

The Alliance of Sahel States and the Future of West African Regional Integration

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Abstract

ECOWAS, initially designed to promote regional economic integration, has over the years adopted protocols to uphold democracy and good governance. On several occasions it has adopted sanctions against unconstitutional changes of government in its member states, like those that recently occurred in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger. At the end of January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their withdrawal (referred to as 'Sahelxit' by several media outlets) from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This withdrawal – with immediate effect according to the departing states, within a one-year deadline according to the ECOWAS Treaty – presents a complex set of challenges for the region. The three states presented their withdrawal as a reaction to sanctions. The study adopted the qualitative method of research, utilizes secondary sources and relays on content analysis as its method of data analysis. To achieve this, the researcher sourced for information from published textbooks, magazines, and journal articles, online materials and other relevant publications. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) – Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES) and the future of regional integration in West Africa and its implications for ECOWAS. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – all three states led by military regimes – decided to establish a new regional organization, the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS). This paper found that these actions have had mixed results, with negative effects on most ECOWAS member states, hindering economic cooperation and increasing trade costs, thereby complicating regional integration efforts and increasing humanitarian crises. The study therefore recommends enhancing solidarity and promoting conflict resolution, potential strategies for the ECOWAS may include intensifying diplomatic efforts, engaging in preventive diplomacy, deploying peacekeeping forces when necessary, and providing mediation and reconciliation support.

Keywords: Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS), Integration, Regional Integration, West Africa, ECOWAS

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INTRODUCTION

Across the international arena, various regional integration efforts have emerged with the goal of improving welfare and promoting solidarity among member countries. Prominent among these is the European Union, which currently consists of twenty-seven European nations. In South America, MERCOSUR features countries like Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Additionally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) in Asia is dedicated to supporting the interests of its member states.

Regional integration in Africa has been a major goal of African states since they begun to attain independence in the 1950s. In addition to the African Union (AU), which serves as the main continental integration organization, several sub-regional bodies have emerged across the continent. Notable among these are the Community of

Sahel-Saharan States (CENSAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS/CEEAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU/UMA), the East African Community (EAC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The examination of regional integration in Africa has shown that there has been limited success, primarily due to the weak authority of institutional structures. According to Okolo (1985, p.121), member states often hold the power to veto decisions made by their representatives at the regional level. Nye (1970) further contended that powerful external actors have a significant influence on either facilitating or obstructing integration efforts in Africa, given that African regions are largely dependent on developed countries for investment, markets for their raw materials, and technological advancements. This imbalanced relationship with the rest of the world leaves African regions particularly exposed to external economic factors, which in turn hampers regional cooperation (Ravenhill, 1979, p.231). Such challenges often serve as major obstacles to effective integration.

ECOWAS was founded on 28 May 1975 in Lagos, Nigeria, by the heads of state of 15 West African: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Cabo Verde joined in 1977. Mauritania withdrew from the organization in 1999/2000, as it wanted to join the Arab Maghreb Union instead, bringing ECOWAS membership back to fifteen. ECOWAS was originally formed with the aim of promoting economic integration and development to create a unified economic area in West Africa. Subsequently, its focus broadened to address political and security concerns as well. The ECOWAS Treaty is designed to establish an economic and monetary union through the abolition of tariffs and equivalent taxes, the establishment of a common external tariff, and the harmonization of economic and sectoral policies (ECOWAS Official website). In 1993, the Treaty was revised to include, among other provisions, the principle of supra-nationality regarding the implementation of its decisions.

The economies of ECOWAS member states are relatively small and highly vulnerable to external economic and political factors, which adversely impacts their socio-economic and political progress. This challenge is exacerbated by the current surge in global trade, finance, technology, and production, collectively known as globalization. This seemingly irreversible trend predominantly benefits developed nations, leaving developing countries, including those in ECOWAS, increasingly marginalized in global economic activities and sidelined in international matters.

Security is another critical issue impacting the West African sub-region. The presence of civil unrest and

unstable governments can quickly extend to neighboring countries, turning the entire area into a potential refuge for international terrorist organizations. Consequently, sub-regional integration has been recognized as a more advantageous strategy to enhance member states' opportunities for engaging with and reaping the benefits of globalization, while also fostering security and democracy within their territories and facilitating collaboration in various sectors.

The resurgence of interest in regional integration and collaboration is a global trend, largely influenced by the achievements observed in Europe. This shift also indicates a heightened recognition of the advantages that regional solidarity and cooperation can offer in addressing the challenges of an increasingly competitive global market (Mytelka, 1972). The term "new regionalism" is frequently used to describe this phenomenon (CEC, 1992). In Africa, fostering regional unity is viewed as a potential remedy for the continent's enduring economic and social crises, particularly as private initiatives gain momentum due to the empowerment of civil society and the liberalization and privatization of national economies. Additionally, the ongoing reduction of state-imposed barriers to cross-border interactions is facilitating greater regional trade (World Bank, 1994, pp.62-76, 230-231).

The African Economic Community (AEC) Treaty, signed in Abuja in June 1991, laid out an ambitious framework for economic integration and development across Africa. However, on September 16, 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—three nations under military leadership—announced the formation of a new regional entity, the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS), known in French as Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES). This decision was driven by the escalating crisis within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2023, which reached a critical point when the three AoSS countries declared their withdrawal from ECOWAS on January 28, 2024. These developments have produced mixed outcomes, negatively impacting many ECOWAS member nations, obstructing economic collaboration, raising trade costs, and complicating efforts toward regional integration while exacerbating humanitarian challenges.

