

ECOWAS at the Crossroads: Military Coups, Sovereignty, and the Rise of the Alliance of Sahel States

Nafisa Umar

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy,

Baze University, Abuja, Nigeria

Email: nafisaumar31@gmail.com

nafisa13826@bazeuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2023 has fundamentally altered the trajectory of regional integration under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have challenged the organization's democratic norms and reshaped the geopolitical and security architecture of the Sahel. The subsequent withdrawal of the three states from ECOWAS and their formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represent the most significant institutional challenge to West African regionalism since ECOWAS was founded in 1975. This paper critically examines the implications of these military regimes for the future of ECOWAS integration. Using a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and institutional documents, the study investigates the structural causes of the coups, evaluates ECOWAS's responses, and assesses the AES as an emerging regional security framework. The paper argues that the crisis reflects deeper governance failures, persistent insecurity, socioeconomic inequality, and public dissatisfaction with domestic elites and external security partnerships, rather than a rejection of democracy itself. It further argues that the AES represents an attempt by the three military-led governments to redefine regional security cooperation around sovereignty and mutual defence, although its long-term institutional and economic sustainability remains uncertain. The study concludes that ECOWAS remains Africa's most advanced regional economic organization, but that its future relevance will depend on comprehensive institutional reform, greater responsiveness to citizens' security and development needs, and renewed dialogue with the Sahel states.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, military coups, regional integration, Sahel, democratic governance, security, West Africa

Introduction

Regional integration has become one of the principal strategies through which African states pursue economic growth, political cooperation, collective security, and sustainable development. Since the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 and its transformation into the African Union in 2002, African leaders have consistently treated regional organizations as essential building blocks for continental integration. Among these, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as one of the continent's most influential regional institutions.

Established through the Treaty of Lagos on 28 May 1975, ECOWAS initially focused on economic integration - free trade, industrial cooperation, infrastructure development, and the free movement of people, goods, and services. Its mandate later expanded to encompass conflict prevention, democratic governance, peacekeeping, electoral observation, and regional security management, driven largely by the civil wars that engulfed Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire during the 1990s and early 2000s. ECOWAS gained international recognition for pioneering African-led peacekeeping through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and subsequently developed a normative framework for democratic governance through the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, both of which prohibit unconstitutional changes of government.

Despite these achievements, West Africa has witnessed an unprecedented resurgence of military coups since 2020: Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, Guinea in 2021, Burkina Faso twice in 2022, and Niger in July 2023. These transitions differ from earlier waves of African military intervention because they occurred amid expanding jihadist insurgencies linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, widespread humanitarian crises, state fragility, climate-induced displacement, and growing public dissatisfaction with elected governments. The juntas justified their interventions by claiming that civilian governments had failed to protect citizens, combat corruption, and preserve national sovereignty.

ECOWAS responded with diplomatic sanctions, economic embargoes, suspension of membership rights, and demands for rapid democratic transition—measures that, while affirming the organization's commitment to constitutional governance, drew criticism for disproportionately burdening ordinary citizens rather than political elites. The crisis reached a historic turning point when Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger jointly withdrew from ECOWAS and consolidated the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES). Initially conceived as a mutual defence pact, the AES has evolved into a broader political and economic partnership intended to strengthen sovereignty, coordinate counterterrorism operations, and reduce dependence on traditional external partners.

The crisis also carries significant geopolitical weight. France has substantially reduced its military presence in the Sahel, while Russia has expanded security cooperation with the military-led governments; China, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and the African Union have likewise adjusted their engagement strategies. Because the withdrawal of three landlocked states threatens

regional trade, migration management, and coordinated counterterrorism, the stakes of this realignment extend well beyond the domestic politics of any single country. Millions of citizens who have historically relied on ECOWAS protocols on free movement and regional markets now face uncertainty over future mobility and economic opportunity.

These developments cannot be reduced to a disagreement between ECOWAS and three military governments; they reflect deeper structural tensions concerning governance legitimacy, state capacity, regional solidarity, external influence, and competing visions of security cooperation in contemporary Africa. Against this background, this paper critically evaluates the future of ECOWAS integration considering the resurgence of military regimes in the Sahel. It analyses the structural causes of the coups, examines ECOWAS's responses, assesses the emergence of the AES, and evaluates the broader implications for regional peace, democratic governance, and economic integration.

