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The ECOWAS Standby Force and West Africa's Security: A Focus on The Exit of Sahel States from ECOWAS.

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Abstract

The study sets out to investigate how the ECOWAS Standby Force has been able to address security challenges in the Central Sahel region of West Africa. It also examined the political, economic and security implications of the exit of Sahel states from ECOWAS. Since not much has been written on the aforementioned subjects, therefore, this study seeks to fill these yawning knowledge gaps. The efforts of the ECOWAS Standby Force to restore peace and security in the region is hampered by a multitude of structural, institutional and political challenges, such as lack of a standing military force, logistical and institutional weaknesses, overreliance on external donors among others. We anchored our analysis on the theory of Neorealism also known as Structural Realism, articulated by Waltz (1979), and adopted the descriptive research design. The study employed the secondary/qualitative method of data collection, while content analysis was utilized for the analysis of data. Essentially, we found that the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for mutual defence and cooperation between its members. Its emergence represents more than a security pact; it challenges the prevailing regional order led by ECOWAS. Its exit from ECOWAS marks a deep crisis for West African regionalism, and reshapes the geopolitical balance of the continent. The withdrawal has also fractured regional security cooperation, creating a precarious counterterrorism vacuum and destabilising borders across West Africa. Consequently, the study recommends among others, the establishment of a permanent ECOWAS Intelligence Fusion Center (EIFC) to serve as the hub for real-time intelligence collection, analysis and dissemination among member states.

Keywords: ECOWAS Standby Force, Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Sovereignty, Collective Security, Counterterrorism.

Introduction

The exit of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2024 represents a significant moment for regional stability in West Africa. It raises questions about the organization's effectiveness in navigating political crises and its ability to uphold democratic principles in the region. Their exit also raises broader concerns about the organization's future and its capacity for peacekeeping.

The Sahel region, characterized by its arid climate and diverse cultures, has become a focal point for international attention due to the escalating crises in Mali and its spillover effects into neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger. The historical context of these conflicts can be traced to a combination of factors including colonial legacies, ethnic

tensions and socio-economic challenges that have perpetuated instability. Following the coups in early 2020, there has been a marked increase in Islamic insurgency, which has further complicated the political landscape. Groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and ISIS affiliates have exploited local grievances to expand their influence, leading to widespread violence and humanitarian crises.

The crisis spilled over from Mali into Burkina Faso in 2015, initially through terrorist attacks led by Boko Haram. Attacks intensified in 2016 after the formation of a new group, named Ansarul Islam. In Niger, Islamist insurgents carried out attacks in the western region of the country. There were also concurrent attacks in the south-eastern region of the country, as conflict spilled over across the basin border from Nigeria. The Niger conflict intensified in 2017 and attacks remained frequent throughout 2021. Since 2020, violence and internal



displacement have been moving southwards, with considerable violent attacks in Burkina Faso's southern region and borderlands with Côte d'Ivoire and increasing violence in southern Mali (Mohammed & Arebo, 2024).

Various actors, including France, the USA, and ECOWAS have engaged with the Sahelian States through military interventions, diplomatic efforts, and development, aimed at stabilizing the region. France's historical ties with its former colonies have led it to maintain military presence under Operation Barkhane, while the USA has focused on counter-terrorism initiatives through programs like Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). ECOWAS' Security Mechanism was put in place to fortify conflict management, develop efficient peacekeeping/peacebuilding, and humanitarian support system.

On September 16, 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, that gave birth to the Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES), (Alliance of Sahel States), a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for mutual defence and co-operation between its members (Chukwu et al., 2026). The alliance pledges military support to one another should any of them come under attack. On January 28, 2024, the three states announced their exit from the ECOWAS' citing their grievances against ECOWAS, which include among others, ECOWAS failure to assist them in their existential fight against terrorism and insecurity.

Many articles have been written on the crises in the Sahel region, but not much has been written on the ECOWAS Standby Force and West Africa's security; neither has there been much scholarly works on the political, economic and security implications of the exit of Sahel states from ECOWAS. Since not much has been written on the aforementioned subjects, therefore, this study seeks to fill these yawning knowledge gaps.