In a socio-political context in which the role and functions of the state, the extent of state powers and the way in which they are exercised are increasingly being called into question, new forms of political and social organization are developing. These are also influenced by the current geopolitical developments in the changing world order. At the same time, states and societies and the ongoing regional integration processes are facing major new challenges. Within ECOWAS, conventional ideas of state and society, values and structures are coming up against growing tendencies towards a new understanding of statehood and sovereignty. In the West Africa/Sahel region, new processes of nation-building and state-

building are under way, underpinned by efforts to renew social cohesion and to integrate the 'vital forces of the nation' – a concept cited increasingly frequently in these countries – as comprehensively as possible.

The political and social conditions and expectations of the partners in the West Africa/Sahel region are currently undergoing profound transformation. Any appraisal of the future developments and integration of the dynamics that determine them must take account of the various integration processes, which are particularly diversified and run in parallel in this region.

Thus, this paper analyses the potential of development prospects and sustainability to the critical relationship between ECOWAS and the AoSS. If the partnership between the West African and Sahel states is to be continued, it will be vital to adopt a pragmatic approach and maintain a political dialogue with all the partners.

Conceptual Review

Integration

Integration refers to the process through which multiple nations or states voluntarily come together to form a supranational organization with shared political, economic, environmental, and social institutions and decision-making powers. This involves surrendering some national sovereignty in order to achieve collective decision-making at the regional or global level. Integration is any level of association between actors, on one dimension or another of various types of integration, such as economic, social, and policy integration. This places "integration" on the same analytical level as "interdependence" which is not closely associated with a teleological or process-oriented theory (Nye, 1971, p.26; Keohane & Nye, 1975, p.366). Integration is a process toward inter-state security.

Integration in international relations refers to the process of bringing countries or regions closer together through economic, political, and social cooperation. Integration can take many forms, including economic integration, political integration, and cultural integration.

Integration is associated strictly with regional processes and the parts forming the whole were sovereign states. Hurrell (1995, p.38) that there are no 'natural' regions and definitions of 'region' and indicators of 'regionness' vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation.

An international region is a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence, while regionalism is a doctrine advocating the formation of interstate groupings or associations on the basis of regions (Nye, 1968, p.vii). Integration occurs among countries or provinces whose geographic borders affected their mutual security, where economic and political processes coincided. Integration therefore is a political process fostered by economic

processes. Integration is a primary approach to international organization.

Students of integration theory have oriented their work heavily toward the analysis of peaceful change in an anarchic system. Integration like its cousin, peace, is foremost a property of the international system viewed as a whole. In our general definition, the integrative process is seen as culminating in a community-like political form which embraces a group of people who, originally at least, were organized politically as a system of sovereign nation-states (Pentland, 1973, p.193). Over time, the integration process has not formally replaced the nation-state with a supranational one. Recognizing a broader scope of integrative processes is essential to understanding regional integration and other continuous processes.

Regional Integration

Regional integration is the process by which two or more nation-states agree to co-operate and work closely together to achieve peace, stability and wealth. Usually integration involves one or more written agreements that describe the areas of cooperation in detail, as well as some coordinating bodies representing the countries involved. Regional Integration is a process in which neighboring states enter into an agreement in order to upgrade cooperation through common institutions and rules. The objectives of the agreement could range from economic to political to environmental, although it has typically taken the form of a political economy initiative where commercial interests are the focus for achieving broader socio-political and security objectives, as defined by national governments. Regional integration has been organized either via supranational institutional structures or through intergovernmental decision-making, or a combination of both. Past efforts at regional integration have often focused on removing barriers to free trade in the region, increasing the free movement of people, labor, goods, and capital across national borders, reducing the possibility of regional armed conflict (for example, through Confidence and Security-Building Measures), and adopting cohesive regional stances on policy issues, such as the environment, climate change and migration.

Regional integration has being an evolving process over many decades now and different regions have embraced it. Its evolution was very much in the form of integrating actors concern with economic and security issues to the inclusion of other concerns such as social, cultural, environmental, other developmental needs. It is however, the commitment and the achievement of set goals by the member states in the various regional integrating bodies that have determined how far they have gone with the process, and have distinguished very successful regional integration organizations from others. As with many phenomena, regional integration has been given different meanings and definitions. Haas defined it as "the process

whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new centre, where institutions possess jurisdictions over the preexisting national states" (Haas, 1958, p 16).

Mattli (1999, p.42) has outlined a set of conditions that needed to be satisfied for regional integration to be successful. In the first place, the potential for economic gains from market exchange within the region must be significant. If there is little potential for gain, perhaps because regional economies lack complementarity or because the small size of the regional market does not offer important economies of scale, the process of integration will quickly wither away. Secondly, he pointed out that there must be a fulfillment of supply conditions. Some of these conditions include situations under which political leaders are willing and able to accommodate demands from regional institutions at each step of the integration process. Another important factor is the presence of a benevolent leading country within the region seeking integration. Such a country serves as a focal point in the co-ordination of rules, regulations and policies. It may also help to ease tensions that arise from the inequitable distribution of gains from integration (ibid).

