.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the paper is anchored in Liberal Institutionalism Theory, which argues that international institutions facilitate cooperation among states by reducing uncertainty, promoting compliance with international norms, and providing mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes (Keohane, 1984; Martin & Simmons). The theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for explaining how the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and other international organisations contributed to the peaceful settlement of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute despite competing sovereignty claims and complex political interests.

1.4 Contemporary International Legal Framework: Charter of the United Nations.

The peaceful settlement of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute was fundamentally anchored in international law. Although historical claims, political considerations, and diplomatic negotiations shaped the evolution of the conflict, its eventual resolution depended primarily upon internationally recognised legal principles governing territorial sovereignty, treaty obligations, boundary delimitation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The Bakassi case demonstrates the increasing importance of legal institutions in managing interstate territorial disagreements within the contemporary international system. Rather than replacing diplomacy, international law provided the normative framework within which political negotiations, judicial adjudication, and institutional implementation were conducted.

The contemporary legal obligation requiring states to resolve disputes peacefully derives



principally from the Charter of the United Nations (UN). Adopted in 1945 following the devastation of the Second World War, the Charter fundamentally altered international relations by prohibiting the use of force except under narrowly defined circumstances while simultaneously imposing a positive obligation upon states to pursue peaceful means of dispute settlement. Article 2(3) obliges member states to settle international disputes through peaceful means in such a manner that international peace, security, and justice are not endangered. Complementing this obligation, Article 33 identifies negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and resort to regional arrangements as recognised mechanisms through which disputes should be resolved before escalating into armed conflict (United Nations, 1945; Shaw, 2021). These provisions transformed peaceful dispute settlement from a diplomatic preference into a fundamental principle of international law.

The significance of these Charter provisions extends beyond their legal status. They institutionalise the expectation that interstate disputes should be managed through rules rather than military coercion, thereby reinforcing the rule-based international order. In the Bakassi dispute, both Nigeria and Cameroon eventually embraced these principles by accepting judicial adjudication before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) despite prolonged political disagreements and intermittent military confrontations. Their decision to submit competing territorial claims to judicial determination reflected an important demonstration of confidence in international legal institutions and illustrated how legal norms can moderate interstate conflict even where strategic national interests are involved.

The International Court of Justice occupied the central legal position within the settlement process. Established under Chapter XIV of the UN Charter and governed by its Statute, the Court serves as the principal judicial organ responsible for resolving legal disputes between sovereign states. Unlike political negotiations, which frequently involve compromise, judicial settlement requires impartial application of international law to facts and legally admissible evidence. The Court therefore examined the Bakassi dispute primarily through documentary evidence, including colonial treaties, diplomatic correspondence, administrative practice, maps, and subsequent agreements concluded between Britain, Germany, Nigeria, and Cameroon. In its judgment of 10 October 2002, the Court concluded that sovereignty over the Bakassi Peninsula belonged to Cameroon principally based on the Anglo-German Treaty of 11



March 1913 and subsequent legal instruments governing territorial succession (International Court of Justice, 2002).

The Court's reasoning reflected the long-established doctrine that treaty obligations remain legally binding upon successor states unless lawfully modified or terminated. In this regard, the judgment reinforced the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, one of the foundational doctrines of international law requiring states to honour their treaty commitments in good faith. Codified under Article 26 of the *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties* (1969), this principle ensures the stability and predictability of international relations by preventing states from selectively disregarding legally binding agreements. Although Nigeria advanced arguments based upon historical administration, effective occupation, and the welfare of local communities, the Court assigned greater legal weight to treaty obligations and internationally recognised boundary instruments. This approach showed the primacy of documentary legal title in the judicial determination of territorial sovereignty (Shaw, 2021; *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, 1969).

Closely related to treaty law was the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris*, which has become one of the defining principles governing interstate boundaries in post-colonial Africa. Originally developed in Latin America and subsequently adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the doctrine requires newly independent states to preserve inherited colonial administrative boundaries to minimise territorial conflicts (Organisation of African Unity, 1964). The legal significance of *uti possidetis juris* was reaffirmed by the ICJ in the *Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso v. Mali)* case, where the Court described the doctrine as an essential mechanism for preserving stability during decolonisation (International Court of Justice, 1986). In the Bakassi dispute, the doctrine strengthened Cameroon's legal position because the Court regarded the colonial boundary arrangements inherited at independence as possessing continuing legal validity. Although the doctrine has frequently been criticised for perpetuating arbitrary colonial boundaries, its application has nevertheless reduced the potential for widespread territorial revisionism across Africa (Brownlie, 1979).