Statement of the Problem

The crises in the Sahel region have paved the way for the emergence of some "terrorist" groups in the region. In their efforts to coerce the Sahelian people and government decision-makers for ransom or political concessions, these groups have employed various terrorist activities, including launching deadly attacks against civilians and military targets alike, attacking public and private property, kidnapping individuals and more (Harsch, 2020). Weak state institutions around the inter-state borders have enabled such groups to flourish in the peripheries and border towns, targeting people in multiple countries at once.

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger saw over 4000 casualties of terrorist attacks in 2019 (United Nations, 2020); these attacks led to the displacement of over half a million of people. The growing presence of "terrorist" groups in the Sahel has also intensified organized crime and criminals networks that have served as routes for lucrative criminal activities such as drugs, arms trade, human trafficking and the kidnapping of persons for ransom. In Burkina Faso, there was growing instability since 2014 uprising and subsequently from 2016, there were

attacks against the Burkinabe military forces and civilians by extremist groups. These groups have had a strong presence in Burkina Faso and neighbouring Mali. Mali has been in a continuous armed conflict since 2012, with various peace agreements between the parties failing to reach a decisive end to the conflict. It is estimated that from May 2020 to June 2021, over 2000 people have been killed in the ongoing clashes in Mali (Kheira et al., 2021). By the end of 2021, there were over 350,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 50,000 Malian refugees (UNHCR, 2022).

Niger, with shared borders with both Burkina Faso and Mali, has faced the catastrophic consequences of armed clashes among state forces, armed groups and extremist groups over the last decade. In the first half of 2021 alone, over 540 conflict-related civilian casualties were reported in Niger (Amnesty International, 2021). The armed conflict has had a devastating impact on children in Niger; of the 3.8 million people in need of humanitarian aid in Niger, 2.1 million are children and 1.6 million children suffer from malnutrition (UNICEF, 2021). More than eighty children between the ages of 15 and 17 years living in towns on the Niger-Burkina Faso border have reportedly been recruited as child soldiers, and over sixty children were killed in conflict-related violence in Niger in 2021 (Amnesty International, 2021).

Following the emergence of violent extremist groups, armed conflicts and terrorism in the Sahel region, ECOWAS had developed joint military strategies, intelligence-sharing frameworks, and has collaborated with international partners including the African Union, United Nations and France to combat the menace (Rupiya, 2020). However, the effectiveness of ECOWAS Standby Force is constrained by a multitude of structural, institutional and political challenges, such as lack of a standing military force, logistical and institutional weaknesses, overreliance on donor funding, among others (Atlas Report, 2024).

Research Questions

- I. How has the ECOWAS Standby Force been able to address security challenges in the Central Sahel region of West Africa?
- II. What are the political, economic and security implications of the exit of Sahel states from the ECOWAS?

Objectives of Study

The study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

- I. To examine how the ECOWAS Standby Force has been able to address security challenges in the Central-Sahel region of West Africa.
- II. To explore the political, economic and security implications of the exit of Sahel states from the ECOWAS.

Conceptual Clarification

The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF)

The ECOWAS Security Mechanism has different arms and

institutions which facilitate the realization of its noble objectives. They include; 1. Assembly of Heads of States 2. The Mediation and Security Council (MSC) 3. The Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) 4. The Council of Elders and 5. The ECOWAS Standby Force (Kabia, 2011).

A vital achievement of ECOWAS Security Mechanism is the establishment of ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). It consists of 6,674 troops, and has two major units which are; a Task Force comprising 1,646 soldiers and the Main Brigade, comprising 5,028 members. The ECOWAS Standby Force is made up of military, police and civilian components as recognized by Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter which provides for regional peace and security. The operational concept sets out that the Task Force should be designed to mobilize quickly for it may be deployed as an intervention measure against organised crime, conflict prevention, attempted overthrow of democratic governments, humanitarian intervention and peacebuilding. Countering terrorism and reinstating democratic governance following military coups. The Standby Force is headed by the chiefs of defence staff from member countries.