West Africa

West Africa, also known as Western Africa, is the westernmost region of Africa. **Western Africa**, region comprise of the countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. West Africa is west of an imagined north-south axis lying close to 10° east longitude, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and Sahara Desert. Colonial boundaries are reflected in the modern boundaries between contemporary West African states, cutting across ethnic and cultural lines, often dividing single ethnic groups between two or more states. The population of West Africa is estimated at around 419 million people as of 2021, and at 381,981,000 as of 2017, of which 189,672,000 were female and 192,309,000 male. The region is demographically and economically one of the fastest growing on the African continent.

Overview of ECOWAS

The inspiration for the creation of ECOWAS came from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), which had divided Africa earlier in the 1960s into regions for purposes of economic development. ECOWAS was founded on 28 May 1975 in Lagos, Nigeria, by the heads of state of 15 West African: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal,

Sierra Leone, and Togo. Cabo Verde joined in 1977. Mauritania withdrew from the organization in 1999/2000, as it wanted to join the Arab Maghreb Union instead, bringing ECOWAS membership back to fifteen.

The initial objective of forming ECOWAS was to achieve economic integration and development so as to form a unified economic zone in West Africa. Later on, the scope was widened to include political and security issues. The ECOWAS Treaty seeks to establish an economic and monetary union based on the removal of duties and equivalent taxes, the adoption of a common external tariff, and a harmonization of economic and sectoral policies (ECOWAS Official website). In 1993, ECOWAS revised its Treaty to introduce among other measures, the principle of supra-nationality concerning the application of its decisions.

The institutions of ECOWAS are as follows: The Authority of Heads of State and Government, Council of Ministers, Community Parliament, Economic and Social Council, Community Court of Justice, and the Executive Secretariat. Its financial institutions are ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, ECOWAS Regional Investment Bank, ECOWAS Regional Development Fund. Its specialized Agencies are West African Health Organization, West African Monetary Agency, West African Monetary Institute, Conference of Ministers of Youth and Sport, ECOWAS Gender Development Centre, Water Resources Coordination Unit, and ECOWAS BROWN CARD Secretariat. Its associated private sector organizations are ECOBANK and ECOMARINE.

ECOWAS has a total land surface area of 5,112, 903 km², with a population of over 251 million (Wikipedia website, 2007). ECOWAS countries has three main official languages with French spoken in former French colonies of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. English is the official language used in Liberia and the former English colonies of Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, while Portuguese is spoken in the former Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau.

As the name suggests, ECOWAS was initially founded as an organization primarily concerned with regional economic cooperation. However, West African leaders soon realized that this objective was impossible to separate from political and security concerns. According to Gambari (1991) this was reflected in subsequent protocols (i.e., the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression and the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defense), and eventually in the Revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993 and the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security (henceforth, the 1999 Mechanism). With the adoption of the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) in 1991 (3 June, Abuja, Nigeria), ECOWAS also became one of the so-called Regional Economic Communities (RECs), representing five African

regions – i.e., North, East, South, Central, and West (the RECs are actually eight, however, with significant overlaps with some countries being members of more than one organization). In that capacity, ECOWAS has been the West African building block for continental economic integration, as well as for continental policies and international organization in Africa more generally (Herpolsheimer, 2023).

Operationally, ECOWAS is run by a complex combination of political and technical organs, these include, for example, the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers and, on the more technical side, the Committee of Chiefs of Defense Staff and several community institutions - these are the ECOWAS Parliament, the Community Court of Justice, the West African Health Organization, the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing in West Africa (GIABA), and the Office of the Auditor General. The staff of the ECOWAS Commission (formerly Executive Secretariat), and the staff of a range of specialized agencies, these include, for example, the West African Power Pool, the West African Monetary Agency, and the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre.

In addition, ECOWAS works closely with a few civil society organizations, for example including the West African Network for Peace-building (WANEP) and the West African Civil Society Initiative (WACSI). This non-conclusive list of different state and non-state actors that contribute to the agency of ECOWAS points to the organization's complex collective agency, (Döring & Herpolsheimer, 2023) across a wide variety of policy fields. Although more and more of these policy areas have been related to security concerns (e.g., climate change, migration, health and energy), ECOWAS is about much more than just economic and security cooperation (Balogun, 2022). Nevertheless, governance, peace and security continue to be key dimensions (Herpolsheimer, 2021).

What becomes clear from this list of member states is that ECOWAS comprises a diverse membership, both with respect to economic strength, military capabilities, and political regimes. Although always careful not to alienate other members, subsequent Nigerian governments have played a crucial role both in the establishment of ECOWAS and in its operations. However, despite its economic strength and influential role in the region, Nigeria has not been able to impose its positions on other members, as most recently seen during the response to the military coup in Niger. From a normative perspective, Ghanaian governments have played an important role in recent efforts to reform ECOWAS and to lock in democratic gains. On the francophone side, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal have been the most influential member states in the organization, actively influencing regional positions, although this has sometimes led to disunity, pointing to the

continued relevance of occasional divisions between Anglophone and Francophone states. This is, however, not to say that the other member states do not play important roles in the organization. For example, Togo has been instrumental in bringing ECOWAS together in the first place, helping the Nigerian government to bridge the gap between Anglophone and Francophone states in West Africa (Gambari, 1991, pp.20-21). Likewise, President Umaro Sissoco Embaló of Guinea-Bissau has recently taken a very active leadership role during the presidency of his country from July 2022 to July 2023, and the same was the case for Liberia under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf during her 2016-2017 mandate.