Equally important was the legal principle governing the peaceful settlement of disputes through judicial adjudication. International law recognises judicial settlement as one among several peaceful mechanisms available to sovereign states; however, unlike mediation or negotiation,



judicial decisions create legally binding obligations upon the parties concerned. Article 94 of the UN Charter requires member states to comply with judgments delivered by the International Court of Justice in cases to which they are parties. This obligation strengthens international legal certainty by ensuring that judicial determinations are not merely advisory but enforceable within the broader framework of the United Nations system. Nigeria's eventual acceptance and implementation of the Court's judgment, despite considerable domestic political opposition, demonstrated the continuing normative authority of international judicial institutions in contemporary interstate relations.

Nevertheless, judicial settlement alone did not guarantee successful implementation of the Court's decision. International law increasingly recognises that compliance with judicial judgments often requires complementary diplomatic arrangements capable of addressing practical, political, and humanitarian concerns arising after legal determinations have been made. This necessity was reflected in the conclusion of the Green Tree Agreement (GTA) of 12 June 2006, negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations. The Agreement established the procedures governing Nigeria's phased withdrawal from Bakassi, guaranteed the protection of affected populations, and created implementation mechanisms supervised by the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission. Accordingly, the GTA transformed the ICJ judgment from a legal determination into an operational framework capable of facilitating peaceful implementation while reducing the risks of renewed confrontation (United Nations, 2006).

1.5 Role of International Organisations in the Peaceful Settlement of the Bakassi Disputes

The peaceful resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute represents one of the most significant examples of multilateral institutional cooperation in the management of interstate territorial conflicts in post-colonial Africa. Unlike many territorial disputes that remain unresolved or culminate in prolonged military confrontation, the Bakassi conflict was ultimately managed through the coordinated intervention of multiple international organisations operating within distinct but complementary institutional mandates. Rather than relying exclusively upon judicial adjudication or political negotiation, the settlement process evolved through a carefully sequenced interaction of legal institutions, diplomatic mechanisms, confidence-building initiatives, and implementation frameworks. This multidimensional institutional approach



demonstrates that contemporary interstate disputes increasingly require collaborative governance involving international organisations operating across legal, political, diplomatic, and humanitarian domains.

The United Nations (UN) occupied the central coordinating position throughout the settlement process. Although the dispute initially developed as a bilateral disagreement between Nigeria and Cameroon, its gradual escalation raised broader concerns regarding regional peace and security within the Gulf of Guinea. Recognising the risks associated with continued military confrontation, the UN provided an institutional framework through which competing legal and political claims could be addressed peacefully. Rather than imposing a political settlement, the organisation facilitated dialogue, promoted confidence-building measures, and encouraged both parties to pursue internationally recognised mechanisms of dispute resolution consistent with the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945). In doing so, the UN performed one of its fundamental functions: transforming potentially violent interstate disagreements into manageable legal and diplomatic processes.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the United Nations lay not merely in its support for judicial settlement but in its sustained engagement after the International Court of Justice delivered its judgment in October 2002. International experience demonstrates that judicial decisions frequently encounter implementation difficulties, particularly where questions of sovereignty, national identity, and strategic resources are involved (Merrills, 2017). In the Bakassi case, the UN recognised that the legal determination of sovereignty represented only the first stage of conflict resolution. Subsequently, under the leadership of the then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, the organisation facilitated extensive diplomatic consultations designed to prevent the judgment from triggering renewed hostilities or political instability. This post-judgment diplomacy proved essential in maintaining communication between both governments during a politically sensitive transition period.

Closely connected to the UN's diplomatic role was the contribution of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), whose judgment fundamentally altered the trajectory of the dispute. Although the Court functions as an independent judicial institution rather than a political organisation, its role within the broader United Nations system illustrates the increasing judicialisation of international dispute settlement. By providing an impartial legal determination based upon



established principles of international law rather than political bargaining, the Court introduced legal certainty into a dispute that had remained contested for several decades. Importantly, the Court's judgment reduced opportunities for unilateral interpretations of colonial treaties by producing an authoritative legal decision accepted within the international legal order (International Court of Justice, 2002).