The operational concept sets out that the Task Force should be designed to mobilize quickly for rapid deployment. This can then be expanded and enhanced into a fully functional, more robust, main brigade, through deploying the Main Force when required. The concept of operation is further broken down into four phases which cover a period of six months. The first phase covering the first twenty-five days (D - D+25) includes the movements into the joint operational area. The second phase, which covers the first ninety days (D - D+90), includes movement to area of operation with a focus on stabilization. In the third phase, covering the second quarter of operations (D+90 - D+180), the focus of operation is on consolidation of the situation. This is where the Main Force would have had time to come in to augment the Task Force into a Main Brigade. The fourth phase, at the end of the six-month commitment (D+180), involves rehatting or withdrawal, as the ESF is not designed for longer-term commitments (ECOWAS, 2010).

In terms of training, ECOWAS has three centres of excellence engaged as training institutes at the strategic, operational and tactical levels respectively. In the same order, these are the National Defence College (NDC) in Nigeria, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Ghana, and the Ecole de Maintien de la Paix (EMP) in Mali (Camilla and Justin, 2020).

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is a newly formed political and security coalition established by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in the wake of ongoing political instability and widespread insecurity in the Sahel region (Segun et al., 2025). The formation of the AES is deeply rooted in the broader dynamics of governance crises, military interventions and the persistent threat posed by violent extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State-affiliated insurgents. In recent

years, these three countries have experienced military coups, leading to the suspension of democratic governance and the rise of military-led administrations (Kohnert, 2024). Following these coups, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed economic and political sanctions in an effort to pressure the military juntas to restore constitutional order. In response, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS in early 2024, denouncing what they described as interference and an unsympathetic posture towards their domestic security realities (Shkvarya & Abdoulaye, 2024). The Alliance of Sahel States was thus formed as alternative framework for mutual support, cooperation, and defence of sovereignty in the face of both internal threats and external pressures.

The emergence of the AES is primarily geared towards enhancing military cooperation and intelligence sharing among its members. The alliance underscores the principle of non-interference by foreign powers, prioritising regional solutions to regional problems. It presents itself as a mechanism to consolidate sovereignty, respond more effectively to the complex security environment, and assert political legitimacy beyond traditional Western-backed multilateral arrangements (Segun et al., 2025). However, the emergence of the AES represents more than just a security pact — it challenges the prevailing regional order led by ECOWAS. The withdrawal of these three countries, each with significant geographical and strategic weight, undermines the unity and cohesion of West African regionalism. Furthermore, the AES departs from the governance norms promoted by ECOWAS, including the emphasis on democratic transition, civilian rule and respect for constitutional processes (Kurt, 2024).

By formalising their alliance, Angalapu (2025) notes that Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have signalled a deep mistrust in ECOWAS structures and a shift towards a self-determined political path, raising critical questions about the future of regionalism and collective security in West Africa.

Sovereignty and National Security

The concepts of sovereignty and national security are crucial in understanding the dynamics, tensions and sometimes outright contradictions that characterise the establishment of ECOWAS Standby Force and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Sovereignty in its classical sense, refers to the absolute authority of a state to govern its affairs without external interference. It encompasses the right to exercise control over a defined territory, formulate domestic policies, and determine the direction of foreign relations (Omoyeni, 2023). National security, on the other hand, deals with the safeguarding of a state's sovereignty, its territorial integrity and the welfare of its citizens from both internal and external threats. These concepts are not merely theoretical; they are deeply embedded in the daily governance strategies of states, especially those grappling with insecurity and political instability (Segun et al., 2025).