Historical Context of Withdrawals from Regional Blocs by African Countries

The history of African countries' withdrawals from regional and continental agreements reflects the complex dynamics of regional integration, political sovereignty, and economic considerations. One notable example is Mauritania, which exited the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) back in 2000 but later signed a new associate-membership agreement in August 2017. The reasons for this initial withdrawal are multifaceted and include issues related to economic strategies, trade structures, and political alignments. The eventual return through an associate-membership agreement indicates a nuanced approach that seeks to balance national interests with regional collaboration.

Similarly, Morocco's departure from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1984, later rebranded as the African Union (AU), occurred after the body recognized the independence of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. This withdrawal was a result of a fundamental dispute over territorial integrity and sovereignty. The subsequent readmission in 2017 reflects the shifting political landscape and the potential for reconciliation despite past disagreements.

Moreover, Tanzania's withdrawal from the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) due to a zero-tariff reduction agreement underscores the intricate relationship between trade policies and regional integration. Tanzania's heavy reliance on revenues from trade tariffs and VAT led to the perception that reducing tariffs to 0% posed a threat to its economic stability, shedding light on the delicate balance that countries strike between regional integration and national economic interests.

These examples emphasize the diverse and intricate factors that underpin African countries' decisions to withdraw from regional agreements. Such decisions are often influenced by a combination of geopolitical, economic, and ideological considerations, showcasing the nuanced approach that nations take in navigating their roles within regional entities. The implications of these

Table 1: Overview of the Economic, Demographic, and Natural Resource Characteristics of the Three Members of the Alliance of Sahel States

Indicator	Burkina Faso	Mali	Niger
Area (km ²)	274,200	1,240,192	1,267,000
Population (2022 estimate)	21,751,000	20,250,833	26,803,275
Population density (inhab/km ²)	79.4	16.3	21.2
GDP (estimate 2021, in billions of U.S. dollars)	15.75	19.98	10.27
GDP per capita (estimate 2021, in U.S. dollars)	729	986	372
GDP growth (estimate 2021)	5.4%	5.1%	5.8%
Main economic sectors	Agriculture, mining, Services	Agriculture, services, Industries	Agriculture, stock rearing, Minerals
Natural resources	Gold, manganese, zinc, nickel	Gold, phosphates, uranium, bauxite	Uranium, coal, oil, metal Ores
Literacy rate (%)	36.5%	35.6%	19.1%
Life expectancy at birth (years)	61.9	60.5	62.7

Source: Abdelhak B. (2024). From the Alliance of Sahel States to the Confederation of Sahel

withdrawals are far-reaching, affecting not only the withdrawing countries but also the broader regional integration efforts and the functioning of the respective regional organizations.

The performance of ECOWAS from its establishment in 1975 to the late 1980s had not been excellent, and its level of regionness was very low. Many reasons have accounted for this poor performance, and Abass Bundu, a former Secretary General of ECOWAS has enumerated some of them as the absence of development and integration culture in the sub-region; priority given to national programmes following the years of independence; and differences in ideology and approach. Other factors include the fear of domination by Nigeria by some of the member countries; the burden of certain institutional and economic structures inherited from the colonial era; economic problems that the countries face; and political instability (Bundu, 1997, p.4). There seems to be a new impetus on the part of ECOWAS countries to improve upon their performance if they are to achieve their goals, and be relevant in the ever-developing global economy.

Creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS)

On September 16, 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed the Liptako-Gourma charter, giving birth to the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) – Alliance des États du Sahel (EAS), a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for cooperation between its members. At first glance, the charter seems to prioritize the collective defense of the populations of the three states; but it also includes measures that go beyond cooperation within an alliance and develop a vision of integration of the three states within a confederal framework. This vision is a new development relative to the concepts previously adopted between the three countries.

Indeed, ideas and initiatives for cooperation, mutual aid, and coordination in this area began as early as 1970 and continue to this day:

1.) The Liptako-Gourma Region Integrated Development Authority (l'Autorité de développement intégré de la région du Liptako-Gourma) was the subject of the memorandum

of understanding of December 3, 1970 (Liptako-Gourma refers to the “zone of three borders”, a region where the borders shared by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger meet. The charter therefore symbolically takes the name of the place where the three countries meet);

2.) Another memorandum of understanding was signed on December 16, 2000, abrogating that of 1970;

3.) The revised treaty of the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma States, signed on January 24, 2017, completed and amended the December 16, 2000, memorandum of understanding;

4.) The text establishing the alliance, in September 2023, makes no reference to the former abrogated or amended charters. It gives the impression of a first step on a new initiative.

The three countries share many geographical, economic, and cultural characteristics. They are located in the same region and share several hundred kilometers of borders. They are (or were) members of ECOWAS.

With vast, partly desert territories (Mali and Niger), the three countries share a semi-arid climate and common environmental challenges, including desertification and water scarcity. Economic, demographic, and social data shows a high degree of similarity between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Table 1).

States: The road is clear, but full of traps. Morocco: The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS). Policy Brief - N° 19/24 - April 2024.

In addition, the states have ethnic populations, many of which span the three countries, creating a demographic and cultural continuity that reinforces territorial and geographical continuity. This demographic, territorial, and cultural continuity is reinforced by similar historical legacies, marked by European colonization and post-independence challenges related to governance, education, and economic development.

They share a common history as former French colonies, which have influenced their political institutions, legal systems, and official languages. This common history has given rise to a shared feeling, with all three countries expressing, at almost the same time, a rejection of the former occupying power.

