

Regional Security in West Africa and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/djiap eh.v2.i1.08

Abstract

The paper examined the regional security implications of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) exit from the ECOWAS. The theoretical foundation was the critical theory of international relations, which contends that the AES alliance reveals that regional order cannot be sustained by power or treaties alone, but by shared meaning, values and collective identity. Critical theory emphasis, is on historical and social dimensions of societal change. From the critical theoretical frame, and by their historical affinity, these states; Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, no longer share a common identity and vision of integration under the ECOWAS. The formation of the AES no doubt presents more serious challenges to real security co-operations, especially in intelligence sharing and involvement in counter-terrorism efforts. The Union halts regional co-operation in curbing the activities of Jihadists, bandits and transnational crime syndicates, worsening insecurity in the West African region. The fragmentation of the ECOWAS raises concerns about the long-term cohesion and stability of the region. The emergence of a coalition formed by military led governments have challenged the amity and authority of the ECOWAS. In dealing with the realities of the consequences of this exit on the ECOWAS and West Africa's sub-region, we recommend a re-assessment of strategic approach by ECOWAS, in addressing internal contradictions in its member States. Sustained dialogue channels especially with the AES for an agreement upon a framework for calibrated disengagement from the bloc that will enhance co-operation and peaceful co-habitation, with an ultimate goal for security of the region.

Keywords: ECOWAS, AES, Security, Region, West Africa etc

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Background to the Study

Security is basically tied to the manifestation of peace, safety and the absence of crisis. The West African sub-region of African is undergoing significant geopolitical transformation, shaped by shifting alliances, rising insecurity and increasing tensions between regional blocks. At the centre of these developments is the Economic community of West African States (ECOWAS), a longstanding regional organisation dedicated to economic integration, peacekeeping and the promotion of democratic governance among its member States. Unfolding events in the region have challenged the cohesion and authority of the ECOWAS. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States; a Coalition formed by the military-led governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signals a growing dent on the ECOWAS.

The Sahel region spanning from Senegal in the West to Sudan in the East, has been a security porous spot. The Alliance of Sahel States AES formed by the Military – led governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, arose in direct response to perceived overreach and punitive measures by ECOWAS, following military coups in these States. The Creation of this bloc, marks a rejection of ECOWAS intervention and a broader contest over the future of a regional co-operation and governance norms. The aim of this study is to assess these implications of the AES on the security of the region, West Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the critical theory, an offshoot of the constructivist theory of international relations. Critical theory developed from the 1920s through the works of Andrew Link 1990, Robert Cox 1976 and Max Horkhermer's Article of 1937. This theory is more historical, for these theorists, facts are the product of specific social and political phenomenon through the processes of change. Understanding international relations entails the knowledge of history as a process of continuous change and transformation. Critical theorists recognise the constraints placed on possible alternative world order by virtue of historical processes. The theory emphasis, is on historical and social dimensions of societal change.

The theory gives an understanding of the complex interaction of identities, practices and institutions at both the domestic and international levels. According to Yalvac 2015, critical theory is not only an academic approach, but also an emancipatory effort, committed to the formation of a just course. Critical theory seeks to explain, not only the social factors, but also politically motivated actions for the achievement of social relations based on justice. For Wendt, 1995, beliefs, values, discourse, and history, influence foreign policy decisions. The Alliance of Sahel States is built on the shared beliefs and historical courses of these States. The alliance reveals that regional order cannot be sustained by power or treaties alone, but by shared meanings, values and collective identity. The current fragmentation of the ECOWAS reflects a deeper clash in how States in the region interpret legitimacy, governance and sovereignty. From the critical point, these States no longer share a common identity or vision of integration under the ECOWAS. This conviction is based and strengthened by their historical affinity, spurring them into a just course". The ideas and beliefs shared by these

States, define their interests for a unity (AES). The AES member states share similar historical legacies, marked by European colonization and post-independence challenges. They share a common history as Former French Colonies, which has influenced their political institutions, legal systems and official languages. This common history has given rise to a shared feeling, with all three States expressing, at almost the same time, a rejection of the former colonial power, culminating in their formation of an accord; Alliance des Etats du Sahel, Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Conceptual Review