However, the significance of the ICJ extends beyond the legal correctness of its judgment. The Court demonstrated that judicial institutions can contribute to conflict prevention by providing states with legitimate alternatives to military confrontation. Before Cameroon's application to the Court in 1994, bilateral negotiations had repeatedly failed to resolve competing territorial claims. Judicial adjudication therefore shifted the dispute from the battlefield to the courtroom, replacing coercive diplomacy with legal argumentation. This transformation illustrates one of the principal contributions of international judicial institutions to international peace: they substitute legal reasoning for military competition while preserving the sovereign equality of disputing states (Shaw, 2021). Although judicial decisions cannot eliminate political disagreement entirely, they establish objective legal reference points that facilitate subsequent diplomatic engagement.

Nevertheless, judicial determination alone could not ensure peaceful implementation. The practical execution of the Court's judgment required sustained institutional oversight capable of addressing complex administrative, political, security, and humanitarian issues arising from the transfer of territorial authority. This responsibility was primarily undertaken by the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC), established under the auspices of the United Nations in 2002. The Commission represented one of the most innovative institutional mechanisms developed during the settlement process because it transformed judicial pronouncements into practical implementation measures through continuous dialogue between both governments.

The CNMC performed several interrelated functions. It supervised the phased withdrawal of Nigerian administrative authorities, coordinated the transfer of territorial administration to Cameroon, monitored compliance with agreed timelines, addressed technical questions relating to boundary demarcation, and facilitated discussions concerning the welfare of affected populations. Unlike conventional diplomatic negotiations, which often conclude upon the



signing of agreements, the Commission remained actively engaged throughout implementation, thereby providing continuity between judicial settlement and political execution. Its activities substantially reduced opportunities for misunderstanding, miscalculation, or unilateral action that might otherwise have reignited tensions between the parties (United Nations, 2006). The Commission also demonstrated the importance of institutional flexibility in conflict management. Rather than limiting its activities to legal compliance, it increasingly incorporated humanitarian concerns into its work, including issues relating to the protection of civilian populations, citizenship, freedom of movement, property rights, and local livelihoods. Although implementation remained imperfect, the Commission recognised that sustainable peace required attention not only to territorial sovereignty but also to the human consequences of border realignment.

Another important institutional contribution emerged through the negotiation of the Green Tree Agreement (GTA) in 2006. While frequently discussed as a bilateral agreement between Nigeria and Cameroon, the GTA was fundamentally a product of sustained multilateral diplomacy facilitated by the United Nations. The Agreement translated the legal obligations established by the ICJ into a structured implementation framework specifying withdrawal schedules, security arrangements, civilian protection measures, and mechanisms for continued dialogue. More importantly, it institutionalised political commitment by requiring both governments to publicly reaffirm their acceptance of peaceful implementation despite considerable domestic political pressures. The GTA therefore illustrates how international organisations can bridge the gap between legal judgment and political reality through carefully negotiated implementation frameworks.

Although the African Union (AU) exercised a less visible operational role than the United Nations, its normative influence should not be underestimated. Since replacing the Organisation of African Unity in 2002, the AU has consistently promoted the peaceful settlement of interstate disputes as a cornerstone of continental peace and security. Its Constitutive Act reaffirms respect for inherited boundaries while encouraging member states to resolve disagreements through peaceful means consistent with international law (African Union, 2000). These principles contributed to the broader normative environment within which both Nigeria and Cameroon accepted judicial settlement rather than military confrontation. The



Bakassi experience therefore reflects not only the authority of universal international law but also the gradual consolidation of continental norms favouring institutional dispute resolution.

The dispute likewise highlighted the indirect contributions of regional organisations to conflict prevention. Although neither the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) nor the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) assumed primary responsibility for resolving the Bakassi dispute, both organisations possessed important interests in preserving regional stability. Escalation of military conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon would likely have generated significant security, economic, and humanitarian consequences extending beyond the immediate parties. Thus, the existence of regional security architectures reinforced broader diplomatic incentives favouring peaceful settlement and regional cooperation. The Bakassi case thus demonstrates that even where regional organisations remain institutionally peripheral, their commitment to regional stability contributes indirectly to successful conflict management.