This feeling cements the ties between the three countries, and can help their integration efforts. The three countries face similar security challenges, including the threats of terrorism, inter-communal conflicts, and drug and arms trafficking in the Sahel region. This common challenge creates a shared perception of danger and can serve as an ingredient to accelerate the creation of an integrated structure.

Reasons for creating the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS)

The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) was primarily driven by two key factors:

- 1) The dangers posed by terrorism, separatist movements, and the economic underdevelopment in the Liptako-Gourma area.
- 2) The threat of military intervention from the member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

These nations have seen an unparalleled surge in terrorism that has lasted for decades. The region's stability began to sharply decline after NATO countries overthrew Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, leading to an unprecedented influx of weapons. Additionally, the return of the Tuaregs, who had played a significant role in the Libyan Army, reignited the longstanding and painful debate over the establishment of their own nation-state, referred to as Azawad, within Mali. The rise of terrorist groups and separatist movements has been fueled by the poverty afflicting the local population, along with the weak political, economic, and social development of the states involved. Despite recent international interventions led by the UN and supported by regional organizations such as ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and individual countries like France and the United States, the situation has only worsened.

On July 26, 2023, a military coup occurred in Niger, leading to a strong denunciation from the special session of the ECOWAS Assembly of Heads of State and Government, which convened on July 30, 2023. This session issued an ultimatum for the restoration of constitutional order within one week, warning of potential military intervention by ECOWAS to release the detained, democratically-elected President Mohamed Bazoum and reinstate the previous government structure. Following this decision, the military staff committee of ECOWAS member states convened in Abuja, Nigeria, from August 2-4, 2023, to formulate actionable plans. During an emergency meeting on August 10, 2023, the heads of state and government reiterated their July 30, 2024 decision, directing the Military Staff Committee to initiate the ECOWAS Response Force's mechanisms for military intervention and the reinstatement of constitutional order in Niger. Consequently, after the ultimatum expired, ECOWAS military forces were granted full authority to deploy troops into Niger. In light of the

looming threat of ECOWAS military action, and given Niger's existing vulnerabilities due to terrorism and poverty, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) to enhance stability in the Liptako-Gourma region.

Is the Withdrawal Lawful?

The joint statement released by the Alliance of Sahel States highlights the principle of full sovereignty in its decision to exit ECOWAS. The Alliance contends that ECOWAS has strayed from the foundational ideals established by its founders and the principles of pan-Africanism, thereby stressing the importance of upholding the original tenets that support regional integration in West Africa. In contrast, the ECOWAS Commission reaffirmed its dedication to seeking a negotiated resolution to the political deadlock in the region, as mandated by the Authority of Heads of State and Government. This position is consistent with the ECOWAS Treaty provisions, specifically Article 91, which details the withdrawal procedure and requires a one-year written notice from the departing member state.

The collaboration between ECOWAS and the Alliance, along with the African Union Commission's appeal for enhanced dialogue and collective efforts to maintain ECOWAS's unity, reflects a unified approach to addressing the current situation within the ECOWAS Treaty framework. This effort aims to uphold the principles of regional cooperation. Additionally, Nigeria, as a key ECOWAS member, reinforces the Treaty's core principles, highlighting the significance of good faith, freedom of movement, trade, and the sovereign rights of member states. This emphasizes the critical nature of the principles established in the ECOWAS Treaty, which are in harmony with the goals of the African Union and regional economic communities to foster unity, security, stability, and development across Africa.

Role of the African Union and ECOWAS

The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) both play pivotal roles in fostering regional integration, addressing geopolitical challenges, and promoting conflict resolution and solidarity within the West African region.

The Alliance of Sahel States was formed through the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter. This region, where the borders of the three nations converge, spans approximately 370,000 km² and is inhabited by 45 percent of the total population of these countries. Unfortunately, the area has been facing a significant security crisis due to the activities of various militia groups. By February 2023, Burkina Faso and Mali reported alarming increases in fatalities linked to political violence, with rises of 77 percent and 150 percent, respectively. As a result, Burkina Faso

has overtaken Afghanistan as the country most affected by terrorism.

Under this mutual defense agreement, the Alliance of Sahel States commits its members to provide military assistance to one another in the event of an attack. Additionally, the pact requires the three nations to collaborate in efforts to prevent or resolve armed conflicts. Colonel Assimi Goïta, the leader of Mali's transitional administration, stated that this agreement would establish "a framework for collective defense and mutual support for the benefit of communities." It is important to note, however, that the Alliance of Sahel States should not be confused with "the Sahel Alliance," a similarly named coalition established in 2017, which includes 17 full members and nine observers.

The African Union (AU) serves as the continental body responsible for enhancing cooperation, integration, and solidarity among African countries. The AU's roles include promoting peace, security, and stability, advancing socio-economic development, fostering democracy, and protecting human rights. Furthermore, the AU is instrumental in coordinating efforts across African countries to address continental challenges, facilitate trade and economic integration, and provide a collective voice on global issues.

Similarly, ECOWAS, as a regional bloc, focuses on advancing economic integration, political stability, and peace within West Africa. Its responsibilities include promoting economic cooperation, fostering integration through free movement of people and goods, and addressing political and security challenges. Additionally, ECOWAS has been actively involved in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacekeeping efforts, particularly within its member states.

Regarding conflict resolution, both the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have developed frameworks to tackle geopolitical issues and foster unity. The AU utilizes its Peace and Security Council to carry out peacekeeping operations, mediate disputes, and support reconciliation in post-conflict scenarios. Meanwhile, ECOWAS has shown its capacity to intervene in member countries experiencing political turmoil, as evidenced by its actions in response to coups and other political upheavals.

