

ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States: Regional Security, Integration, and the Withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

CEDEAO et Alliance des États du Sahel: Sécurité régionale, intégration et retrait du Mali, du Burkina Faso et du Niger

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Abstract:

This study examines the transformation of the West African regional order following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The analysis covers the period from the 2020 military coup in Mali to the post-withdrawal context in 2026. Following successive military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023, ECOWAS adopted sanctions and other coercive measures aimed at restoring constitutional order. During the Niger crisis, ECOWAS also considered military intervention and took measures concerning its Standby Force, although no military intervention ultimately took place. In response to the deteriorating relationship with ECOWAS, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) on 16 September 2023 through the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The three governments announced their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS on 28 January 2024. On 6 July 2024, they established the Confederation of Sahel States in Niamey. Their withdrawal from ECOWAS became legally effective on 29 January 2025 under the applicable withdrawal procedure of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty.

The study employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), qualitative documentary analysis, historical institutional analysis, and comparative analysis. It argues that the withdrawal did not eliminate regional security interdependence; rather, it changed the institutional mechanisms through which such interdependence is managed. The emergence of parallel regional structures has increased institutional differentiation, complicated collective security coordination, and created new challenges for economic and political integration in West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS; Alliance of Sahel States; regional security; military coups; regional integration; West Africa.

Résumé:

Cette étude examine la transformation de l'ordre régional en Afrique de l'Ouest suite au retrait du Mali, du Burkina Faso et du Niger de la Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO). L'analyse couvre la période allant du coup d'État militaire de 2020 au Mali jusqu'au contexte post-retrait en 2026. À la suite de prises de pouvoir militaires successives au Mali, au Burkina Faso et au Niger entre 2020 et 2023, la CEDEAO a adopté des sanctions et d'autres mesures coercitives visant à rétablir l'ordre constitutionnel. Pendant la

crise nigérienne, la CEDEAO a également envisagé une intervention militaire et pris des mesures concernant sa Force en attente, bien qu'aucune intervention militaire n'ait finalement eu lieu. En réponse à la détérioration de leurs relations avec la CEDEAO, le Mali, le Burkina Faso et du Niger ont établi l'Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) le 16 septembre 2023 à travers la Charte du Liptako-Gourma. Les trois gouvernements ont annoncé leur intention de se retirer de la CEDEAO le 28 janvier 2024. Le 6 juillet 2024, ils ont fondé la Confédération des États du Sahel à Niamey. Leur retrait de la CEDEAO est devenu juridiquement effectif le 29 janvier 2025 conformément à la procédure de retrait applicable du Traité révisé de la CEDEAO.

L'étude mobilise la Théorie du Complexe de Sécurité Régional (TCSR), l'analyse documentaire qualitative, l'analyse institutionnelle historique et l'analyse comparative. Elle soutient que le retrait n'a pas éliminé l'interdépendance en matière de sécurité régionale ; il a plutôt modifié les mécanismes institutionnels par lesquels cette interdépendance est gérée. L'émergence de structures régionales parallèles a accru la différenciation institutionnelle, compliqué la coordination de la sécurité collective et engendré de nouveaux défis pour l'intégration économique et politique en Afrique de l'Ouest.

Mots-clés : CEDEAO ; Alliance des États du Sahel ; sécurité régionale ; coups d'État militaires ; intégration régionale ; Afrique de l'Ouest.

Introduction:

West Africa has experienced significant political and security transformations during the last decade. Military coups, violent extremism, transnational organized crime, institutional instability, and disagreements over democratic governance have placed considerable pressure on existing regional mechanisms. These developments have also exposed tensions between the principles of constitutional governance promoted by regional organizations and the political preferences of several military-led governments in the Sahel.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on 28 May 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos. Initially conceived principally as an organization for economic cooperation and integration, ECOWAS gradually expanded its activities to include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, political mediation, and regional security. The organization consequently developed a security dimension that became increasingly important following the civil wars and political crises that affected West Africa during the 1990s and 2000s.

