

Alliance for Sahel States and the Security of the Sub-Region

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Abstract

The Sahel region has lately witnessed a dramatic transformation in its security landscape, stirred essentially by the proliferation of violent extremist groups, porous borders, weak governance structures, and recurrent political instability. In response, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso initiated the Alliance for Sahel States (AES) in 2023 to consolidate military cooperation, coordinate counterterrorism initiatives, and pursue collective defense against internal and external threats. This study reviews the effects of the AES on security in the sub-region, testing the hypothesis that, within its first decade, this alliance has consolidated regional security capacity, remade geopolitical alignments, and influenced counter-terrorism outcomes. Anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory, the study analyzes the interplay between regional threats and the cooperative security mechanisms devised by the AES. The findings indicate that, while the alliance provides a nascent framework for collective defense, its efficiency remains circumscribed by limited resources, multiple regional commitments, and strained relations with both ECOWAS and Western partners. The paper concludes that the AES has the potential to substantially advance regional stability if institutional coherence is undergirded by the entrenchment of political inclusiveness and operational capacity.

Keywords: Regional Security; Trilateral Alliance; Sahel Alliance; Sahel States; West Africa Sub-region

Introduction

Security challenges in the Sahel have increased over the last ten years, turning it into one of the most explosive areas in the world. The rise of extremist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, combined with recurring coups and weakened state institutions, have threatened the territorial integrity and political stability of countries in the region. Against this background, the recently formed Alliance for Sahel States—a tripartite security arrangement between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—constitutes a geopolitical turning point with the aim of ensuring more coordinated military efforts and potentially decreasing reliance on external agents. The AES emerged following deteriorating relations between its member states and ECOWAS, especially after the imposition of sanctions on military governments and suspension of key members following coups (Akinkugbe, 2024). Basically, this alliance would look to advance sovereignty in decision-making, improve collective responses to terrorism, and establish a framework for mutual assistance against security threats. Yet, its formation equally raises major concerns regarding the consequences on security architecture at the sub-regional level, particularly on cooperation, integration, and external partnership.

This paper interrogates the role of the AES in shaping the security of the Sahel sub-region and assesses the implications for counter-terrorism, regional stability, and collective defence.

Objectives of the Study

- i. The paper aims at discussing the establishment and strategic motives of the Alliance for Sahel States.
- ii. To analyse the impact of the AES on the security dynamics of the Sahel sub-region.
- iii. security
- iv. To assess the challenges and prospects of the AES in fostering sustainable regional security cooperation.

Literature Review

Security is one of the most contested and dynamic concepts in international relations. While traditionally understood through the framework of military protection and state survival, contemporary scholarship has broadened its definition to also cover political, economic, societal, and even environmental dimensions. Baldwin (1997) discusses security as the absence of threats to values that are considered important, emphasizing that these may include everything from territorial integrity to the safety of people and the stability of political institutions. The Copenhagen School similarly conceptualizes security, but emphasizes the process of "securitisation" by which actors frame a particular issue as an existential threat to facilitate action beyond normal political procedures and rules (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). Against the backdrop of multiple crises that simultaneously hit the Sahel region, security in this area is no longer solely a matter of traditional military concerns. The growth of violent extremist organisations, together with chronic poverty, poor governance structures, food insecurity, and climate-induced displacement, makes security multidimensional. As Lecocq and Mann (2020) note, Sahelian insecurities form part of self-perpetuating circles, where political instability fuels terrorism, and environmental degradation exacerbates communal conflict. In this way, security in the Sahel will have to be framed through military, political, socioeconomic, and humanitarian interventions.

The concept of human security has gained increasing importance for assessing regional vulnerabilities. Human security shifts the focus from the security of the state to the security of individuals, a generalized concept defining freedom from fear and freedom from want (UNDP, 1994). In fact, human security remains fragile for the populations of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, with ongoing attacks by insurgents, displacement, and erosion of livelihoods. Consequently, a discussion about security in the context of the AES has to take into consideration both state-centric and human-centric dimensions of security.

Regional Security

Regional security denotes the patterns of security interdependence within a geographically defined area. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), security challenges tend to cluster within specific regional spaces due to common historical experiences, cultural linkages, and geographical proximity. Thereafter, this clustering creates what they term "regional security complexes"—systems in which states' security concerns are so closely intertwined that the actions of one state inevitably affect the security of others. The Sahel exemplifies such a complex, characterized by porous borders, transnational insurgencies, communal conflicts, and weak state institutions.