Despite these institutional achievements, the Bakassi experience also exposes important limitations in the capacity of international organisations. First, institutional effectiveness remained heavily dependent upon the political willingness of sovereign states to comply with international obligations. Neither the United Nations nor the International Court of Justice possessed independent enforcement mechanisms capable of compelling implementation in the absence of Nigerian and Cameroonian cooperation. Compliance therefore resulted less from coercive institutional authority than from sustained political commitment by successive governments. This finding supports institutionalist arguments that international organisations function most effectively where member states perceive cooperation as consistent with their long-term interests (Keohane, 1984).

Second, international organisations demonstrated greater effectiveness in resolving interstate legal questions than in addressing complex socio-economic grievances experienced by affected populations. Although the transfer of sovereignty proceeded relatively peacefully, many displaced Bakassi residents continued to experience uncertainty regarding citizenship, compensation, livelihoods, political representation, and access to public services. These challenges illustrate a recurring limitation within international peace processes whereby institutional attention concentrates upon state-level agreements while insufficiently addressing



local dimensions of peacebuilding (Richmond, 2014). As a result, the absence of renewed interstate conflict should not be interpreted as evidence that all consequences of the dispute were satisfactorily resolved.

1.6 Challenges of International Organisations in the Peaceful Settlement of the Bakassi Disputes

The peaceful settlement of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute is widely regarded as a landmark achievement in the application of international law and multilateral diplomacy to interstate conflict resolution in Africa. Nevertheless, the successful transfer of sovereignty should not obscure the considerable political, institutional, legal, and humanitarian challenges that characterised the implementation process. While international organisations succeeded in preventing the escalation of armed conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon, they encountered significant obstacles that exposed important limitations within contemporary international conflict management. These challenges demonstrate that the effectiveness of international organisations depends not only on the existence of legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms but also on the broader political, social, and administrative environment within which they operate.

One of the most significant challenges arose from the tension between international legal obligations and domestic political realities. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered a legally binding judgment in 2002, its acceptance generated intense political controversy within Nigeria. Public opposition was fuelled by widespread perceptions that the transfer of the Bakassi Peninsula represented a loss of sovereign territory rather than compliance with international law. Political actors, community leaders, civil society organisations, and segments of the media questioned both the legitimacy of the judgment and the constitutional authority of the Nigerian government to relinquish territory without broader domestic consultation (Anyu, 2007; Baye, 2010). Therefore, the implementation process required governments to reconcile international legal commitments with powerful nationalist sentiments, illustrating the persistent tension between external legal obligations and domestic political accountability.



Closely related to this challenge was the limited capacity of international organisations to address the humanitarian consequences of territorial transfer. International law successfully determined sovereignty over the disputed territory, but it provided relatively limited guidance concerning the protection of communities whose lives were fundamentally altered by the judgment. Thousands of Bakassi residents experienced displacement, uncertainty regarding citizenship, disruption of traditional livelihoods, and difficulties associated with resettlement. Although the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission incorporated humanitarian considerations into its implementation strategy, institutional responses were frequently constrained by financial limitations, administrative complexities, and the primary focus on state compliance rather than community welfare. This imbalance reflects a broader limitation within international dispute settlement, where legal and diplomatic priorities often receive greater institutional attention than post-settlement human security concerns (Richmond, 2014).

The implementation process also revealed the limitations of judicial settlement as a stand-alone mechanism for conflict resolution. Judicial institutions are designed principally to determine legal rights and obligations rather than resolve the broader political and socio-economic dimensions of interstate disputes. Consequently, while the ICJ established legal certainty regarding sovereignty, it could not independently resolve questions relating to identity, political representation, compensation, economic rehabilitation, or long-term reconciliation between affected populations. These issues required sustained political dialogue and administrative action extending far beyond the Court's judicial mandate. The Bakassi experience therefore demonstrates that international adjudication should be understood as one component of a broader peace process rather than a comprehensive solution to complex territorial disputes (Merrills, 2017).