In the Sahelian context, where Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have experienced multiple military coups and face persistent

threats from terrorist insurgencies — sovereignty and national security have assumed a heightened significance. The governments of these countries have framed their withdrawal from ECOWAS and the formation of the AES as a defence of national sovereignty and a strategic recalibration of their security priorities. From their perspectives, regional protocols such as the establishment of ECOWAS Standby Force, while well-intentioned, may undermine the state's ability to promote military cooperation and intelligence sharing among its members, owing to the challenges that confront the structure. Within the AES framework, sovereignty is redefined not as isolationism, but as a right to pursue alternative political and security arrangements that reflect the realities and interests of Sahelian states (Segun et al., 2025). The alliance promotes a form of regionalism that is inward-looking and prioritising mutual defence and non-interference principle. This has profound implications for protocols like the ECOWAS Security Mechanism which relies on shared responsibility and legal uniformity across borders. Thus, from the perspectives of AES leaders, regional bodies like ECOWAS have failed to provide adequate security support, and have instead imposed punitive measures that aggravate national vulnerabilities.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored on the theory of Neorealism (also known as Structural Realism). It is a strand of the classical realist tradition which was developed by Waltz (1979). He argues that the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning that there is no supranational authority to regulate interactions between states. This anarchic situation compels states to prioritize their security and survival above all other considerations, often leading them to form alliances to counter perceived threats. The major assumptions of the Neorealism theory are as follows:

- i. **Anarchy in the International System:** The international system operates in a state of anarchy, where there is no central authority to impose order or regulate state behavior.
- ii. **Security and Survival:** States act primarily in their own self-interest, seeking to enhance their security and ensure their survival. This often involves balancing power to mitigate threats.
- iii. **Self-Help System:** States cannot rely on others for their security and must therefore take matters into their own hands by building alliances, strengthening their military or pursuing other strategies to enhance their power.
- iv. **Power as the Central Focus:** States are motivated by the need to increase their power relative to other states, particularly in response to potential security threats (Segun et al., 2025).

The Neorealism theory is suitable for this study due to its capacity to elucidate the actions of the AES member states — Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso — in the context of their exit from ECOWAS and the creation of a new political and security alliance. The AES states' decision to form a

breakaway coalition, despite their previous commitments under ECOWAS, reflects a balance of power strategy. This strategic move can be understood as an attempt to consolidate their sovereignty and protect their national security, particularly in the face of external pressure from ECOWAS and the West, which imposed sanctions after the military coups.

While neorealism has been criticized for focusing predominantly on power dynamics and military security, and for downplaying the significance of economic interdependence and institutional factors (Keohane, 1984), its emphasis on security and survival makes it an ideal framework to explain the actions of AES states. The theory's core assumption of an anarchic international system and the prioritization of sovereignty and security align well with the political dynamics at play in the ECOWAS–AES relationship.

Methodology

The study adopts descriptive research design. Qualitative data obtained from secondary sources like journal articles, academic texts, newspapers, magazines and online publications were used, while the method of data analysis is content analysis.

The ECOWAS Standby Force and Security Challenges in West Africa

In recent years, West Africa has witnessed a troubling resurgence of military coups, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger. These events have raised significant concerns about the effectiveness of the ECOWAS protocol and the Organization's capacity to uphold democratic governance. The coups in Mali 2020, 2021 and Burkina Faso 2022, along with the takeover in Guinea 2021 and Niger 2023, illustrate a troubling trend of political instability that undermines the principles espoused by ECOWAS (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024; Green, 2023).

The resurgence of military coups can be attributed to various socio-political and economic factors, including widespread dissatisfaction with government, rampant corruption and deteriorating security conditions, particularly due to the rise of extremist groups (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024). In this context, ECOWAS has progressively developed a regional security framework designed to address the dynamic and complex threats confronting the sub-region. This architecture is built around several key institutions and mechanisms that collectively aim to promote peace, prevent conflict and respond to security challenges.

Among its primary components are the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), which provides guidelines for proactive conflict management, and the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), which collects and analyzes data to anticipate potential crises.

Additionally, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) serves as a regional peacekeeping and rapid intervention tool in times of armed conflict or political instability (ECOWAS Commission, 2008). These efforts are bolstered by initiatives such as the

West African Police Information System (WAPIS), which facilitates cross-border criminal intelligence sharing, and the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), a collaborative platform for regional law enforcement leaders (Obi, 2020).