In West Africa, the recent exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS presents a significant challenge for both the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS in maintaining regional integration and managing the geopolitical consequences of this fragmentation. To strengthen solidarity, strategies may include fostering regional dialogue, promoting inclusive political processes, and reinforcing pan-African values to cultivate unity and a shared vision among member states.

The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are essential in promoting regional integration, tackling geopolitical issues, and

fostering conflict resolution and unity in West Africa. By utilizing their unique strengths and collaborating effectively, these organizations can significantly advance peace, stability, and development in the area. Additionally, the partnership between the AU and regional entities such as ECOWAS can improve the success of conflict resolution strategies, with the AU offering comprehensive support and coordination for local initiatives.

ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS)

The 15-nation bloc was created in 1975 to promote economic integration among member states. ECOWAS has struggled in recent years to reverse a wave of military takeovers in the region, including Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in 2023.

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents a significant turning point in the regional political landscape of West Africa. The decision, made under the sovereignty of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS), reflects a deep-seated discontent with the trajectory of ECOWAS and the perceived undermining of the organization's founding principles. The move has prompted a series of reactions and implications not only for the withdrawing countries but also for the wider regional integration efforts in Africa. As we delve into the complexities of this development, it becomes clear that the dissolution of membership in ECOWAS poses multifaceted challenges and opportunities, not only for the Alliance of Sahel States but also for the entire region.

The withdrawal does not bode well for the countries' relationships with other ECOWAS states. It is the latest escalation in a growing fracture that has opened up in the wake of a series of military coups. Between 2020 and 2023, the three countries, along with Guinea, all experienced military takeovers. ECOWAS responded by suspending and then sanctioning all four countries, including a commercial no-fly zone and a freeze on all assets held in ECOWAS central banks. The United States, the European Union, and several other Western countries also suspended aid or applied sanctions. In retaliation, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger formed a breakaway "Alliance of Sahel States" in September 2023.

Although it eventually softened its stance, ECOWAS had vowed to militarily engage in Niger in response to the coup. This placed the other two nations in an awkward situation. While Niger has an abundance of uranium, Mali and Burkina Faso were anomalies with little to no natural resources. In a way, it was assumed that Niger is not the same, and to protect its interests in the region, the West won't let the government in Niger fall so easily.

But as time went on, it soon became apparent that ECOWAS's threats to reinstate the ousted Nigerien leader Mohamed Bazoum were baseless. Not only did the citizens seem to be resistant to any external military

intervention, but Burkina Faso and Mali also pledged right away to protect Niger from any military action. The Alliance is the result of this mutual solidarity. While Niger has an abundance of uranium, Mali and Burkina Faso were anomalies with little to no natural resources.

Ironically, despite ECOWAS sanctions, dialogues, and threats of military action, the military authorities haven't given a precise timeline for restoring constitutional governance since the coups. Instead, they have become more antagonistic toward the bloc and have charged that it is betraying its founding principles, becoming a threat to its member states and influenced by outside forces.

The move deepened antagonism between the three states and Western countries, which have seen their influence diminish as various Sahelian states have sought diplomatic alternatives. France, the region's former colonial overlord, was pressured into removing its troops from the three countries in 2022 and 2023 and, likewise, U.S. counterterrorism activity in the region has dwindled since Niger's July 2023 coup.

The Alliance is set to diminish French influence in the region. Once-powerful France, first as a colonial power and then an occupying force, is fast losing its military and economic influence from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea region. Going forward, the Alliance may spell doom for France and bring an end to its not-so-glorious postcolonial legacy in West Africa. The Alliance is also bad news for ECOWAS, as the three countries opted out of the ECOWAS in the same way Mauritania withdrew its membership. This may not be helpful to continental integration. It is not only the ECOWAS that will be divided against itself; it is mainly the Francophone states that will be more divided against themselves. For instance, Benin Republic is being used as an access territory to attack Niger. As a result, Niger strained its military cooperation with Benin. In the same vein, the pro-France countries cannot but be at loggerheads with those not favouring France.

Finally, while speculations are high that the move would draw non-Western powers such as Russia, China, and Iran closer, Russia would clearly be the winner of these developments. In January 2024, Russia has agreed to establish military cooperation with Niger. Several Russian military personnel recently arrived in Burkina Faso to protect the military leader. Meanwhile, despite the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the chief of Russia's private military group, around 1,000 Wagner troops continue to fight in Mali. With waning French influence in contrast to the growing Russian presence, the region may eventually become a theatre for a proxy war.

Implications of the alliance of Sahel States Exit from ECOWAS

The exit of the Alliance of Sahel States from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is expected

to have considerable effects on the economies, trade relations, and diplomatic connections of the member nations, especially since they are landlocked. This departure will also impact ECOWAS regarding its mission and objectives for fostering integration aimed at enhancing collective security and economic collaboration. Both short-term and long-term repercussions are likely to arise from this action.

a) Economically, the exit from ECOWAS could jeopardize the trade relationships and economic alliances that member states have developed over time. This disruption may adversely affect critical sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and natural resource commerce. Landlocked countries, especially, rely on effective and open trade routes to connect with international markets. Without the support of ECOWAS, the Alliance of Sahel States may struggle to retain the trade and economic benefits they once enjoyed within the regional community. Moreover, their ability to access regional infrastructure and transport networks for goods distribution could be at risk, potentially leading to increased expenses and logistical difficulties.