The development of ECOWAS's security role was accompanied by the creation of institutional and legal mechanisms for conflict management. The 1999 Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance strengthened the organization's role in responding to political instability and unconstitutional changes of government.

However, the wave of military coups that affected the region from 2020 onwards created a major challenge to this framework. Mali experienced coups in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso experienced two coups in 2022, and Niger experienced a military coup in July 2023. ECOWAS responded with sanctions and diplomatic pressure and, in the case of Niger, adopted measures concerning the possible use of force and the ECOWAS Standby Force.

The Niger crisis became particularly significant because it intensified disagreements between ECOWAS and the military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, which expressed solidarity

with Niger. On 16 September 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger established the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel—AES) through the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The Charter established a collective defence and mutual assistance framework and provided for cooperation against terrorism and organized crime.

The relationship subsequently deteriorated further. On 28 January 2024, the three governments announced their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS. The announcement was followed by efforts to develop alternative forms of regional cooperation. On 6 July 2024, the three states met in Niamey and adopted the treaty establishing the Confederation of Sahel States. United Nations documentation subsequently described the AES as a military alliance established for collective defence and mutual assistance and noted its transformation into a confederation following the July 2024 summit.

The legal withdrawal from ECOWAS, however, did not occur immediately after the January 2024 announcement. Under the applicable withdrawal procedure, the three states formally ceased to be ECOWAS members on 29 January 2025. ECOWAS subsequently confirmed that date as the effective date of withdrawal.

This distinction between political announcement, institutional reorganization, and legal withdrawal is important. Treating these events as a single process risks obscuring the legal and institutional dimensions of the transformation.

Existing scholarship has examined military coups in the Sahel, ECOWAS sanctions, the Niger crisis, and the emergence of the AES. However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how the withdrawal of the three states interacts simultaneously with regional security, institutional fragmentation, economic integration, and the restructuring of the West African security complex.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following main research question:

What are the implications of the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS for regional security, stability, and integration in West Africa?

This question is divided into three sub-questions:

- What political, security, and geopolitical factors contributed to the withdrawal of the three states from ECOWAS?
- How has the emergence of the AES and its Confederation affected the regional security architecture?
- What are the principal implications of the withdrawal for regional economic integration and institutional cooperation?

The study advances three hypotheses:

- **H1:** The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger resulted from the interaction of political, security, economic, and geopolitical factors, with ECOWAS sanctions and the Niger crisis acting as important catalysts.
- **H2:** The emergence of the AES as an alternative framework of cooperation is likely to complicate collective security management by creating parallel institutional arrangements within the wider West African security environment.

- **H3:** The withdrawal is likely to deepen differences in threat perceptions and political orientations among West African states, thereby contributing to greater differentiation within the regional security complex.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework:

1. Regional Security Complex Theory

This study employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed principally by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. RSCT emphasizes that security dynamics are strongly influenced by patterns of security interdependence among geographically proximate states. Security threats tend to travel more easily over short geographical distances, making the regional level particularly important for understanding international security.

The theory is particularly relevant to the West African context because political instability, terrorism, organized crime, border insecurity, migration, and economic interdependence frequently transcend national boundaries.

The study operationalizes RSCT through four analytical dimensions:

- Security interdependence refers to the extent to which the security conditions of one state affect those of neighboring states.
- Threat perceptions concern the ways in which governments interpret political instability, terrorism, unconstitutional changes of government, and external intervention.
- Patterns of cooperation and confrontation concern the institutional relationships through which states respond to common or competing security challenges.
- Differentiated security sub-complexes refer to situations in which security relationships within a wider region become increasingly differentiated according to distinct political, strategic, or institutional orientations.

Applied to the present case, RSCT makes it possible to examine whether the emergence of the AES represents a temporary institutional response or a deeper transformation of the West African regional security architecture. The study does not assume that the AES has replaced ECOWAS as the dominant regional security organization. Rather, it examines whether the coexistence of ECOWAS and AES structures has produced greater institutional differentiation within an already interconnected security environment.

2. Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative methodology based principally on documentary analysis. The corpus includes:

- ECOWAS treaties, protocols, communiqués, and official statements;
- legal instruments relating to the withdrawal of member states;
- the Liptako-Gourma Charter;
- documents concerning the Confederation of Sahel States;
- African Union decisions and statements;
- United Nations documents;
- regional and international institutional reports;
- academic studies published between 2020 and 2026.

Priority is given to primary sources that directly address membership, withdrawal procedures, sanctions, security cooperation, regional institutional arrangements, and post-withdrawal relations. Secondary academic literature is used to contextualize and interpret these primary materials.

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Three complementary methods are employed. Qualitative documentary analysis is utilized to identify the principal political, legal, and institutional developments. Additionally, historical institutional analysis is applied to trace the evolution of ECOWAS from an economic organization toward a broader political and security institution and to examine how the withdrawal process challenged that evolution. Finally, comparative analysis is integrated, through which the pre-withdrawal ECOWAS-centered regional framework is compared with the post-withdrawal environment characterized by parallel ECOWAS and AES structures.

1. ECOWAS and the AES: From Regional Integration to Institutional Fragmentation

This section analyzes the structural evolution of West African regionalism, tracing how ECOWAS expanded from an economic union into a security actor alongside the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States.

1.1. ECOWAS: From Economic Integration to Regional Security

ECOWAS was created on 28 May 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos with the principal objective of promoting economic cooperation and integration among West African states.¹ Fifteen West African states signed the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, while Cabo Verde subsequently joined ECOWAS in 1977². Mauritania withdrew from the organization in December 2000.

The institutional development of ECOWAS gradually expanded beyond economic matters. Its institutional architecture includes the Commission, the Community Parliament, the Community Court of Justice, the West African Health Organization, and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development.

¹ - Adisa Oluyemi, Opeoluwa. « The Cold War Resurgence: A Discourse on the Rivalry between ECOWAS and AES in West Africa ». *International Journal of Social Sciences and English Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2025, p. 05.

² - Osuchukwu, C.N., W.C. Itke, and I.G. Emesiani. « The Alliance of Sahel States and the Future of West African Regional Integration ». *Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies*, Vol. 13(1), 2025, p. 30.

The expansion of ECOWAS into the field of security was strongly influenced by the conflicts that affected Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) played an important role in regional peace operations, demonstrating that ECOWAS could act not only as an economic organization but also as a security actor³.

The 1993 Revised ECOWAS Treaty reinforced this broader conception of regional cooperation. The subsequent adoption of the 1999 Conflict Prevention Protocol⁴, and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance further strengthened the organization's political and security responsibilities.

These developments contributed to the institutionalization of regional responses to unconstitutional changes of government. ECOWAS subsequently intervened diplomatically or operationally in several crises, including those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and The Gambia⁵.

The organization therefore developed a normative framework connecting regional stability with constitutional governance. This evolution became increasingly important as military coups returned to the political landscape of West Africa.

Between 2020 and 2023, military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger challenged the established regional order. ECOWAS responded with sanctions and diplomatic measures intended to encourage a return to constitutional governance⁶.

The Niger crisis represented the most serious confrontation. Following the July 2023 coup, ECOWAS imposed sanctions and adopted decisions providing for measures that could include the use of force. The organization subsequently took measures concerning its Standby Force while continuing to pursue diplomatic efforts. No military intervention ultimately took place.

The crisis nevertheless had consequences beyond Niger. It strengthened solidarity among the military-led governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and contributed to the emergence of an alternative security framework.

1.2. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger: From Military Solidarity to the Confederation of Sahel States

The transformation of relations between the three Sahelian states and ECOWAS can be understood through four major chronological stages:

- On 16 September 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger established the Alliance of Sahel States through the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The Charter created an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance and identified terrorism, organized crime, threats to territorial integrity, and sovereignty as

³ - Mabum, Kwasen. « The quest for stability in West Africa: ECOWAS' role in conflict mediation and security governance ». *African Research Reports*, Vol. 1(3), August 2025, p. 120.