Envisaged Tasks for the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF)

The tasks of the ESF would depend on the missions they are deployed for. According to the roadmap for African Standby Forces, they should be prepared for the scenarios listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Scenarios for the African Standby Force

Scenario	Description	Deployment Required
1	Military advice to a political mission	in 30 days
2	Observer mission co-deployed with a UN mission	in 30 days
3	Stand-alone observer mission	in 30 days
4	Peacekeeping force for Chapter VI and preventive deployment missions (and peace building)	in 30 days
5	Peacekeeping force for complex multidimensional peacekeeping missions, including those involving low-level spoilers	90 days, with the military mission being able to deploy in 30 days
6	Intervention, e.g. in genocide situations where the international community does not act promptly	14 days with robust military force

Source: African Union (2003) Policy Framework for the Establishment of the African Standby Force and the Military Staff Committee, EXP/ASF-MS/2(1).

Beyond these scenarios, ECOWAS has maintained eight related mission-types in its planning, which were established in its 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for conflict prevention. In an internal briefing note, these missions come with a set of envisioned tasks as set out in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Mission Types and Tasks as per ECOWAS Planning Documents

Mission-types	Tasks
1. Observation and monitoring	Infantry units lightly armed and Military Observers
2. Peacekeeping and restoration of peace	Combat units with capabilities to defeat well-armed belligerents
3. Humanitarian intervention in support of humanitarian disaster	Headquarter staff and Task Force units trained in disaster or emergency management
4. Enforcement of sanctions, including embargo	Capabilities to control the land, air and maritime borders
5. Preventive deployment	Combat units with capability to deploy rapidly
6. Peace building, disarmament and demobilisation	Military units trained in disarmament and demobilisation
7. Policing activities including the control of fraud and organised crime	Special police units
8. Any other operations mandated by the Mediation and Security Council	Training and equipment units as required

Source: ECOWAS Internal Brief (2010); ECOWAS (1999), Protocol relating to the Mechanism for conflict prevention.

ECOWAS utilizes these mission types to manage security, support political stability and maintain democratic governance across West Africa. These missions are managed primarily

through ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and the Political Affairs Directorate.

Achievements and Challenges of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF)

The ECOWAS Security Mechanism is the roadmap of collective security in West Africa and effectively dismantled most of the security obstacles. It mediated and arranged for the stepping down and exile of Charles Taylor in August 2003, following renewed hostilities that plunged Liberia into another conflict. It fully intervened in the conflict when it became full-blown. That same year, 2003, another ECOWAS taskforce was dispatched to intervene in the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. The Côte d'Ivoire case was incisive because the monitoring and pronouncement legitimized and enthroned Alassane Ouattara as winner in the November 2010 elections at the expense of incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo. Earlier in 2005, ECOWAS Security Mechanism monitored and legitimized the electoral process in Togo following the death of President G. Eyadéma. The ad hoc ECOWAS Security Mechanism also intervened and restored normalcy in the aftermath of military coups to scuttle democratic governance in Guinea-Bissau in 2003, as well as Togo in 2005 (Kabia, 2011).

These achievements notwithstanding, ECOWAS Security Mechanism is fraught with challenges in its efforts to restore peace and security in conflict-ridden countries of West Africa. They include resource constraints, operational and military readiness deficits, lack of advanced intelligence sharing mechanisms, and surveillance technologies among others; the Organization relies heavily on member states' contributions, which are often irregular, delayed or insufficient. In addition, ECOWAS depends substantially on external donors' funding to finance peace support operations, mediation efforts and institutional mechanisms (Amaechi et al., 2022; International Crisis Group, 2022). In the case of Mali, financial shortfalls significantly delayed the execution of the ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA). Funding gaps affected logistic planning, procurement of equipment, troop allowances, airlift capacity, and intelligence support. These delays were particularly costly given the rapid territorial expansion of Islamist armed groups in northern Mali in 2012 and early 2013. The inability of ECOWAS to mobilize resources swiftly allowed France's Operation Serval to assume primary responsibility for halting militant advances (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015; Shurkin, 2014). While the French intervention prevented the collapse of the Malian State, it also reinforced concerns about the limited financial autonomy of African-led security initiatives and the continued dependence on external actors for rapid response.