Statement of the Problem

The recurrence of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has exposed significant weaknesses in West Africa's regional governance framework. Despite decades of investment in democratic institutions, conflict-prevention mechanisms, and collective security arrangements, ECOWAS has struggled to prevent unconstitutional changes of government or to address their root causes. The withdrawal of the three Sahel states and the emergence of the AES raise fundamental questions about the future of regional integration, collective security, economic cooperation, and democratic governance in West Africa; if unresolved, these developments could weaken regional institutions, encourage further unconstitutional transitions, reduce economic cooperation, and undermine collective counterterrorism efforts. This study therefore examines whether ECOWAS can maintain its relevance amid increasing regional fragmentation and evolving geopolitical realities.

Conceptual and Literature Review

Economic Community of West African States

ECOWAS is one of Africa's most established Regional Economic Communities. Founded on 28 May 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos by fifteen West African countries, its founding objective was to promote economic integration, facilitate free trade, and improve living standards through a common market characterized by the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital. The Revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993 broadened this mandate to incorporate peacekeeping, democratic governance, conflict prevention, and regional security, reflecting the recognition that economic development cannot be sustained without political stability. ECOWAS today operates through the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the ECOWAS Commission, the Community Court of Justice, the ECOWAS Parliament, and specialized technical agencies, which together coordinate policy, resolve disputes, observe elections, and manage regional peacekeeping and economic cooperation. Its Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment—which permits visa-free travel among member states—remains one

of its signature achievements. Recent political developments, however, have exposed institutional weaknesses: the resurgence of coups and the withdrawal of three member states have challenged ECOWAS's authority and its capacity to enforce democratic norms while preserving regional cohesion.

Regional Integration

Regional integration refers to the process by which geographically proximate states voluntarily cooperate to achieve shared political, economic, social, and security objectives. Haas (1958) conceptualized integration as the gradual transfer of political loyalties, expectations, and decision-making authority from national governments to supranational institutions capable of managing common interests. The concept extends beyond economic cooperation to include policy harmonization, collective security, environmental and migration management, and diplomatic coordination, and it depends on mutual trust, institutional effectiveness, and member states' willingness to prioritize collective over narrow national interests. In Africa, regional integration is regarded as a strategy for overcoming small domestic markets, colonial fragmentation, and external dependence; the African Union identifies Regional Economic Communities such as ECOWAS as building blocks toward continental integration under Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Within West Africa, ECOWAS has pursued this goal through trade liberalization, common external tariffs, monetary cooperation, infrastructure development, regional peacekeeping, democratic governance, free movement of persons, and counterterrorism cooperation—achievements now threatened by political instability, which weakens institutional trust and disrupts collective decision-making.

Military Regimes and Coups d'État

A military regime is a government in which political authority is exercised primarily by the armed forces following the unconstitutional removal of a civilian administration; such regimes typically suspend constitutions, dissolve elected institutions, and govern by decree or transitional charter. A coup d'état is the sudden, illegal seizure of political power, usually executed by a comparatively small group within the state apparatus and justified on grounds of national security, corruption, or governmental incompetence. Military intervention has a long history in African politics dating to the immediate post-independence period, when weak democratic institutions, ethnic tensions, and Cold War rivalries made coups common between the 1960s and 1980s. Although democratic transitions reduced their frequency after the 1990s, the resurgence since 2020 has revived concerns about democratic consolidation. What distinguishes the recent Sahelian juntas from their predecessors is their reliance on popular legitimacy - nationalist rhetoric, anti-colonial sentiment, and promises of restored security - rather than coercive authority alone.