Regionalism

A region is often defined as a group of countries located in the same geographically specified area. According to Igwe 2006, Regionalism is the favouring of degree of co-operation and integration including a possible outright political union at the regional level, as the supreme foreign policy objective, incorporating the ideas and philosophies supportive of the principle, as well as the class alliance and other processes that would make it possible for its practical realisation. For Baylis and Smith 1997, Regionalism can be seen as a process involving the growth of informal linkages and transactions, derived from economic activity and also involving social and political independence. While some scholars emphasize geographic proximity, others prioritise cultural, economic, linguistic, or political ties. Regions can also be socially constructed based on shared identity, as argued by the constructivists, not necessarily based on physical closeness.

According to Chukwu, 2024, the dynamic nature of the international society has undergone massive mutations, compelling States and Regions across the globe to find ways to cope with the growing uncertainties. The different historical, cultural, environmental exigencies of the regions, have created different measures for co-operations and alignments. During the 1960s, there was a wide spread enthusiasm to promote integrations on various levels. The processes of Regionalism across many areas of the globe were aided by the growing number of newly independent States. Thus, Regionalism can be seen as States linked by a geographical relationship and degree of mutual interdependence of political, socio-economic values and cultural tradition. Most of the regional groups are focused in this line. Some are concerned with economic welfare, defence and security or the protection of social and cultural values.

The goal of Regionalism is for a cohesive and consolidated regional bloc that impact greatly on international relations. The development of regional blocs has enhanced peaceful and co-operative political relationships. These blocs are found in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe. Notable blocs in Latin, Central and North America are the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) in the 1950s; the Central American Common Market (CACM), 1960, the Organisation of American States (OAS) etc. Regional arrangement in Asia is centred around the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) formed in 1967. There is also the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) (Baylis and Smith). Regionalism in African started with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) that later transformed into the African Union (AU). Other Sub-Regional Blocs include the South

African Development Co-ordination Committee (SADCC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Union of Central African States (CAS), the Arab Unity Council, East African Community etc.

The formal process of European integration started with the European Union; which has been, and continue to be shaped according to historical and political exigencies. There was the Organisation of European Economic Co-operation (OECD) for the Western Europe, which was countered by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance Organisation (OMECON) for the Eastern Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was also formed and countered by the Warsaw Pact. There were also other European organisations, because regionalism and integration in Europe were shaped by the courses of developments in the area. Differing interests and political forces were major factors. The co-operations staggered in economic, military, security and legal administrative activities (Chukwu pp.98-100). Geography indeed is the major criterion to understand regionalism, but other nongeographic definitions that are ideational or social constructivist, stress shared communal identities of states within a region. According to Mansfield and et al 2010, one source of confusion has been the distinction between Regionalism and Regionalisation. Various political scientists have argued that regionalism is a political process marked by co-operational and policy co-ordination, whereas regionalization is an economic process in which trade and investment within the region grow more rapidly than the region's trade and investment with the rest of the world. Theories of regionalism explain how and why States come together to form regional groups for co-operation in areas of politics, economics and security. Most regional organisations are trade and economic focused, with the intention of assuring the free movement of people, goods and services that enlarge markets for producers. From economic co-operations, people to people, and cultural ties blossom, security relationships is strengthened, clearing grounds for political integration.

Security

Security basically implies freedom from threat to core values. Security is tied to the manifestation of peace, safety, happiness and the safety of human and physical resources and the absence of crisis. Security depicts a situation where a conducive atmosphere is created within which people can go about their normal daily activities without threat to either their lives or properties. Security can be seen as any laid down process towards the defence of persons, and property against aggressive persons. According to Baldwin 1997, security is a complex and contested notion, heavily laden with emotion and deeply held values. Most people would agree that a security problem arises when someone; a person, gang or group or State threatens another's life, time or livelihood.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its human centered focus, see security as protection from hidden and hurtful disruptions in daily activities, as homes, offices and communities. Security for the UNDP, is the state of being safe and secured from danger. It could also be protection from chronic threats, such as hunger, disease and repression. Security is identical to liberty from danger, fear and doubt. Security is just

associated with the case of threats to the existence of individuals or groups. Security is equated with freedom from present and future danger, harm or anxiety.