In addition to funding challenges, ECOWAS struggle with significant operational and military readiness deficits. Although the ECOWAS Standby Force was designed to enable rapid deployment in crisis situations, it has not consistently achieved the level of preparedness required for complex and asymmetrical conflict environments such as Mali (Usman & Ibrahim, 2025). The Malian crisis exposed its weaknesses in force generation, interoperability, strategic

airlift capability and Command/Control coordination among contributing states.

Moreover, the ECOWAS Standby Force lacks advanced intelligence-sharing systems, surveillance technologies and specialized counter-terrorism units necessary to confront highly mobile extremist groups operating across vast desert terrain. Coordination challenges between troop-contributing countries further reduced operational cohesion (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015). As Islamist militants advanced southward toward Bamako in early 2013, ECOWAS was unable to respond decisively or rapidly enough to deter escalation. This situation underscored the gap between the Organization's formal security architecture and its actual deployable capacity, making external intervention unavoidable (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015).

The recurrence of military coups in Mali 2012, 2020 and 2021 posed a direct test to ECOWAS' normative framework on constitutional order and democratic governance (Usman & Ibrahim, 2025). Although ECOWAS imposed sanctions and suspended Mali's membership following these coups, enforcement mechanisms proved inconsistent and politically negotiated outcomes diluted normative commitments.

Institutional decision-making processes also constrained ECOWAS responsiveness. Following the March 2012 coup in Mali, several months elapsed before a coherent and unified strategy emerged, despite multiple summits, diplomatic engagements, and formal resolutions (Diallo, 2017; Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015). The consensus-based nature of ECOWAS decision making, while intended to preserve unity, often slows urgent responses in fast-moving crises.

Political division among ECOWAS member states significantly complicated collective action. Nigeria, historically the organization's dominant military contributor, adopted a cautious approach, partly due to its own internal security challenges, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency. In contrast, several Francophone member states favoured stronger intervention, influenced by historical ties, security interdependence, and alignment with France's strategic posture (Diallo, 2017).

Although Algeria is not a member of ECOWAS, its regional influence and preference for dialogue over military intervention shaped broader Sahelian security calculations. These differing threat perceptions and strategic priorities weakened collective resolve and slowed decision-making (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Since 2012, violence has expanded from northern Mali into the central regions and across borders into Burkina Faso and Niger. Armed groups have adapted by exploiting inter-communal tensions, weak governance and porous borders (Thurston, 2020; Parádelo-López & Jima-González, 2024).

In 2019, Burkina Faso replaced Mali as the epicentre of the Sahel Crisis. Jihadi groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) consolidated their hold on several regions after opening new fronts the previous year. These groups have

exploited local ethnic cleavages while self-defense groups, vigilantes, and community-based militias have become increasingly embroiled in counter-terrorism efforts. This has triggered cyclical episodes of localized intercommunal violence characterized by tit-for-tat killings between jihadi militant groups on one side, and communal self-defense groups on the other (Clionadh et al., 2020).

One of the main reasons for the exit of Sahel States from ECOWAS was the continuation of terrorism and insurgencies in the Sahel. To combat insurgencies associated with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), ECOWAS had set up a number of security frameworks, including the Accra Initiative and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (Tchie, 2022). But these efforts had not done much to stop violence. Large-scale attacks had caused severe internal displacement and refugee crises, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali (Harmon, 2024). These states had resorted to alternative alliances, such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and Russian military cooperation, particularly with the Wagner Group, in place of ECOWAS' inadequate security mechanism (Shinn, 2023). Thus, the decision to leave ECOWAS is associated with the freedom to implement counter-terrorism plans free from regional bureaucratic restrictions, which strengthens the claim that ECOWAS is incapable of meeting their urgent security needs.