⁴ - Boni Bazza, Mike, Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, and Paul Pilani Michael. « ECOWAS AND THE OPTION OF THE SAHEL THREE: COMPETING SOVEREIGNTY AND THE DILEMMA OF A FRAGILE REGION ». *AHURI Final Report Journal*, Vol. 18(12), December 2025, p. 95.

⁵ - Mabum, Kwasen. Op. Cit., p. 118.

⁶ - Sow, Djiby, and Melissa Li. *ECOWAS in Crisis: A Case for Ambitious Reforms*. Institute for Security Studies, The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), Berlin, Germany, 2025, p. 75.

common security concerns. United Nations documentation similarly describes the AES as a military alliance for collective defence and mutual assistance⁷.

- On 28 January 2024, the three governments announced their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS⁸.
- On 6 July 2024, the three states held their first summit in Niamey and adopted the treaty establishing the Confederation of Sahel States. The Confederation represented an attempt to broaden the original security alliance into a wider framework of political, diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation⁹.
- On 29 January 2025, the withdrawal of the three states from ECOWAS became legally effective. ECOWAS officially confirmed that Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger were no longer members from that date.

These four stages must be analytically distinguished. The establishment of the AES was not itself a withdrawal from ECOWAS. Similarly, the creation of the Confederation did not automatically terminate ECOWAS membership. The three states therefore remained ECOWAS members during the applicable withdrawal period, while the legal termination of their membership took effect on 29 January 2025¹⁰. The legally decisive point is that the withdrawal became effective on 29 January 2025.

1.2.1. Military Rule and the Crisis of Legitimacy

The political background of the withdrawal is closely connected with the emergence of military governments in the three countries. Mali experienced a military coup in August 2020 and another change of power in May 2021. Burkina Faso experienced two military takeovers in January and September 2022. Niger experienced a military coup in July 2023.

ECOWAS regarded these events as unconstitutional changes of government and adopted measures aimed at encouraging a return to constitutional order. The military governments, however, increasingly questioned the legitimacy and effectiveness of ECOWAS's approach¹¹. Their political discourse emphasized sovereignty, national security, and opposition to external political pressure¹².

This divergence produced a legitimacy conflict. ECOWAS emphasized constitutional governance as a regional norm, whereas the military governments increasingly prioritized national sovereignty and security autonomy. The disagreement therefore concerned not only the legality of military rule but also the meaning of legitimate regional intervention.

1.2.2. ECOWAS Sanctions and the Escalation of Political Tensions

⁷ - Boni Bazza, Mike, Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, and Paul Pilani Michael. Op. Cit., p. 97.

⁸ - Adisa Oluyemi, Opeoluwa. Op. Cit., p. 05.

⁹ - Acho, Gerald. « ECOWAS after the 'Triple Withdrawal' and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States: Challenges and Ways Ahead for Regional Security Governance ». *GGI Analysis 3/2024*, Brussels: Global Governance Institute, 2024, p. 07.

¹⁰ - Sow, Djiby, and Melissa Li. Op. Cit., p. 82.

¹¹ - Hassan, Hamdy A. « The withdrawal of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS: What Implications for West African Integration? ». *Cuadernos de Política Exterior Argentina (Nueva Época)*, 143, 2026, p. 18.

¹² - Boni Bazza, Mike, Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, and Paul Pilani Michael. Op. Cit., p. 96.

ECOWAS relied on sanctions as one of its principal instruments for responding to unconstitutional changes of government. Sanctions were intended to impose political and economic costs and encourage transitional authorities to restore constitutional governance. Nevertheless, sanctions also generated political and social consequences¹³.

In the case of Niger, the severity of the confrontation increased after ECOWAS adopted measures authorizing the possibility of using force and subsequently took steps concerning its Standby Force. Mali and Burkina Faso expressed solidarity with Niger¹⁴, while the AES increasingly presented itself as an alternative framework for collective defence.