The cross-border nature of threats is a factor that significantly shapes regional security in the Sahel. Terrorist organizations like ISGS and JNIM function undeterred across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, utilizing ungoverned spaces to dodge state forces. The mobility of such groups means insecurity in one state rapidly spills into neighboring ones, reinforcing a shared feeling of vulnerability. As Charbonneau 2021 captures, counterterrorism in the Sahel cannot be considered independently of regional dynamics because unilaterally conceived campaigns fall short of responding to the transnational drivers of insecurity.

Furthermore, regional security is influenced by the roles that external actors play. The Sahel has hosted several international military missions over the years, including France's Operation Barkhane, the EU Training Mission, and UN peacekeepers. While all these interventions have sought to stabilize the region, they have also generated dependency and sometimes domestic resentment. With the withdrawal of several Western forces, the regional security landscape is undergoing a transformation that requires greater regional ownership. In this dynamic, the AES becomes a regional security arrangement propelled by imperative needs to reassert agency and autonomy. Its establishment indicates awareness on the part of its member states that security, if at all attainable, can only be maintained through closer regional coordination based on common interests and mutual vulnerabilities.

Military Alliance

According to Walt (1987), a military alliance is an arrangement where states formally or informally coordinate military policies in pursuit of mutual defense or to seek common solutions for perceived security threats. In this regard, alliances have been created as a power balancing tool, a deterrent to aggression, and for collective defense. The rationale behind alliances is that states increase security through the amalgamation of resources and strategic interests in situations involving common adversaries or asymmetrical threats. The AES is a military alliance, but one molded into its current form by the very specific socio-political dynamics of the Sahel. Unlike other military alliances like NATO, which are built on longstanding democratic and institutional cooperation, the AES derives primarily from the imperative to confront insurgency and political instability. Its member states have similar security environments characterized by military coups, weakened state authority, and growing anti-Western sentiments. As Adebajo (2024) observes, these shared experiences have facilitated political solidarity among military leaderships and formed fertile ground for alliance formation.

The rationale for the AES is that of a military alliance, encompassing firm intelligence sharing, harmonized rules of engagement, and joint military operations backed by rapid deployment capabilities. The collapse of the G5 Sahel Joint Force due to its funding and political disagreement reinforced the need for an alliance both regionally autonomous and politically coherent. In formally committing to mutual defence under the Liptako-Gourma Charter, member states placed themselves under an obligation to take collective action in case of aggression. Moreover, AES reflects the wider trend of diversification of military partnerships. The growing engagement of the alliance with non-Western partners, such as Russia, indicates a strategic realignment based on sovereignty and security autonomy. To that end, AES symbolizes a military alliance and a political bloc for reconfiguring the regional balance of power.

Collective Security

Collective security can be defined as an international system wherein states accept that threats against one are threats to all and pledge to undertake joint action with respect to aggression or instability (Claude, 1962). Unlike military alliances that are often formed between states with compatible political ideologies or strategic interests, collective security is based on a universal commitment to peace and stability. The United Nations and ECOWAS adopt collective security principles through providing frameworks for mediation, sanctions, conflict prevention, and peacekeeping. Collectively, security has traditionally been operationalized in West Africa through the ECOWAS mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and the ECOWAS Protocol on Non-Aggression that have enabled interventions in civil conflicts, electoral crises, and coups. However, the relationship between the AES and collective security has been strained since the imposition of sanctions on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The suspension of these states from ECOWAS and their subsequent withdrawal signal a deviation from the established norms of collective security.

With the AES, the principle of collective security has come to be reimagined through the so-called lens of regional self-help. The alliance adopts certain features of collective security, notably the commitment to mutual defence, yet operates outside of any broader regional framework traditionally recognized within West Africa. This raises questions regarding the future of regional stability, in which such rival security architectures might undermine collaboration and facilitate strategic fragmentation. However, the AES might be seen as an effort at crafting an alternate model of collective security fit for the realities of the Sahel. Its commitment to defending member states against both internal and external threats differs from the emphasis on democratic governance and constitutional order that has been led by ECOWAS. As Koné (2024) argues, the AES represents a parallel collective security arrangement that prioritises stability and regime survival over political liberalization.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

The RSCT, as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), offers an analytical framework for exploring how security threats and responses are conditioned by geographical proximity and patterns of interdependence among states. RSCT postulates that regional complexes or clusters of states are beset with inextricably linked security challenges that can be usefully tackled through collective rather than isolated national approaches. In this scheme of things, security becomes regionalized because such threats as insurgency, transnational organized crime, illegal arms trafficking, and political instability transcend national borders to create shared vulnerabilities. The Sahel region best fits this situation, as the porous borders, extensive ungoverned spaces, and fragile state institutions present a complex tapestry of interlocking security threats that cannot be contained within the narrow confines of individual states.