Political, Economic and Security Implications of the Exit of Sahel States from ECOWAS

Political Implications

The exit of the Sahel states from ECOWAS demonstrates the rising anti-Western sentiment and a shift towards military governance in these countries. The future of democracy in these countries remains uncertain, with growing concern about long-term stability and the erosion of civic freedoms. For instance, in Mali, the military government officially dissolved all political parties on May 14, 2025, thus bringing an abrupt end to any hope of a transition to civilian rule. What was presented as a temporary intervention aimed at stabilizing the country has instead evolved into a prolonged period of military rule. The promise of restoring democratic governance had faded as Mali now faces deepening political crisis.

In Burkina Faso, insecurity and various forms of misgovernance, which were reasons adduced for military takeover, have derailed the hitherto transition to civil-rule agenda. In September 2024, Military President of Burkina Faso Ibrahim Traoré stated that his priority was to address insecurity and safeguarding the nation, not elections (ISS, 2025).

According to Human Rights Watch (2025), Niger's transition to civil rule is bleaker, as the administration under Abdourahamane Tiani has moved the transition period from three years to five years due to the worsening security situation in the Sahel (Mudge, 2025).

Flowing from the above, there is a possibility that the enthronement of military regimes in the Sahel states might have a contagious effect on other fragile states that are at

different stages of transition to civil rule. According to Al Jazeera (2023), there were 214 coups in Africa from 1950 to 2022. Between 1960 and 2022, about 200 military coups (both successful and failed) occurred in Africa, of which West Africa produced 104 (successful and failed) coups (Chilaka & Peter, 2022). Between 2020 and 2025, there were seven coups in West Africa: two in Mali on August 19, 2020, and May 24, 2021, respectively; one in Guinea in 2021; two in Guinea-Bissau in 2022 and 2025; one in Burkina Faso in 2022; and one in Niger in 2023. There was a failed coup in the Republic of Benin on December 7, 2025 (Chilaka & Peter, 2022; Maclean, 2022; Alder, 2025). Thus, the exit of the AES trio from ECOWAS, as well as their reluctance to embrace democratic governance, may embolden other countries with similar sentiments to toe the undemocratic path to governance.

Economic Implications

ECOWAS was created to enlarge and expand the sub-regional market, which was hitherto rigid and segmented, ensure free movement of people and factors of production, and enhance their bargaining power on the Continent and the world (Obuah, 2026). The exit of the Sahel states means that ECOWAS will lose an estimated 76 million of its 446 million people and more than half of its total geographical area. ECOWAS provided a platform for free movement of people and goods within the sub-region. With the breakaway of the AES, the stability of trade and economic relations within the sub-region would be at risk. There will be an introduction of restriction of movement, trade and border controls, which could further exacerbate economic hardship in these countries already struggling with the consequences of conflict and humanitarian crises (Zanns, 2025).

Since 2015, import tariffs for intra-ECOWAS goods were eliminated, and a Common External Tariff (CET) with five bands was levied on imports from non-ECOWAS countries regardless of the first port of entry into the group. As a consequence of their exit, the AES trio will be obligated to adhere to the CET rates for their imports into ECOWAS and revert to using the WTO's Most Favoured Nation rates on imports from ECOWAS countries. They will be further hurt by the Community levy, a 0.5% tax ECOWAS imposes on goods from non-ECOWAS member states to fund the bloc's budget (Resnick, 2025).

In the area of food security, the exit of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) might have severe consequences. Since the AES countries are landlocked, the economic impact from the tariff increases and the loss of coastal access in Dakar, Cotonou, Abidjan, Tema, Lagos and Lomé will be worse for them than the remaining ECOWAS counterparts. Their exports would also be less competitive. Niger is a key source of onions, while Burkina Faso and Mali are great exporters of livestock to the sub-region. Their exit would shift this trade to other ECOWAS states, which will no doubt threaten the economic stability of the bloc. (Zanns, 2025)

Security Implications

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter in September 2023, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The agreement pledged members to mutual protection in the event of internal revolt or external assault (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Charter presented the alliance as a sovereign tool to ensure national existence, reflecting their leaders' belief that ECOWAS had become more punitive than helpful in dealing with their security and governance challenges (Adebayo, 2023).