Another important challenge concerned the dependence of international organisations on state cooperation. Unlike domestic judicial systems, international organisations generally lack independent enforcement powers capable of compelling compliance with legal decisions. Their effectiveness therefore depends substantially upon the willingness of sovereign governments to honour international obligations voluntarily. In the Bakassi case, the eventual implementation of the ICJ judgment reflected considerable political restraint by both Nigeria and Cameroon rather than coercive institutional enforcement. Had either government rejected



the judgment or withdrawn from the implementation process, international organisations would have possessed limited practical capacity to compel compliance without broader political intervention through the United Nations Security Council. This institutional reality highlights one of the enduring structural constraints of contemporary international governance: legal authority often exceeds enforcement capacity (Hurd, 2019).

The dispute further exposed challenges relating to institutional coordination among multiple international actors. Although the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission, and regional organisations contributed to different stages of the settlement process, their respective mandates occasionally overlapped or evolved incrementally rather than through a predetermined institutional strategy. Much of the coordination that eventually emerged developed through continuous diplomatic engagement rather than formalised institutional planning. While this flexibility contributed to the eventual success of the process, it also revealed the absence of standardised frameworks governing post-judgment implementation of international territorial decisions. Similar coordination difficulties have been observed in other international peace processes where legal, political, humanitarian, and developmental institutions operate according to distinct organisational mandates.

The management of identity and citizenship constituted another complex challenge. The Bakassi Peninsula had long been inhabited by communities possessing deep historical, cultural, and economic ties to Nigeria despite the eventual transfer of sovereignty to Cameroon. Following the implementation of the Green Tree Agreement, many residents faced uncertainty concerning nationality, political participation, access to public services, and the preservation of cultural identity. While international organisations facilitated intergovernmental dialogue on these matters, they possessed limited authority to determine domestic citizenship policies or constitutional arrangements within sovereign states. Consequently, several identity-related concerns remained dependent upon national legislation and bilateral cooperation rather than international institutional intervention. This illustrates the broader difficulty of separating territorial sovereignty from the lived realities of borderland populations whose identities frequently transcend internationally recognised boundaries.

The Bakassi case also demonstrated the influence of strategic economic interests on the implementation of international legal decisions. The peninsula's location within the resource-



rich Gulf of Guinea heightened political sensitivity because sovereignty carried implications for maritime jurisdiction, fisheries, offshore hydrocarbon exploration, and broader national economic interests. Although international law successfully clarified territorial ownership, competition over strategic resources continued to shape political discourse surrounding the dispute. This finding supports broader scholarship suggesting that resource-rich territorial disputes often present greater implementation challenges because economic incentives reinforce domestic resistance to political compromise (Humphreys, 2005).

These challenges do not diminish the significance of the Bakassi settlement as a landmark achievement in African conflict resolution. Rather, they reveal the multidimensional nature of territorial dispute management and the limitations of relying exclusively upon legal or diplomatic mechanisms. The experience demonstrates that international organisations are most effective when judicial adjudication is complemented by political leadership, institutional coordination, humanitarian protection, community engagement, and long-term implementation strategies. These lessons possess wider relevance for other African territorial disputes where legal certainty must be accompanied by socially sustainable peacebuilding.

1.7 The Bakassi Peninsula Crisis: Lessons for Africa

The peaceful resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute offers important lessons for the management of interstate territorial disputes across Africa. Although the dispute emerged from circumstances unique to the Nigeria–Cameroon relationship, many of the structural factors that shaped its evolution, including colonial boundary legacies, competing sovereignty claims, strategic natural resources, and political sensitivities, are neither exceptional nor geographically isolated. Similar conditions continue to underpin territorial disputes elsewhere on the continent, including disagreements involving Ethiopia and Sudan, Somalia and Kenya, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Therefore, the Bakassi experience provides broader insights into how African states and international organisations can strengthen peaceful dispute settlement while avoiding the political and humanitarian costs associated with military confrontation.

Perhaps the most important lesson concerns the continuing relevance of international law as the foundation for peaceful interstate relations in Africa. Since independence, African states



have generally accepted the principle that inherited colonial boundaries should be respected despite their historical imperfections. Although this principle has frequently been criticised for preserving arbitrary colonial territorial arrangements, the Bakassi experience demonstrates that adherence to internationally recognised legal norms contributes significantly to regional stability by reducing incentives for unilateral territorial revisionism. More importantly, the dispute illustrates that legal adjudication provides states with an institutional alternative to armed conflict, thereby reinforcing the predictability and legitimacy of interstate relations (Shaw, 2021). The challenge for Africa is therefore not the abandonment of international legal principles but the continued strengthening of institutional confidence in their impartial application.