b) In the context of trade relations, the withdrawal could potentially weaken the diplomatic and economic connections between the Alliance of Sahel States and the other ECOWAS member countries. Losing the benefits of trading bloc privileges and preferential access to larger markets may create challenges for the Sahel States as they strive to preserve essential trade relationships in the region. Without the ECOWAS trade framework, trade dynamics may shift, compelling the Sahel States to explore new trade partnerships and forge agreements beyond the regional bloc.

c) Diplomatically, the withdrawal could prompt a reassessment of regional cooperation initiatives and the diplomatic status of Sahelian countries in West Africa. Adjustments in alliances and existing diplomatic ties may be required to reflect the new circumstances resulting from the withdrawal. Additionally, the lack of ECOWAS mechanisms for conflict resolution, security collaboration, and economic integration may increase the diplomatic challenges faced by the Alliance of Sahel States, compelling them to address these matters on their own or explore other regional partnerships.

d) For landlocked nations; the challenges faced by landlocked countries are intensified by their dependence on effective trade routes and access to regional markets. In the absence of the support and infrastructure provided by ECOWAS, the landlocked nations of the Sahel may encounter greater difficulties in reaching sea ports, transportation corridors, and international markets, which could hinder their economic growth and development. Consequently, the withdrawal of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS could disrupt the economies, trade relationships, and diplomatic connections of the member states, presenting distinct challenges due to their

landlocked status. Adapting to these new realities will likely necessitate strategic planning and proactive engagement to alleviate negative effects and explore new avenues for economic and trade collaboration both within the region and beyond.

e) Sanctions Impact: The sanctions levied against the Alliance due to earlier coups in these nations could have played a role in their choice to exit ECOWAS. The economic and political fallout from these sanctions can be substantial and may have shaped the Alliance of Sahel States' evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of remaining part of the regional organization.

The sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and other regional organizations in response to the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso likely had significant repercussions on the economies and diplomatic relations of these nations. The enforcement of trade and financial restrictions, such as halting commercial activities, freezing government assets, and cutting off financial aid, has certainly affected the economic stability and growth potential of the impacted countries. These measures may have led to economic hardship and diplomatic challenges for the nations involved, prompting them to reconsider their roles within ECOWAS. The constraints and disruptions resulting from the sanctions could have altered their views on the advantages of remaining part of the regional alliance, especially if the economic and diplomatic drawbacks were perceived to surpass the benefits of membership. Additionally, the effects of these sanctions on the landlocked countries in the Alliance of Sahel States may have been particularly pronounced. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as landlocked nations, rely on effective trade routes, access to seaports, and regional cooperation to support their economic growth and international trade. The sanctions could have intensified the economic challenges these countries are already experiencing, possibly prompting them to consider withdrawal due to the perceived barriers and limitations imposed by the sanctions. The sanctions enacted following the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso may have contributed to the Alliance of Sahel States' decision to withdraw from ECOWAS, particularly if the economic hardships and restrictions were seen as detrimental to their national interests and economic stability. This situation underscores the complex relationship between political events, regional dynamics, and economic factors in shaping the decisions of nations within regional organizations.

f) Implications for their participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): The disbandment of the Alliance of Sahel States within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has far-reaching effects on their participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and could alter their economic strategies in numerous ways. Firstly, the withdrawal from ECOWAS significantly impacts the trade

dynamics and market access for the Sahel States within the larger African landscape. Without the established trade framework and preferential access to the ECOWAS market, these nations may need to reassess their trade strategies. This could involve modifying trade policies and regulations to fit within the AfCFTA framework and initiating bilateral trade negotiations with other AfCFTA member countries to establish new trade agreements.

Moreover, individual membership in AfCFTA, given their status outside a recognized regional economic community, presents both advantages and challenges for the economic strategies of the Sahel States. On one side, it enables these countries to build direct trade connections with other AfCFTA members, potentially opening up new markets and diversifying their trade relationships beyond the regional context. On the other hand, the lack of a cohesive regional bloc like ECOWAS may intensify competition and necessitate more extensive trade negotiations and regulatory alignment, which could be particularly challenging for nations with smaller economies and limited resources. The involvement of the Sahel States in the AfCFTA as separate member nations may require a shift in their economic development approaches. To align with the goals and regulatory standards of the AfCFTA, these countries might need to concentrate on their areas of comparative advantage, improve their industrial and manufacturing capabilities, and emphasize trade facilitation and infrastructure development to fully capitalize on the advantages of their membership. The fragmentation of the Alliance of Sahel States within ECOWAS, along with their individual participation in AfCFTA, has significant implications for their trade strategies and economic growth. This change may necessitate a restructuring of trade agreements, a reassessment of market access, and an adjustment of economic policies to make the most of the opportunities offered by the continental free trade area. As a result, the Sahel States will likely need to customize their economic strategies to successfully navigate the evolving trade environment within AfCFTA and harness the potential benefits of their individual membership in this Pan-African trade initiative.

CHALLENGES

Adebajo (2002) and Kabia (2009) noted that, despite certain similarities, West African nations have experienced a diverse range of historical events, political frameworks, and challenging socio-economic situations. This diversity has posed a significant challenge for ECOWAS since its establishment. Additionally, the high levels of external dependency and interference in the region's economic and political matters have frequently hindered the political landscape within member countries. Herpolsheimer (2021) suggested that these elements collectively contribute to ongoing political instability in numerous West African

nations, which can adversely affect neighboring countries and potentially lead to broader regional repercussions. Consequently, while ECOWAS is one of the most robust regional organizations in Africa, it operates within a particularly complex geographical context.