From this perspective, sanctions should not be considered in isolation. Their effects interacted with existing political grievances, sovereignty concerns, security pressures, and changing geopolitical alignments. ECOWAS's reliance on sanctions and coercive pressure appears to have contributed to a hardening of positions between the organization and the three states, although the withdrawal cannot be attributed to sanctions alone. The resulting confrontation contributed to a deterioration of trust between the three states and ECOWAS¹⁵.

1.2.3. Escalation of Security Threats

Security pressures constitute another major factor in the transformation of the regional order. The central Sahel continues to face threats from terrorist organizations, armed groups, organized crime networks, and other forms of insecurity. These threats are transnational and therefore cannot be effectively contained within national borders.

The security situation creates strong interdependence among Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and neighboring states. Armed groups operate across borders, while instability can affect Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and other states in the wider region.

The security dilemma is therefore paradoxical. On the one hand, the three AES states seek greater autonomy from ECOWAS and other external actors. On the other hand, their security problems require sustained cross-border cooperation¹⁶. This demonstrates one of the central propositions of RSCT: institutional divergence does not necessarily eliminate security interdependence. The creation of the AES can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to reorganize security cooperation around a smaller group of states sharing similar political orientations and threat perceptions¹⁷.

1.2.4. Geopolitical Alignment and Strategic Diversification

¹³ - Adisa Oluyemi, Opeoluwa, and Aidi Yusuf Babawale. « REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CRISIS: DISSECTING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SAHELIAN WITHDRAWAL FROM ECOWAS ». *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review*, Vol. 09, Issue 02, March-April 2026, p. 669.

¹⁴ - Boni Bazza, Mike, Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, and Paul Pilani Michael. Op. Cit., p. 96.

¹⁵ -Sow, Djiby. Op. Cit., p. 82.

¹⁶ -Uwak, U. E., Victor Etefia, and Victor Ebong. « West African Fragmentation and the Sahel State Exiting Ecowas: The Implication for the Sub-Regional Cohesion ». *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, Vol. 09, Issue 02, February 2026, p. 1450.

¹⁷ -Boni Bazza, Mike, Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, and Paul Pilani Michael. Op. Cit., p. 96.

The political transformation of the Sahel has also been accompanied by changes in external partnerships. The governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have sought to diversify their international relations and reduce dependence on traditional Western partners¹⁸. Russia has become particularly important in their security and diplomatic strategies, although the extent and form of external partnerships differ from one country to another.

Other international actors, including China, Turkey, and Iran, have also developed relations with African states, including countries in the Sahel, but these relationships should not be treated as identical or equally significant across the three AES members. The relevant analytical point is therefore not the existence of a single external alliance but the broader diversification of international partnerships¹⁹.

From an RSCT perspective, this process introduces additional external actors into an already complex regional security environment. External partnerships can affect threat perceptions, military cooperation, diplomatic alignments, and the distribution of influence within the region.

2. ECOWAS and the AES at a Crossroads: Implications for West Africa

This section evaluates the wide-ranging ramifications of the trilateral departure, examining how institutional fragmentation impacts regional credibility, security architectures, and economic integration.

2.1. ECOWAS Credibility and Institutional Authority

The withdrawal of three states represents a significant institutional challenge for ECOWAS. The organization has historically presented itself as both an economic integration framework and a political-security organization. The withdrawal therefore raises questions about the capacity of ECOWAS to maintain common regional norms while preserving cohesion among member states²⁰.

The crisis also illustrates the difficulty of reconciling two objectives: defending constitutional governance and maintaining political dialogue with governments that reject ECOWAS's preferred transition frameworks²¹.

The experience of the three AES states suggests that coercive measures may generate unintended consequences when political trust is already weak. Sanctions can provide incentives for compliance, but they may also strengthen narratives of external pressure and encourage affected governments to develop alternative institutional arrangements²².

This does not necessarily mean that ECOWAS's normative framework is ineffective²³. Rather, it demonstrates the difficulty of enforcing regional norms in an environment characterized by severe security threats, domestic political instability, and competing geopolitical interests. The

¹⁸ -Hassan, Hamdy A. Op. Cit., p. 18.

¹⁹ -Acho, Gerald. Op. Cit., p. p. 11.