Closely related to this is the lesson that judicial settlement should not be viewed as a substitute for diplomacy but rather as a complementary mechanism within a broader conflict management strategy. The peaceful implementation of the ICJ judgment was not achieved solely because the Court delivered a legally persuasive decision. Instead, success resulted from sustained diplomatic engagement before, during, and after judicial adjudication. Preventive diplomacy, political dialogue, confidence-building measures, and continuous communication between Nigeria and Cameroon proved indispensable in transforming a legally binding judgment into a politically acceptable outcome. This experience suggests that African governments should integrate judicial mechanisms with sustained diplomatic engagement rather than treating international litigation as the final stage of dispute resolution. Effective conflict management requires institutions capable of maintaining political dialogue even after judicial decisions have been delivered (Merrills, 2017).

The Bakassi experience also highlights the importance of political leadership in determining the effectiveness of international organisations. International institutions possess considerable normative authority; however, their practical influence ultimately depends upon the willingness of sovereign governments to implement agreed obligations. Nigeria's acceptance of the ICJ judgment under President Olusegun Obasanjo, despite intense domestic political opposition, demonstrated a significant commitment to international law and regional peace. Similarly, Cameroon's willingness to participate in extended diplomatic consultations under United Nations supervision contributed to reducing opportunities for renewed confrontation.



The lesson for Africa is that international organisations are most effective when national political leaders demonstrate strategic restraint, prioritise long-term regional stability over short-term domestic political gains, and recognise compliance with international law as an investment in continental peace rather than a concession of national interests.

Another important lesson emerging from the Bakassi settlement concerns the necessity of institutional coordination. The dispute demonstrated that no single organisation possessed the capacity to resolve every dimension of the conflict independently. The International Court of Justice clarified legal rights; the United Nations provided diplomatic leadership and implementation oversight; the Cameroon–Nigeria Mixed Commission translated legal obligations into practical administrative arrangements; while continental norms promoted by the African Union reinforced the legitimacy of peaceful dispute settlement. These complementary institutional roles illustrate the advantages of collaborative governance over isolated organisational interventions. Future African territorial disputes are therefore likely to benefit from integrated institutional frameworks that combine legal adjudication, political mediation, technical implementation, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict monitoring within a coherent peace architecture rather than treating these activities as separate processes.

Perhaps the most enduring lesson from the Bakassi dispute is that peaceful settlement should not be evaluated solely by the absence of armed conflict. While preventing war remains a fundamental achievement, sustainable peace requires broader conditions characterised by political legitimacy, institutional cooperation, socio-economic recovery, and public confidence in the settlement process. Durable peace emerges when legal certainty is accompanied by effective governance, inclusive development, protection of affected populations, and continued diplomatic engagement. This multidimensional understanding of peace reflects contemporary peacebuilding scholarship, which increasingly recognises that successful conflict resolution depends upon addressing both interstate legal disputes and the everyday security concerns of affected communities (Galtung, 1969; Lederach, 1997).

1.8 Conclusion

The Bakassi Peninsula dispute represents one of the most instructive examples of peaceful interstate conflict resolution in contemporary Africa. Although the dispute originated from



colonial boundary ambiguities, competing sovereignty claims, and strategic economic interests, its eventual resolution demonstrated that complex territorial disagreements need not culminate in prolonged military confrontation. Rather, the Bakassi experience illustrates how international law, multilateral diplomacy, and sustained political commitment can collectively transform a potentially destructive conflict into a peaceful and legally recognised settlement. This outcome reinforces the continuing relevance of institutional approaches to conflict management within an international system where territorial disputes remain significant sources of political instability.

The Bakassi experience also provides valuable insights for the future management of territorial disputes across Africa. As the continent continues to confront disputes rooted in colonial boundary legacies, competition over strategic resources, and evolving geopolitical dynamics, the need for effective institutional responses remains pressing. The lessons derived from Bakassi suggest that African states should strengthen preventive diplomacy, encourage early recourse to judicial and arbitral mechanisms, enhance cooperation between continental and global institutions, and institutionalise post-settlement implementation frameworks capable of addressing both legal and humanitarian dimensions of territorial conflict. Equally important is the need to deepen the operational capacity of the African Union and Regional Economic Communities to complement the work of global institutions while promoting African ownership of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.



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