Williams 2008 see security from the socio-political perspective and averred that security involves the capability to pursue cherished political and social ambitions. For him, security is socio-political in nature, such that, without security, there cannot be political stability, and consequently, social activities will be in chaos. In this thought, lay the link between security and survival; that security can be seen as a rudimentary condition for the existence of man. In the context of the international society, security is about the ability of States to maintain their independent identity and integrity. The traditional notion of security is primarily a State-centered concept, where the survival and interests of the State take precedence. The primary concern of States is to safeguard their territorial integrity and political autonomy from external threats, including military aggression or invasion. The use of military force is considered an essential element of traditional concept of security, and States may resort to the use of force in self defense, or to protect their national interests. Military capabilities, including armed forces, weaponry, defense strategies and deterrence, are thus seen as critical components in ensuring a State's Security (Attina 2016).

The traditional notion of Security Originated with the formation of the modern Nation-State system. The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia which marked a turning point in the development of the modern State system, established the principle of State sovereignty, where States were endowed with exclusive authority and security over their territories. A State is secured to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice these core values, if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory. Security then, is the nerve centre of the international system. Since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, the history of the State system has been a relentless struggle to achieve security; creating room for different arrangements to the international, regional and sub-regional levels. The ECOWAS sub-regional economic arrangement is tied to the security of the West African region. The recurring coups that led to the formation of the Sahel Alliance Cast a spell on the political unity of the region.

The ECOWAS and West Africa

Since independence, Africa States have faced serious and sustained challenges towards sustainable development, Peace and Security. The formation of regional blocs was encouraged as a means to multilaterally address these issues. According to Acho, 2024, Regional Economic Communities were seen as important institutional mechanisms to promote regional integration, facilitate trade, harmonize policies and promote Peace, Security and Stability across the continent. The region of the African continent hit most by insecurity since independence, is West Africa. Many West African States experienced coups and instability as they adjusted to new forms of self-government. According to Suleiman and Onapajo 2022, West Africa accounted for 44% of all African coups in each of the ten years from 1958 to 2008. The first attempt to achieve collective self-reliance in West Africa was made in 1963 when a Conference on Industrial Harmonization in the sub-region was held in Lagos, Nigeria. Subsequent Conferences and meetings that culminated in the signing of the

1975 ECOWAS Charter took its root from the 1963 Lagos Conference. According to Chukwu 2023, the major aim for the creation of the ECOWAS was to promote co-operation and development in all fields of economic activities, especially in the fields of industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial issues and in social and cultural matter for the purposes of raising the standard of living of its people, increasing and maintaining economic stability, as well as foster close relations among its member States and contributing to the progress and development of the African continent.

The ECOWAS Charter was Signed by 15 Heads of States of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Ghana, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo. Cape Verde joined the Union two years later. Mauritania (the only Arabic speaking member) withdrew from the Union in December 2000. Not long after its formation, it was apparent to ECOWAS members that the Organisation's lofty goals could only be achieved in an atmosphere of peace and stability. Accordingly, two protocols on defence were signed by members. These were the Protocol on Non-Aggression (1978) and the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (1981). The documents empowered ECOWAS to intervene in armed conflict in any of its member States, if the conflict was likely to endanger peace and security of the region.

The lessons learned from interventions in Liberia, 1990-1997, Sierra Leone 1997-2000 and Guinea-Bissau, 1999, shaped the creation of the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security in 1999. This went beyond the earlier Protocols of 1978 and 1981, in that it allowed situation where ECOWAS could intervene in internal crisis including the overthrow of, or threats to, democratically elected governments. This was the cause for ECOWAS intervention in Cote d' Ivoire, Mali and several other crisis situations across the region; making ECOWAS designation as one of the five Regional Pillars of the African Economic Community (AEC). (Osita and Alili p.110). According to Acho 2024, ECOWAS has often been regarded as one of the more advanced Regional Economic Communities, in terms of governance and capacity to promote effective tools and policies of election observation, mediation and sanctions. The 1993 Treaty revision of ECOWAS strengthened her mandate on governance, Peace and Security while the 2001 Supplementary Protocol formalised election monitors and crisis mediation in member states. These efforts were in essence, intention for ECOWAS to provide the platform for advancing economic growth and addressing issues related to poverty and underdevelopment within the region. ECOWAS went further in corporate power, notably, through the establishment of mechanisms, as the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, that enabled her to play proactive role in maintaining regional stability in responding to internal political crisis.