²⁰ -Ansah, Robert Abeku. « The Withdrawal of Sahel States from ECOWAS: A Political Analysis of the Regional Crisis ». *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, February 2025, p. 172.

²¹ -Sogodogo, Abdoul. « Les relations entre l'AES et la CEDEAO : état des lieux et perspectives ». *Policy Brief*, 7 February 2025, p. 14. February 15 August 2026. Available at: <https://pasas-minka.fr/fr/resources/download/1143>

²² -Adisa Oluyemi, Opeoluwa, and Aidi Yusuf Babawale. Op. Cit., p. 672.

²³ -Acho, Gerald. Op. Cit., p. 06.

challenge for ECOWAS is consequently to combine normative consistency with institutional flexibility and sustained diplomatic engagement²⁴.

2.2. Regional Security amid Changing Geopolitics

The security implications of the withdrawal are particularly important. The withdrawal did not remove Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the West African security environment. Their geographical position, shared borders, migration routes, trade connections, and exposure to transnational armed groups ensure that their security remains interconnected with that of ECOWAS member states.

From an RSCT perspective, the withdrawal should therefore be interpreted as a transformation of the institutional management of security interdependence rather than its disappearance.

The emergence of the AES creates a new security arrangement centered on three states. Its original Liptako-Gourma Charter established collective defence and mutual assistance as core objectives. The Confederation subsequently expanded the scope of cooperation²⁵. Nevertheless, it should not automatically be described as a fully integrated supranational organization or as a complete substitute for ECOWAS. Its long-term effectiveness will depend on its institutional capacity, financial resources, military coordination, diplomatic cohesion, and ability to respond to transnational security threats²⁶.

At the same time, ECOWAS continues to provide a broader regional framework involving a larger number of West African states. The coexistence of the two frameworks therefore produces a more differentiated security environment. The risk is that intelligence sharing, border coordination, counterterrorism cooperation, and crisis management could become more complicated if political disagreements prevent effective cooperation across institutional boundaries. Nevertheless, the persistence of security interdependence creates incentives for practical cooperation even in the absence of political agreement²⁷.

2.3. Economic Impact and Integration Challenges

The economic consequences of the withdrawal are equally significant. ECOWAS was created principally to promote economic integration, free movement, trade liberalization, and regional cooperation. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are deeply connected to neighboring ECOWAS economies through trade routes, transportation networks, migration, labor mobility, and cross-border markets. Their withdrawal therefore creates institutional complications without necessarily eliminating economic interdependence²⁸.

ECOWAS itself recognized this reality when the withdrawal became effective on 29 January 2025. The organization requested that its authorities and member states continue, until further notice, to recognize national passports and identity cards bearing the ECOWAS logo issued to

²⁴ -Ansah, Robert Abeku. Op. Cit., p. 170.

²⁵ -Hassan, Hamdy A. Op. Cit., p. 12.

-Bagayoko, Niagalé. « AES versus CEDEAO : Vers la fragmentation de l'Afrique de l'Ouest ? ». 26 March 2025, p. 04. Accessed 15 February 2026. Available at: <https://fmes-france.org/aes-versus-cedeao-vers-la-fragmentation-de-lafrique-de-louest/>

²⁶ -Acho, Gerald. Op. Cit., p. 08.

²⁷ -Hassan, Hamdy A. Op. Cit., p. 19.

²⁸ -Sow, Djiby, and Melissa Li. Op. Cit., p. 86.

citizens of the three countries. It also requested the continued treatment of goods and services under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and investment policy and maintained visa-free movement, residence, and establishment arrangements for citizens of the three countries until further notice²⁹.

These measures demonstrate an important distinction between legal withdrawal and practical disengagement. The termination of membership did not immediately eliminate the dense economic and social relationships developed over decades of regional integration. This transitional approach also reflects the practical costs of abrupt economic separation. Traders, migrants, transport operators, businesses, and border communities depend on predictable rules. Consequently, the long-term economic impact of the withdrawal will depend not only on political relations between ECOWAS and the AES but also on the extent to which both sides preserve functional arrangements for trade, movement, investment, and transport³⁰. The creation of alternative economic mechanisms within the AES may gradually reduce dependence on ECOWAS institutions. However, building equivalent regional infrastructure requires substantial institutional and financial capacity. The economic relationship between the two blocs is therefore likely to remain characterized by both competition and interdependence³¹.