Democratic Governance

Democratic governance denotes a political system characterized by constitutional rule, competitive elections, respect for human rights, accountability, transparency, separation of powers, and the rule of law. Within ECOWAS, it is institutionalized through the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and

Good Governance, which prohibits unconstitutional changes of government and commits member states to constitutionalism and credible electoral processes. Democratic governance, however, extends beyond periodic elections to encompass effective public service delivery, an independent judiciary, civilian control of the military, anti-corruption institutions, and inclusive economic development. The recent coups suggest that elections alone cannot guarantee democratic stability: where governments fail to provide security and economic opportunity, public confidence declines and openings for military intervention emerge. Contemporary scholarship accordingly emphasizes governance quality over procedural democracy as the foundation of political stability.

The Sahel Region

The Sahel is a semi-arid ecological zone stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, forming the transitional belt between the Sahara Desert and the savannah of sub-Saharan Africa. It spans Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan; within West Africa, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger constitute the Central Sahel. The region faces interconnected challenges, including terrorism, violent extremism, climate change, desertification, food insecurity, displacement, weak state institutions, and arms and human trafficking. The expansion of Al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-affiliated groups has made the Sahel one of the world's fastest-growing conflict zones, eroding public confidence in civilian governments and contributing significantly to the resurgence of military intervention.

The Alliance of Sahel States

The Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) emerged in September 2023 through the Liptako-Gourma Charter, signed by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Initially a mutual defence pact, it has evolved into a broader framework for political, military, diplomatic, and economic cooperation. Its principal objectives include collective defence, joint counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing, the promotion of regional sovereignty, reduced dependence on former colonial powers, and strengthened intra-Sahel economic cooperation—an alternative vision of regional cooperation grounded in sovereignty and resistance to external pressure. Supporters argue that the AES enables more effective coordination against terrorism without external interference; critics point to limited financial resources, weak institutional capacity, diplomatic isolation, heavy dependence on the survival of the three military governments, and limited economic integration relative to ECOWAS. Whether the AES evolves into a sustainable regional institution remains uncertain.

Evolution of Regional Integration and Empirical Literature

The concept of regional integration has occupied a central place in African development discourse since independence. Haas (1958) held that integration occurs when states voluntarily transfer aspects of sovereignty to common institutions capable of managing shared interests; in Africa, integration has been viewed as a strategy for overcoming colonial fragmentation and strengthening political solidarity. ECOWAS represents one of the continent's most ambitious integration

projects: Asante (2018) credits it with considerable progress in free movement, trade liberalization, peacekeeping, and democratic governance, while Adebajo (2002) argues that ECOWAS transformed African peacekeeping through its interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, demonstrating that regional organizations could address security crises without excessive reliance on external actors. Bach (2016), however, contends that West African integration remains constrained by weak protocol implementation, political instability, limited industrialization, and divergent national interests. More recent scholarship characterizes the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as the greatest institutional challenge ECOWAS has faced since its founding, exposing deeper tensions over sovereignty, governance, and regional legitimacy rather than a mere disagreement over sanctions.

Empirical work on the coups themselves points to structural rather than idiosyncratic causes. The International Crisis Group (2024) found that the deterioration of security across the Sahel significantly undermined the legitimacy of civilian governments, as terrorist attacks continued to increase—particularly in the shared border areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—despite substantial international military assistance, fuelling public frustration that created conditions favourable to intervention. Okolo and Akinyemi (2023) similarly argue that West African democratic governance has often emphasized elections while neglecting service delivery, accountability, and institutional reform, allowing military actors to present themselves as agents of national renewal. Yabi (2024) contends that ECOWAS's reliance on sanctions and diplomatic pressure, while consistent in defending constitutional order, has been less effective in addressing the governance failures that precede coups—creating a perception that the organization reacts to crises rather than preventing them. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) emphasizes that violent extremism in the Sahel is driven by poverty, youth unemployment, environmental degradation, weak institutions, and limited access to justice, meaning that military responses alone cannot resolve the underlying instability.

Geopolitical competition has intensified alongside these domestic dynamics. Following the withdrawal of French forces, Russia has expanded security engagement with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, while China and Türkiye have increased economic and diplomatic engagement—developments that place the Sahel at the intersection of domestic political transition and broader international strategic competition. Scholarly interpretations of the AES itself diverge: some analysts view it as an expression of sovereign resistance to external interference, while others question its sustainability given its members' limited economic capacity and its current lack of the institutional depth, economic integration mechanisms, and legal frameworks that characterize ECOWAS. Taken together, this literature suggests that the future of West African integration depends less on restoring constitutional order in a narrow, procedural sense than on addressing the structural conditions - weak institutions, insecurity, and socioeconomic exclusion - that make unconstitutional change attractive in the first place.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the analytical lens through which a research problem is examined, explaining relationships among variables and offering a basis for interpreting findings.