The ECOWAS and the Sahel States

Between 2020 and 2025, a wave of military coups swept across West Africa affecting Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and recently Guinea Bissau. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have

been contending with significant political and security challenges in recent years, due to the emergence of the Islamist militant groups in the Sahel; a Semi-arid region across Africa. Groups such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa (ISWAP) etc have attacked civilians, local security forces and foreign troops, leading to thousands of fatalities and millions of displaced persons. This situation has left these States, disillusioned with their governments, as well as foreign security partners. In Mali, Colonel Assimi Goita led a coup in 2020, ousting President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Just nine months later, he led a second coup against the Transitional government. Despite international pressure, including from ECOWAS and France, Goita became head of the new transitional government. Anti-French sentiment grew, leading to the expulsion of French Forces in 2022. Mali was suspended by the ECOWAS and sanctions were imposed on her.

In Burkina Faso, in January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kabore. By September, growing dissatisfaction over Damiba's failure to handle insurgent threats led to another coup by captain Ibrahim Traore who forced Damiba into exile. Rising public anger toward civilian leadership and France, as in Mali came up also in Burkina Faso who was also suspended with sanctions by the ECOWAS. In July 2023, General Abdourahamane Tiani of Niger also staged a coup against President Mohamed Bazoum. The country, like her neighbours faced jihadist violence, economic difficulties, and growing public distrust of government. These coups reflected deep-rooted instability, frustration with civilian governments, and increasing rejection of foreign influence, especially from France.

Within days of the coup, the ECOWAS announced a raft of sanctions on Niger, the strictest, the Bloc has ever imposed. Members of the Bloc, excluding members already suspended, since falling under military rule; Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, along with eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union, agreed to close all borders with Niger, suspend financial transactions and freeze the country's assets in external banks. ECOWAS also issued an ultimatum to the Junta to restore constitutional order and reinstate the ousted president within one week or face other measures, including military intervention. ECOWAS' initial reaction to yet another coup was understandable, due to legitimate concerns about the risk of coup contagion in the sub region. Nigeria helped shape this reaction. President Tinubu was perceived as keen to establish himself as a decisive leader during the regional crisis. President Tinubu, the newly elected president of Nigeria, assumed the Chairmanship position of the ECOWAS just weeks before the coup, advocated for an intervention to reinstate the ousted President Mohammed Bazoum. Nigeria also cut off its supply of electricity, which Niger had relied on, to meet about 70 percent of her domestic needs. (Obasi 2023)

ECOWAS pointedly threatened military intervention, ordering mobilization of its standby force, to get Bazoum reinstated, if all else failed. Besides, ECOWAS believed they were well within their rights to intervene as they did, with the backing of the 2001 Protocol promoting democracy and good governance, as was notably enforced and widely supported in 2017 when ECOWAS intervened with military force to remove Gambian President Yahya Jammeh

after he refused to accept electoral defeat. However, the new regime in Niger, together with her counterparts in Burkina Faso and Mali reacted strongly to ECOWAS pressure policy. According to Bhattacharya 2024, the Burkinabe and Malian Military authorities vowed to come to the Nigerians aid, should ECOWAS follow through with military action. ECOWAS showed her readiness to apply all available measures to pressure for the ousted president to be restored, but not only did the citizens appeared resistant to any external military intervention, but Burkina Faso and Mali also pledged military support in solidarity.