3. The Broader Regional and Institutional Implications

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has implications extending beyond the relationship between ECOWAS and the three states.

- It challenges the principle that regional integration is necessarily accompanied by political convergence. The experience of the AES demonstrates that states may remain geographically and economically interconnected while simultaneously developing alternative political and security institutions.
- The situation highlights the tension between regional constitutional norms and state sovereignty. ECOWAS has developed rules concerning democracy and constitutional governance. The AES governments have increasingly emphasized national sovereignty and political autonomy. The confrontation between these approaches has become one of the defining political tensions in contemporary West Africa³².
- The withdrawal may encourage greater differentiation within the West African security complex. Rather than a single institutional framework organizing

²⁹ -Acho, Gerald. Op. Cit., p. 07.

³⁰ - Deegbe, Fiifi. « From ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahel States: Shifting Security Architectures in West Africa ». *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, Vol. 10, Issue 01, January 2026, p. 7703.

³¹ -Lawal, Mohammed Dahiru. « Traders turn smugglers, two years after Sahel countries exit ECOWAS ». 1 April 2026. Accessed 15 February 2026. Available at: <https://prnigeria.com/2026/04/01/traders-turn-smugglers-sahel/>

³² -Folahanmi, Aina, Babatunde Afolabi, and John Kayode Fayemi. « The Alliance of Sahel States, Democratic Relapse, Insecurity, and the Prospects of Regional (Dis)integration or (Re)integration in West Africa ». *Journal of Society*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 1 February 2026, p. 71.

regional security cooperation, the region now contains overlapping mechanisms with different memberships, political orientations, and strategic priorities³³.

- The development of the AES does not necessarily mean the disappearance of regional cooperation. On the contrary, the emergence of a new regional arrangement confirms the continuing importance of collective action³⁴.

The critical question is therefore whether the new institutional landscape will generate constructive pluralism or persistent fragmentation.

The African Union has also expressed concern about the deterioration of relations between the three states and ECOWAS³⁵. In February 2024, the AU Assembly expressed concern over the establishment of the AES, noted with grave concern the joint communiqué announcing the withdrawal from ECOWAS, and called on the authorities of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to reconsider their decision and engage in dialogue with ECOWAS in the spirit of African integration and Agenda 2063³⁶. This position demonstrates that the issue has implications for continental integration as well as West African regionalism.

The long-term outcome will depend on whether ECOWAS, the AES, and the African Union can develop mechanisms allowing security cooperation and economic interaction to continue despite political disagreements.

Conclusion:

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS represents one of the most significant transformations of the contemporary West African regional order. Rather than a singular event, this process evolved through several interconnected milestones: the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States on 16 September 2023, the formal announcement of withdrawal on 28 January 2024, the creation of the Confederation of Sahel States on 6 July 2024, and the final legal effectiveness of the withdrawal on 29 January 2025.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that this institutional shift stemmed from a confluence of interacting drivers rather than a single catalyst. Political disagreements over military governance and constitutional order intersected directly with ECOWAS sanctions, the Niger crisis, pressing security challenges, sovereignty concerns, and shifting geopolitical alignments.

- The first principal finding is that ECOWAS has evolved from an economic organization into a significant political and security institution. This evolution enabled the organization to respond to unconstitutional changes of government, but it also exposed ECOWAS to greater political confrontation with military-led governments.

³³ -Deegbe, Fiifi. Op. Cit. p. 7703.

³⁴ -Adamu, Mohammed, and Umar Abubakar Arabo. « REGIONAL STABILITY AND INTEGRATION: THE IMPLICATION OF THE WITHDRAWAL OF BURKINA FASO, MALI AND NIGER FROM ECOWAS ». *ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)*, Vol. 02, Issue 06, November-December 2024, p. 178.