The three states signed a Confederation treaty in Niamey in July 2024, further formalizing their collaboration. This pact signaled an ongoing endeavor rather than a short-term tactical alliance, extending beyond security to include economic cooperation and diplomacy (France 24, 2024). The AES leaders complicated ECOWAS' bargaining positions by solidifying their affiliation outside of ECOWAS' structure and creating a bloc that speaks with a single voice in regional security discussions (Amani Africa, 2024). This move by the AES leaders challenges the traditional dominance of ECOWAS in regional security matters and may lead to a shift in power dynamics within the Sahel region.

ECOWAS' collective security framework is based on three key instruments: the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security; the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance; and the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (Hartmann, 2017). These tools rely on widespread member engagement, shared resources, and access to operational theaters. The absence of the three Sahelian states reduces ECOWAS' reach and legitimacy, particularly in the areas where cross-border insurgency is most prevalent (Oloruntoba, 2016).

The AES-ECOWAS schism undermines security cooperation in a variety of ways. Thus, intelligence sharing and cross-border pursuit of rebels have become more fragmented, sanctions are more difficult to enforce, and cooperation with external players like the African Union and the United Nations has been disturbed (Institute for Security Studies, 2024). The establishment of two parallel blocs undermines collective deterrence and empowers armed groups who exploit jurisdictional gaps (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The operational impacts are already obvious, hence ECOWAS sanctions on Niger in 2023 were undercut by neighbouring states providing alternate trade channels, particularly through Guinea, thereby diminishing the impact of economic pressure (Reuters, 2023). By 2025, Niger had declared its withdrawal from the Lake Chad Basin Multinational Joint Task Force, thus undermining international counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram and allied organizations (HumAngle, 2025). Such situations demonstrate how regional fragmentation can create operational gaps for armed parties to exploit.

The AES governments have also established strategic realignment, thereby reducing their dependence on France and Western allies, while expanding connections with Russia and

other non-Western entities (Carbone, 2024). This situation has injected new foreign power dynamics into West African security governance.

Conclusion

The study aims to examine the extent to which the ECOWAS Standby Force has been able to address security challenges in the Central Sahel region of West Africa. It also explores the political, economic and security implications of the exit of Sahel States from ECOWAS. We anchored our analysis on the theory of Neorealism (also known as Structural Realism), articulated by Waltz (1979), and found that the efforts of the ECOWAS standby force to restore peace and security in the region is hampered by a multitude of structural, institutional and political challenges such as lack of a standing military force, logistical and institutional weaknesses, over reliance on external donors among others.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for mutual defence and cooperation between its members. Its emergence represents more than a security pact; it challenges the prevailing regional order led by ECOWAS.

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS threatens to disrupt cross-border trade, raise transit and consumer costs, and worsens food insecurity for landlocked economies. The exit marks a deep crisis for West African regionalism and reshapes the geopolitical balance of the continent. The exit has also fractured regional security cooperation, creating a dangerous counterterrorism vacuum and destabilizing borders across West Africa.

Recommendations

- i. There is need for the establishment of a permanent ECOWAS Intelligence Fusion Center (EIFC) to serve as the hub for real-time intelligence collection, analysis and dissemination among member states.
- ii. Boosting ECOWAS' economy requires targeted improvements in infrastructure, regional trade integration, agricultural modernization and private-sector investment.
- iii. ECOWAS should be steadfast in its resolve in keeping to its protocols on democratic governance in the region.
- iv. There is need for the establishment of a regional Security Trust Fund, financed through assessed contributions and levies on trade taxes in order to reduce ECOWAS' overreliance on external donors.

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