On September 16 2023, Mali, Niger and Burkina Fasso signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, that gave birth to the Alliance des Etats du Sahel, Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for mutual defence and co-operation between its members. The Alliance Pledges members support to one another militarily, should any of them come under attack. Members are also obligated to co-operate to end or prevent armed uprisings. According to Bhattacharya 2024, the leader of Mali's transitional administration, Colonel Assimi Goita, declared that the agreement would create an architecture of joint defence and mutual support for the benefit of communities. At first glance, the Charter seems to prioritize the collective defence of the populations of the three States, but it also includes measures that go beyond co-operation within an alliance, but also incorporates a vision of integration of the three states within a confederal framework.

On 28 January 2024, the three States, announced that they were exiting the ECOWAS. In their joint withdrawal statement, the military rulers of the three States listed four specific grievances against the ECOWAS, including:

1. That ECOWAS moved away from the ideals of its founding fathers and Pan-Africanism. Under the influence of foreign powers, that ECOWAS betrayed its founding principles and became a threat to its member States, and their populations whose happiness that was to be promoted.
2. That the ECOWAS failed to assist them in their existential fight against terrorism and insecurity”, a reference to their struggles to defeat jihadists that have resulted in thousands of civilians and combatants killed and over two million people displaced.
3. Lamented when their embattled States “decided do take their destiny into their hands, ECOWAS adopted an irrational and unacceptable posture in imposing illegal; illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible sanctions in violation of its own texts”.
4. They charged ECOWAS actions of sanctions, further weakened their populations already bruised by years of violence (Bhattachanya 2024).

Thus, the AES was formed to provide collective security, resist foreign and regional pressure, and protect the political survival of its military governments. This marks a shift from the traditional West African integration and regionalism, tilting towards a military and security arrangement.

The Francophone Force in West Africa International Relations

The Francophone factor is a real element in West Africa's regional relations. The West African

region has many Francophone States made up of States where French is either the main or one of the official languages. The Francophone States in Africa include Algeria, Benin Republic, Burundi, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Malagasy, Mali, Djibouti, Mauritania, Togo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Zaire, Seychelles, Mauritius Reunion, Rwanda. These States were all French or Franco-British or Franco-Spanish territories who acquired the French status through the unique French system of colonial administration of Assimilation, and later the creation of a French community, French Union and French Commonwealth. According to Edeoin Okochi 1990, France entered into colonial acquisition, not necessarily for the Psychology of being one of the Powers in the 19th century European imperialist conquest, but with a vision to creating a French empire, in order to acquire the status of an imperial power with the attendant self-respect.

In pursuits of this goal, France has continued to maintain a strong link with her erstwhile colonies. Despite the independence of these States, their constitutional, judicial and political set-ups retain the French Pattern. Presidents of these States, emulate their French counterpart and depend on him for their stay in office. There is always a strong presence of French intelligence, as well as administrative and diplomatic personnel in most Francophone States. The consequence of this, is that most of their foreign and domestic policies have to be cleared locally with these French officials and with Paris. In so much that these Francophone States depends on France for their political sustenance, economically, the reverse is the case. France needs Africa more than Africa needs France. France industrial growth and nuclear development depend on raw materials from Africa. France reckons heavily on African oil, where her two largest State-Owned Oil Companies, La Societe Nationale ELF-Aquitaine (SNEA) popularly called ELF in Africa, and La Campaign Franoise de Peetroles (CEP) have their largest Operations. In fact, SNEA (ELF) has very aggressive exploration and exploitation drive in Africa. The activities of these Companies in Gabon, Cameroun, Congo-Brazzaville, Ivory Coast, Niger, Senegal, Equitorial Guinea, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania and even non-Francophone States like Nigeria, South Africa, Namibia, Morocco etc, attests to this fact. France also enjoys a special privilege for importing raw materials from the France zone, as international currency and price fluctuations do not affect such transactions. Also, France monetary arrangements with these former territories especially in West and Central Africa through the Colonises Francaises D'afrique (CFA) has been a very strong leverage on the economy of these States.