Applying RSCT to the AES allows insight into the motivations behind its formation and potential consequences for regional security dynamics. Similarly, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger face patterns of terrorist violence by groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, whose operations freely cross national boundaries. Under RSCT, these states can be seen as existing within the same security complex marked by mutual vulnerability and recognition of unilateral responses as patently inadequate. The AES thus assumes the nature of a collective response to shared threats, with the incipient RSCT proposition that states within a regional security complex will seek out cooperative mechanisms for confronting common dangers.

Another important RSCT-related dimension of the AES pertains to regional autonomy versus external intervention. Throughout most of its history, the Sahel has been subject to strong external influence, notably through French and European Union operations such as Barkhane and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. While RSCT does concede that regional security complexes can be influenced by external powers, it maintains that the foundation for lasting security ultimately rests with regional ownership. The withdrawal of French troops and a decline in the previously major Western-led missions around the Sahel were important factors in altering the configuration of security alliances there. On this score, the AES represents an attempt at reaffirming regional autonomy through the elaboration of internal mechanisms for security cooperation as a means of detaching dependence on external actors.

Finally, RSCT underlines that regional polarity and power distribution are determining elements for security outcomes: the Sahel is characterized by relatively equal but fragile military capacities among its states. Rather than one hegemonic actor dominating the regional complex, the AES represents a horizontal coalition of states that seek to strengthen their collective bargaining power. The alliance thus embodies the RSCT logic, as it shows how states facing comparable security challenges and capacities may align in an effort to enhance collective stability. RSCT thus locates the AES both as an outcome and a cause of changing regional security dynamics, as a response to overlapping insecurities and as a means whereby the member states can coordinate their strategies within an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design, drawing mainly upon secondary data from academic journals, policy briefs, government documents, and international organisations' reports. The content analysis of sources was carried out to identify themes related to the formation, activities, and perceived impact of the AES on regional security. The theoretical framework of RSCT directed the interpretation of the findings, focusing on patterns of interdependence, threat perception, and collective action within the alliance.

Emergence and Strategic Motivation of the AES

The Alliance for Sahel States emerges from a convergence of political and security transformations, along with geopolitical ones that occurred between 2020 and 2023. These have been shaped by unprecedented waves of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, impelled by the mass frustration of peoples over the failure of their governments to manage the escalation of insecurity. These countries drifted toward military administrations with a marked deterioration in relations with ECOWAS because of sanctions, diplomatic pressures, and demands for an immediate return to democratic governance. The governments of the Sahel states viewed these actions as punitive and externally imposed, ultimately placing them in a position of political marginalization within the regional system. According to Akinkugbe, 2024, the AES thus emerged as not only a political and security alternative to ECOWAS but also one aiming at self-assertive sovereignty to resist external influence.

In large part, the imperative for an integrated response to terrorism drove AES's strategic rationale. The individual efforts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger had been thoroughly insufficient in curbing the expansion of jihadist networks. The insurgent groups exploited porous borders and the weak presence of the state in operating seamlessly on the territories of all three states. Past failures of

collective arrangements, such as the G5 Sahel, further reinforced the need for these states to adopt a more robust and autonomous cooperation mechanism. The AES has thus attempted to institutionalize joint security efforts in intelligence sharing, coordinated military operations, and mutual defense commitments. This also reflects a wider strategic realignment, as these states increasingly turned toward non-traditional partners like Russia for security assistance following the withdrawal of Western forces.

In other words, the AES was established based on impulses of security sovereignty, effectiveness, and political solidarity for states under similar kinds of threats and international pressures. It represents a movement or turn toward regional self-help, as posited under RSCT, that states within a security complex would search for internal solutions once the external arrangements become ineffectual and unsatisfactory.

Impact of the AES on Sub-Regional Security

The formation of the AES has brought significant changes to the Sahel's security landscape, with opportunities and tensions created in equal measure. The alliance has enabled a partial military convergence among its member states, as they become better positioned to coordinate operations against terrorist networks. Joint patrols along shared borders, cooperative intelligence frameworks, and the articulation of mutual defence commitments have created an incipient feeling of collective agency. What has taken place is a departure from the kind of fragmented, often externally driven security initiatives that have characterised the region hitherto. Measurable success in reducing insurgent violence is still limited, but the AES has nonetheless demonstrated an increased political will to seek regional solutions for regional problems.