³⁵ - Aboagye, Festus B. « The Withdrawal of AES from ECOWAS: An opportunity for re-evaluating existing instruments for regional integration? ». 31 January 2025. Accessed 15 February 2026. Available at: <https://amaniafrica-et.org/the-withdrawal-of-aes-from-ecowas-an-opportunity-for-re-evaluating-existing-instruments-for-regional-integration/>

³⁶ -African Union. Assembly/AU/Dec.868(XXXVII), *Decisions of the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union*. Addis Ababa, 17–18 February 2024.

- The second finding is that the withdrawal cannot be explained exclusively by sanctions. Sanctions appear to have contributed to the deterioration of relations, but they operated within a broader context of political distrust, security crises, changing domestic legitimacy, and geopolitical diversification.
- The third finding is that the AES represents an attempt to create an alternative framework for collective security and political cooperation. The Liptako-Gourma Charter initially established a collective defence and mutual assistance architecture, while the 2024 Confederation sought to broaden cooperation among the three states.
- The fourth finding concerns regional security. From the perspective of RSCT, the withdrawal did not eliminate security interdependence among the three states and their neighbors. Terrorism, organized crime, border insecurity, migration, and economic interaction remain transnational phenomena. Institutional fragmentation therefore coexists with persistent security interdependence.
- The fifth finding concerns economic integration. The withdrawal creates legal and institutional complications for trade, movement, investment, and regional economic cooperation. Nevertheless, ECOWAS's transitional arrangements demonstrate that practical interdependence cannot be immediately eliminated by legal withdrawal. The continuation, until further notice, of certain arrangements concerning movement, residence, establishment, and trade illustrates the distinction between formal membership and continuing regional interdependence.
- The sixth finding is that the future of West African regionalism will depend largely on the capacity of ECOWAS, the AES, and the African Union to manage institutional divergence without allowing political disagreement to destroy necessary forms of practical cooperation.

Assessment of the Hypotheses:

The findings generally support the three hypotheses advanced in this study:

1. **H1** is supported by the evidence that the withdrawal resulted from the interaction of political, security, economic, and geopolitical factors, with ECOWAS sanctions and the Niger crisis acting as important catalysts. The evidence does not support reducing the withdrawal to any single factor.
2. **H2** is also supported, as the emergence of parallel institutional arrangements has complicated the coordination of regional responses to transnational security threats. However, the effects should be understood as an increased challenge to coordination rather than as the complete disappearance of regional security cooperation.
3. **H3** receives substantial support, insofar as the withdrawal has contributed to divergent threat perceptions and the emergence of differentiated security arrangements within the broader West African regional security complex. Nevertheless, persistent geographical, economic, and security interdependence limits the possibility of a complete separation between the two regional frameworks.

Recommendations:

1. ECOWAS should maintain institutional channels of dialogue with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Political disagreement should not prevent communication on issues of common security and economic interest.
2. ECOWAS should examine mechanisms that permit greater flexibility in dealing with transitional governments while maintaining its fundamental constitutional principles.
3. Security cooperation should continue across institutional boundaries, particularly in relation to terrorism, organized crime, border security, and intelligence sharing.
4. The African Union could play a greater facilitating role by encouraging dialogue among ECOWAS, the AES, and other relevant regional actors.
5. Practical arrangements concerning trade, transport, movement, residence, and investment should be preserved as far as possible in order to limit the social and economic costs of institutional separation.
6. The long-term stability of West Africa requires mechanisms capable of accommodating different political orientations while maintaining cooperation against common transnational threats.

Ultimately, the ECOWAS–AES confrontation demonstrates that regional integration is not an irreversible process. Institutions can fragment when political legitimacy, security priorities, and perceptions of sovereignty diverge. At the same time, geographical proximity and transnational threats continue to generate strong incentives for cooperation.

The future of West African regionalism will therefore depend not simply on whether ECOWAS or the AES becomes institutionally stronger, but on whether the region can reconcile political diversity with the practical necessity of collective security and economic interdependence.

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