The political landscape of ECOWAS has been significantly influenced by internal conflicts and persistent disunity regarding how to address critical issues and violent confrontations.

While the comprehensive frameworks developed during the late 1990s and early 2000s embody a collective vision for the ECOWAS region, the interpretation of the foundational norms and practices is often hotly debated and controversial.

This has resulted in a lack of political will and support from some member states, creating divisions that impede the organization's capacity to act promptly and decisively (Bossuyt, 2016). Recently, this has been evident in the extended discussions surrounding the proposed amendment of the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which aims to tackle the contentious matters of presidential term limits and constitutional adjustments (Herpolsheimer, 2024).

Over the last decade, these issues have led to repeated crises in various West African countries, including a military coup in Guinea in September 2021. Nevertheless, the potential revision of the 2001 Protocol poses significant risks, as it could regress from the accomplishments and stipulations of the original protocol.

Although not entirely new, transnational organized crime and violent extremism have emerged as significant challenges for ECOWAS over the past two decades. Despite extensive efforts from ECOWAS, the African Union, and the broader international community—including missions from France, the EU, and the UN, as well as various US initiatives—progress in addressing these issues has been limited (Trémolières, Walther & Radil, 2021). Insecurity, particularly in the Sahel region, has either remained high or worsened, contributing to a recent wave of military coups in the area: Mali experienced coups in August 2020 and May 2021, Chad saw an unconstitutional power shift in April 2021, Burkina Faso faced coups in January and September 2022, and Niger experienced a coup in July 2023 (Herpolsheimer, 2024).

Addressing the challenges previously mentioned, along with the broader failures of the international community, ECOWAS has faced significant obstacles, resulting in an inability to restore constitutional governance and democratic systems. Moreover, they have struggled to create effective communication pathways with the coup leaders and other influential political figures in these regions. The responses from ECOWAS have largely adhered to conventional strategies, including diplomatic outreach, mediation efforts, and the use of threats and sanctions. However, the formation of a strategic alliance among the coup leaders, supported by external entities

(Maru, 2023), combined with disunity among ECOWAS member states, has significantly undermined the effectiveness of these measures. The Sahelian nations have long attempted to carve out a unique identity within ECOWAS (Baldaro & Lopez, 2022), and this strong counter-position has underscored a growing separation from the community's foundational principles. This divide was starkly illustrated by the establishment of the AES by the military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger on September 16, 2023 (Laplace, 2024), followed by their announcement of withdrawal from ECOWAS on January 28, 2024. In response to this evolving situation, ECOWAS has recently revised its approach, lifting most sanctions imposed on the AES nations. This decision reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the current realities and the limited options available, as well as a concession to member states that have consistently opposed aggressive interventions, particularly in Niger, in order to prevent further internal discord.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the recent exit of the Alliance of Sahel States from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents a crucial shift in West Africa's political dynamics. Additionally, examining the possible contributions of the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS in promoting regional integration, tackling geopolitical issues, and enhancing conflict resolution and solidarity underscores the vital functions these organizations serve in maintaining stability and fostering development in the area. The Alliance of Sahel States is now at a crossroads, facing important choices about its future, including the possibility of joining the West African Economic and Monetary Union, addressing the challenges of being landlocked, and capitalizing on international trade opportunities.

The current situation and future outlook for the Alliance of Sahel States present a complicated array of diplomatic, economic, and political factors that affect regional integration. To navigate these complexities, it is vital to engage proactively with regional and international stakeholders. This approach will help address the consequences of the recent withdrawal, explore avenues for economic cooperation, and develop strategic initiatives that align with the alliance's long-term goals. As the Sahel States work through these challenges, the importance of strategic collaboration, diplomatic relations, and a commitment to regional integration will be essential in shaping their future endeavors within the Pan-African context. Diplomatically, the prospects for future collaboration between the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS depend on ongoing diplomatic discussions and the synchronization of regional goals. To uphold a diplomatic relationship, it is essential to engage consistently, share interests, and work together towards

common objectives. Both entities acknowledge the importance of fostering positive diplomatic relations and creating a forum for dialogue on issues that affect the region.

Economically, the future of the relationship between the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS is fundamentally linked to the economic benefits that this partnership yields. ECOWAS provides an essential framework for trade, investment, and economic cooperation among its member states. The Sahelian countries enjoy advantages from trade agreements, preferential access to larger markets, collaborative infrastructure projects, and joint economic initiatives. The likelihood of future collaboration will depend on the commitment to sustain these economic benefits and to further integrate into the regional economy.

Politically, Future collaboration between the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS will be shaped by the alignment of their political goals and regional security dynamics. ECOWAS has played a vital role in managing political crises, resolving conflicts, and promoting security cooperation throughout West Africa. The active participation of Sahelian countries in these initiatives, along with their shared political and security interests with ECOWAS will be crucial for the continuation of their collaborative efforts.

In light of these considerations, the probability of the Alliance of Sahel States sustaining its partnership with ECOWAS and the prospects for future cooperation depend on a shared comprehension of diplomatic, economic, and political priorities. Ongoing interaction, positive dialogue, and initiatives to harmonize regional goals will play a crucial role in determining the future of their collaboration in West Africa.

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