The AES also reshaped geopolitical alignments in West Africa. By distancing themselves from ECOWAS and opting for a more inward-looking security approach, member states contributed to the redefinition of regional blocs and security priorities. Such realignment, further underlined by an expanding alliance with Russia through military advisory missions and transfers of equipment, points very strongly toward weakening ties with traditional Western partners. This realignment, if perpetuated, would mean parallel security architectures and weakened coherence of collective security frameworks such as ECOWAS's Standby Force and the African Union Peace and Security Council.

Nevertheless, the AES has also engendered new risks for sub-regional security. The withdrawal from the ECOWAS framework by its members threatens to lead to fragmentation of regional coordination effort-for instance, in counterterrorism, border management, and early warning mechanisms. In the past, terrorist groups have capitalized on institutional weakness and political division between states, and current fragmentation could inadvertently entrench extremist networks. Besides, while the AES fosters ownership, its operational capability remains limited by low financing capacity, logistical constraints, and lack of proper military equipment. These hindrances will always interfere with its ability to generate those transformative security outcomes meant to stabilize the region. The influence of the AES on sub-regional security therefore will be multi-dimensional. While it has consolidated intraregional solidarities and increased functional cooperation among its members, it has also created new geopolitical tensions and underlined the structural deficits within the security sector of the Sahel. Its long-term impact will indeed be determined by its resilience to institutional and resource constraints, combined with its ability to maintain healthy relations with other relevant regional and international partners.

Challenges and Prospects of the AES

There are significant hurdles facing the AES, and these are very real structural, political, and socioeconomic realities within the Sahel. Arguably, one of the greatest challenges involves the extreme resource deficit facing its member states. Militaries are underfunded, lacking appropriate logistics, and using antiquated equipment, all factors combining to challenge the operational capacity in the face of persistent counterterrorism demands. Geographically expansive theaters pose added challenges to military operations: controlling remote regions and ousting embedded terrorist groups present a frustratingly uphill battle. Besides, there are human rights concerns with respect to military operations that have jeopardized relations with international partners and risked alienating the very populations whose cooperation is vital to counterinsurgency success.

Another major challenge is constituted by political instability. Military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger face issues of legitimacy at both the national and international level, while long transition timelines and difficulties in diplomatic relations disturb their potential to garner international support or make any long-term plans. The political uncertainties also raise question marks over the AES's sustainability in the future, since new democratic transitions might reevaluate the alliance's direction or its very viability.

However, the AES nevertheless carries great potential for enhanced regional security if its challenges are addressed strategically. The alliance does hold an opportunity for coordinated border management, something very key in a region where insurgent groups exploit border vulnerabilities. With clear strategies and improved technical capacity, the AES might be able to reduce the cross-border movement of weapons and fighters. The AES may also promote a culture of regional self-reliance through support for endogenous solutions fitted to the specific socio-political realities that characterize the Sahel. In addition, if effectively institutionalized, the AES could develop into a wider security community that incorporates political and economic cooperation, with the potential actually to reshape the geopolitical landscape of the sub-region.

The AES's future prospects thus lie in developing internal cohesion, bringing about improvements in its operational capacities, and establishing constructive partnerships at the regional and global levels. Its success will also depend on the proper balance between imperatives of security and reforms in governance, with the proviso that the fight against terrorism does not come in the way of long-term stability and democratic development.

Conclusion

The creation of the Alliance for Sahel States was a result of serious structural changes in the political and security environment of the Sahel. While common security threats and geopolitical pressures had been the motive for its inception, the AES is still in the early stages of institutional development. Using RSCT, this study demonstrates that this alliance is a by-product of regional interdependence shaped by common threats and collective vulnerability. The AES has introduced new mechanisms for military coordination and signalled a move toward strategic autonomy, while its overall impact on regional security is mixed due to resource limitations, internal political instability, and strained relations with ECOWAS and Western partners. However, it could emerge as an important instrument for enhancing stability in the Sahel once improved coordination, inclusion, and capacity building are achieved.

Recommendations

- i. Enhance Operational Capacity: AES members should invest in common training, logistics, and intelligence infrastructure to promote interoperability for counterterrorism operations.
- ii. Rebuild Relations with ECOWAS: The government should work towards minimizing institutional rivalry and negotiate security frameworks that complement each other to prevent regional fragmentation.
- iii. Promote Inclusive Governance Accountability and improvement in civil-military relations will build legitimacy and assure greater cooperation with local communities.
- iv. Diversify Security Partnerships While pursuing new alignments, the AES states should balance the external partnerships to avoid overdependence upon a single power.

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5. Institutionalize the AES
Developing clear protocols, command structures, and funding mechanisms will be instrumental in the alliance's long-term sustainability.