Given the multidimensional nature of regional integration and political instability in West Africa, this study draws primarily on neo-functionalism, while also referencing Regional Security Complex Theory and Democratic Peace Theory to enrich the analysis.

Neo-Functionalism

Neo-functionalism, developed by Haas (1958) to explain regional integration, holds that cooperation among states in one functional area creates incentives for further cooperation in related sectors - a process known as spillover - gradually shifting political loyalty from national to regional institutions as states recognize the mutual benefits of collective action. Its central assumptions are that integration begins in technical and economic sectors; that success in one area encourages cooperation in others; that regional institutions gradually acquire greater authority; and that economic interdependence promotes political cooperation and reduces conflict. Applied to ECOWAS, the theory explains how the organization's original economic objectives expanded to include peacekeeping, democratic governance, conflict prevention, and regional security, reflected in the establishment of the ECOWAS Commission, the Community Court of Justice, and the ECOWAS Parliament. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, however, presents a challenge to the theory: rather than continued integration, the region has experienced partial disintegration driven by political disagreement and competing interpretations of sovereignty, suggesting that spillover is not automatic and can reverse when member states perceive regional institutions as inconsistent with national priorities. Neo-functionalism nonetheless remains useful for highlighting the institutional cooperation, mutual trust, and sustained political commitment that long-term regional integration requires.

Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), holds that security threats are often concentrated within geographically connected regions, such that insecurity in one country quickly affects its neighbours and states cannot effectively address it in isolation. The Sahel illustrates these dynamics: terrorist organizations operate across national boundaries, exploiting weak border controls, and violence originating in Mali has spread into Burkina Faso and Niger alongside displacement, arms trafficking, and organized crime. RSCT therefore reinforces the importance of ECOWAS and other regional mechanisms for intelligence sharing, joint operations, and coordinated counterterrorism.

Democratic Peace Theory and Justification for the Chosen Framework

Democratic Peace Theory holds that democratic states are less likely to engage in violent conflict with one another because democratic institutions encourage negotiation, accountability, and peaceful dispute resolution; within ECOWAS, this underpins the organization's emphasis on constitutional governance and civilian control of the military, reflected in the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Recent developments, however, demonstrate that procedural democracy alone cannot prevent instability: elections that fail to improve governance or security

may weaken rather than strengthen democratic legitimacy, suggesting that democratic consolidation must be accompanied by effective governance and inclusive development.

Although RSCT and Democratic Peace Theory offer valuable insight into the security and governance dimensions of the study, neo-functionalism is adopted as the principal framework because it most directly addresses the process of regional integration itself and provides the most appropriate lens for analysing how political crises interrupt integration, weaken institutions, and affect cooperation among member states.

Drivers of the Military Coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

The resurgence of coups in the Central Sahel between 2020 and 2023 occurred despite the existence of constitutional governments, regional democratic norms, and ECOWAS mechanisms designed to prevent unconstitutional change. Unlike the post-independence wave of coups, these interventions emerged in a context shaped by transnational terrorism, fragile institutions, socioeconomic crisis, climate-induced insecurity, and growing public disillusionment with civilian leadership. Although each coup reflected specific national circumstances, they shared common structural drivers - deteriorating security, weak governance, corruption, economic hardship, declining confidence in democratic institutions, and opposition to perceived foreign influence—that combined to make military intervention appear, to substantial segments of the population, a plausible response to persistent governance failure.