France aid to these francophone countries is also another strategy of controlling the destinies of these States. Two institutions in France are given the responsibility, and have continued to carry out the task effectively. The strategic importance of these States to Frances economy have made France to play outstanding roles in the affairs of other African States, in addition to the Francophone Countries. This explains France's intervention and military policies in Africa. The French factor in some of the crisis in most African States has affected the resolution efforts of the OAU, ECOWAS, and even other individual countries. Nigeria's efforts at resolving the Chad Libyan border crisis were not made difficult by Libya, but the

French Factor. France adopts various strategies in most of these countries to maintain her economic interest in Africa. To actualise its complete control on some Africa States, France, in the 1960s made some 15 Francophone States to enter into defence and military assistance agreement with Paris. By this agreement, France was allowed to station some 20,000 troops and military bases in Africa.

The strong alliance these Francophone States have with France have continued to make them toe the line of France in their relations with other non-Francophone countries and also affected their behaviour from the OAU and the ECOWAS. The oppositions encountered by Nigeria in some of her continental efforts like those in Angola, South Africa (apartheid), Chad, ECOWAS, and even the Nigerian Civil War, have been traced to this force. Even the socialists' inclinations of some of these States have not erased the French Factor in their inter-state relations. Nigeria's contiguous Francophone neighbours are Benin, Niger, Cameroun and Chad. More than 15 states of Nigeria are border land location, and have more than 35 gate way local government areas. These borders cut across various ethnic groups which on both sides disregard the borders in their daily activities. Nigeria has however, maintained a non-aggressive and puritanical approach to border problems, unlike her neighbours who despite their military inferiority, are very aggressive on such issues.

Despite the radical, moderate and Pro-French positions of these countries, the French Factor has continued to affect their relations with Nigeria (Ede 1986. All views on this sub-title are from this source). The three States that make up the Sahel Alliance; Mali, Nigeria and Burkina Fasso are of the Francophone bloc. This obviously strike a connection with the French Factor.

The AES on the ECOWAS

It is not in doubt that the withdrawal of the three military led States of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is a significant turning point in the regional political, security and economic dynamics of West Africa. The decision reflects a deep-seated discontent with the trajectory of the ECOWAS, and the perceived undermining of the founding principles of the regional bloc. The pull-out has implications for the AES, the region and West Africa's integration process.

Firstly, relations between the States in the AES and their neighbours in the ECOWAS have soured. This likely cements the divide that begun with the initial coup in Mali and subsequent suspensions and sanctions from the ECOWAS, and Western Powers, as well. ECOWAS went even further when they threatened military intervention in Niger. Though ECOWAS later softened her stance towards the States in the alliance, it considers the seizure of power by the new regimes to be unconstitutional.

The AES exit diminishes ECOWAS in terms of its size, population and economic impact, that consequently weakens ECOWAS credibility and effectiveness as a regional authority. According to Bhattacharya 2024, ECOWAS loses 76 million of its 446 million people, and more than half of its total geographical land area. Regional integration and co-operation remain threatened. Francophone States, for instance will also be more divided against

themselves, as Pro-France Countries cannot, but be at loggerheads with those not favouring France. According to Acho 2024 the withdrawal of the French and EU military operations and the UN Mission in Mali have led to increased attacks by violent groups, while the rising influence of Russia, and the negative perception of France in her former colonies is already being felt. Afriyie 2024 also raises the fact that the situation has affected the humanitarian landscape, as these three States hosts millions of refugees and internally displaced individuals reliant on international assistance and protection.

This AES move may alter relationship with global partners, particularly France and other Western States engaged in the Sahel, indicating a shift in the region's geopolitical landscape, as these States look to forge new alliances with other powers. Russian influence is growing and quite significant. According to Osuchukwu et al 2024, Russia is a winner in the situation, as it deepens its ties with the AES States and enhances her influence in the region. Russia's infamous private military group, Wagner, has reportedly been operating in Burkina Faso and Mali. Russia's diplomatic and political backing gives the junta government legitimacy and the ability to resist, not only pressures from the ECOWAS, but also Western Powers. The formation of the AES obviously presents more serious challenges to impactful security co-operations, especially regarding intelligence sharing and involvement in counter-terrorism efforts. The move halts regional co-operation in curbing the activities of jihadists, bandits and transnational crime syndicates, worsening insecurity, in addition to the possibility of spill over into other stable States in the region.