Mali

Mali experienced repeated instability from the early 2010s onward. Following the 2012 coup and the subsequent occupation of northern Mali by armed extremist groups, the country endured prolonged insecurity despite French-led interventions through Operations Serval and Barkhane. On 18 August 2020, officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta after months of public protest against corruption, electoral irregularities, and deteriorating security; although a transitional civilian government was initially installed, the military seized power again in May 2021, removing the interim president. The junta justified its actions by citing civilian leaders' failure to address terrorism, corruption, and economic decline, and public demonstrations in Bamako indicated that many citizens viewed the military as more credible than the political class - reflecting a deep crisis of democratic legitimacy.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso had long been regarded as a relatively stable democracy following the 2014 popular uprising that ended Blaise Compaoré's rule. From 2016 onward, however, the country experienced a dramatic escalation in terrorist attacks in its northern and eastern regions; by 2021, thousands of civilians had been killed, millions displaced, and significant territory had fallen outside effective government control. Public dissatisfaction with President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré intensified amid the government's inability to contain insecurity. On 24 January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew Kaboré, promising to restore security; continued deterioration led to a second coup in September 2022, when Captain Ibrahim Traoré assumed

power. This succession of coups illustrated both dissatisfaction with civilian governance and divisions within the military over the most effective strategy against violent extremism.

Niger

Prior to July 2023, Niger was widely regarded as one of the Sahel's few democratic success stories; the peaceful transfer of power from President Mahamadou Issoufou to President Mohamed Bazoum in 2021 was celebrated as a democratic milestone. Despite this achievement, Niger continued to face attacks from Boko Haram, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, alongside rising inflation, food insecurity, and dissatisfaction with the perceived ineffectiveness of foreign military partnerships. On 26 July 2023, members of the Presidential Guard led by General Abdourahamane Tiani overthrew Bazoum, citing deteriorating security, poor governance, and threats to national sovereignty—a coup that prompted widespread international condemnation and triggered one of the most severe political crises in ECOWAS's history.

Common Structural Drivers

Across all three countries, the most immediate driver was a worsening security environment. Since the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011, the proliferation of weapons, armed groups, and cross-border criminal networks has transformed the Sahel into one of the world's most volatile regions; groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have exploited weak governance and porous borders to target civilians, military installations, schools, and humanitarian workers, and civilian governments struggled to respond despite substantial international support. Beyond security, governance failures, corruption, ineffective public administration, weak judicial oversight, and the marginalization of rural communities, eroded public trust and created openings for military leaders to present themselves as reformers. Persistent poverty and unemployment compounded these grievances: although Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger possess substantial natural resources, including gold, uranium, and agricultural potential, the benefits of growth have not been equitably distributed, and climate change has intensified competition over land and water.

A distinguishing feature of the recent coups is the level of public support they initially received. Large demonstrations in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey reflected frustration with corruption, insecurity, and political elites, and military leaders used nationalist rhetoric to consolidate domestic legitimacy - a pattern that suggests growing dissatisfaction with the performance of specific governments rather than a wholesale rejection of democracy as a system. Anti-foreign sentiment, particularly toward France's long-standing military presence through Operations Serval and Barkhane, further fuelled nationalist narratives and encouraged the juntas to diversify their international partnerships toward Russia, China, and Türkiye. Social media platforms - Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok - played an increasingly significant role in mobilizing demonstrations and shaping public opinion during these transitions, even as misinformation complicated public understanding of unfolding events.

Comparative Overview

Factor	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger
Primary trigger	Terrorism and governance crises	Escalating insecurity	Security concerns and sovereignty
Coup timeline	2020 and 2021	Two coups in 2022	July 2023
Public support	Initially high	Initially high	Considerable
ECOWAS response	Sanctions and suspension	Suspension and sanctions	Strong sanctions and threat of military intervention
Current status	AES member	AES member	AES member

The comparison demonstrates that while insecurity served as the principal catalyst across all three countries, differences in domestic politics, military cohesion, and international response shaped the trajectory of each transition. From a regional integration perspective, these coups collectively challenge the effectiveness of ECOWAS's democratic governance framework, raise questions about the balance between sovereignty and regional norms, and underscore the need for more preventive approaches to conflict management. They also indicate that sustainable democratic governance cannot rest on electoral legitimacy alone: governments must additionally provide security, promote inclusive development, and maintain public trust, or risk creating the conditions in which future unconstitutional transitions become more likely. ECOWAS's Institutional Response