For the AES, the existing regional security frameworks of the ECOWAS have failed to adequately address their security concerns, hence their joint move to leave the regional bloc and build their own new security structure, especially by virtue of their historical foundation. On the economic angle, the withdrawal of these States from the ECOWAS risks a significant drop in the economic performance of several States that have strategic importance. As an economic community, the loss of any member affects ECOWAS overall economic activity.

According to Acho 2024, the three countries comprise 15% of the ECOWAS population and collectively contribute 8% of ECOWAS's 761 billion-dollar GDP based on 2022 figures. Being a member of the ECOWAS brings with it benefits like tariff-free trade for member States. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, being landlocked States, are heavily reliant on imports facilitated by coastal ECOWAS members for their trade routes. This withdrawal would lead to the reintroduction of tariff barriers, more stringent border controls, and subsequently, increased import transaction on costs between them and the remaining ECOWAS States. Their exports would also become less competitive. Niger is a key source of Onions, while Burkina Faso and Mali are great exporters of livestock to the sub-region. The exit would shift this trade market to other ECOWAS States, which will no doubt threaten the stability of the bloc.

The economic fragmentation also undermines the Wider West African Integration agenda, reducing market size, investor confidence, and progress toward the ECOWAS single currency

project. In the long run, these economic disruptions could deepen poverty and instability in the Sahel and strain the economies of both the AES States and their trading partners in the region.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of the AES states; Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, from the ECOWAS marks a turning point in West African regional politics, with far-reaching consequences on diplomatic coherence, political and economic integration, and consequent security threats. The security implications of the pull-out of these States from the ECOWAS, a region that is already facing security vulnerability, is a critical issue. The fragmentation of the ECOWAS raises concerns about the long-term cohesion and stability of the region, which will impact on the security of the region. West Africa is undergoing significant geopolitical transformation, shaped by alliances, rising insecurity and increasing tensions. The emergence of the AES a coalition formed by Military led governments have challenged the cohesion and authority of the ECOWAS.

The Francophone Factor has been an issue not just in West Africa's international relations but in Africa as a whole. From the inception of the ECOWAS, subtle divisions between the Anglophone and Francophone member States have existed. The exit of these States from the ECOWAS and the formation of the AES, marks a significant re-alignment in regional politics, and an infringement on the security context of the West African region. Already, the Sahel region, spanning from Senegal in the West, to Sudan in the East has become a theatre of violent extremism resulting from governance vacuums, porous borders and socio-economic fragility, that have created fertile grounds for terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). States that share borders with these Saharan States have been significantly affected by the spill-over of insecurity and borne the brunt of transnational terrorism. Terrorist groups exploit porous borders and weak State presence, undermining the security of neighbouring States. This, no doubt, impedes the transnational collaboration efforts which ECOWAS stands for. Regional disintegration, Nationalist Militarism, no doubt undermines the ideas of a shared West African destiny. ECOWAS foundational protocols on democracy and good governance are under existential strain.

Recommendations

Based on the overwhelming consequences of the exit of the Sahel States from the ECOWAS, we make the following recommendations.

1. A reassessment of strategic approach by the ECOWAS in addressing internal contradictions of its member states. While ECOWAS leaders are rightly concerned that Coups are endangering democracy in West Africa, they should rethink their approach to decisively help member States resist military takeovers. Grievances should be addressed.
2. Sustained dialogue channels, especially with the AES should be maintained. Nigeria's effort in June 2025 as reported by the Business Insider Africa, that Nigeria's Minister

of Foreign Affairs Yusuf Tuggar in a press briefing announced that Nigeria has invited the three Sahel States to the 2025 West Africa Economic Summit for continued regional co-operation, is a good step that should be enhanced.

3. ECOWAS can seek an agreement with the States upon a framework for calibrated disengagement from the bloc that will protect co-operation and peaceful co-habitation. This will allow the ECOWAS maintain diplomatic leverage that allows the bloc to pressure the AES into providing a timeline for the return to democracy in their various States.

These steps are to protect security co-operation and prevent already integrated economies from disruptions that may arise, due to the exit of the AES States, and above all, enhance the stability of the region.

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