The resurgence of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger posed one of the greatest tests of ECOWAS's commitment to democratic governance since the adoption of the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which condemns unconstitutional changes of government and empowers the organization to impose diplomatic, political, and economic measures against offending states. In responding, ECOWAS sought to preserve its credibility as the region's principal guarantor of democracy while preventing the spread of military rule. Its response nonetheless generated considerable debate: supporters argued that sanctions and diplomatic pressure were necessary to defend constitutional governance, while critics maintained that these measures failed to address the structural causes of instability and imposed significant costs on ordinary citizens.

ECOWAS's actions were grounded in a legal framework built up since the 1990s: the Revised ECOWAS Treaty (1993), which broadened the organization's mandate to include peace and security; the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, which authorizes collective action in response to threats to regional stability; and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Together, these instruments empower ECOWAS to suspend offending states, impose sanctions, mediate political crises, and, in exceptional circumstances, authorize collective military intervention.

Suspension and Sanctions

Following each coup, ECOWAS suspended the affected state from regional decision-making bodies - Mali after both the August 2020 and May 2021 takeovers, and Burkina Faso and Niger

after their respective coups. Suspension signalled ECOWAS's rejection of unconstitutional change and increased diplomatic pressure for a transition to civilian rule, but its practical impact on the juntas, which retained domestic control, was limited.

Economic sanctions constituted the most visible component of the response: border closures, suspension of commercial transactions, freezing of financial assets, restrictions on access to regional financial markets, suspension of development assistance, and travel bans and targeted sanctions against military leaders. The sanctions imposed on Niger in 2023 were among the most comprehensive in ECOWAS's history, extending even to the suspension of Nigerian electricity exports that had supplied a significant share of Niger's power—placing considerable strain on the country's economy. ECOWAS argued these measures were necessary to discourage future coups, but humanitarian organizations and analysts observed that ordinary citizens bore a substantial share of the economic burden through higher food prices, reduced trade, and shortages of essential goods, raising ethical and policy questions about the design of regional sanctions.

Diplomatic Engagement and the Threat of Force in Niger

Alongside sanctions, ECOWAS pursued sustained diplomatic engagement, with mediation missions led by prominent West African leaders seeking negotiated transition agreements, realistic timetables, and inclusive political dialogue. In Mali and Burkina Faso, mediation produced agreements on transitional arrangements, although disagreements over their duration delayed progress; in Niger, diplomatic efforts proved more contentious, as the military authorities rejected external pressure in defence of national sovereignty.

The Niger coup marked a turning point in ECOWAS's approach. After the overthrow of President Bazoum, ECOWAS announced it was prepared to use force if constitutional order was not restored, activating its Standby Force and requesting contingency planning from member states—action justified as necessary to defend constitutional governance, deter future coups, and preserve ECOWAS's credibility. The proposal, however, generated controversy: several member states expressed reservations about the humanitarian consequences and risk of escalation, and the governments of Mali and Burkina Faso declared that any intervention in Niger would be treated as an act of aggression against them, reflecting the emerging solidarity among the three juntas. Faced with these complexities, ECOWAS ultimately relied on continued diplomatic engagement rather than military action.

Assessing ECOWAS's Response

ECOWAS's strategy achieved some clear successes: it consistently reaffirmed its commitment to democratic governance, demonstrated institutional consistency by responding swiftly to each coup, and - through sustained diplomatic engagement - helped avert an immediate regional military confrontation, reinforcing the legal norm that coups are unacceptable within the ECOWAS framework. Its limitations, however, were equally significant. Sanctions did not compel the juntas to relinquish power; instead, the military governments consolidated domestic legitimacy and cultivated alternative international partnerships. ECOWAS was criticized for responding primarily after coups occurred rather than addressing the governance failures, insecurity, and socioeconomic

grievances that preceded them, and its credibility was further undermined by the perception that it had tolerated constitutional amendments allowing incumbents to extend their tenure while reacting strongly to military takeovers. Ultimately, the withdrawal of all three states from ECOWAS demonstrated that sanctions alone could not preserve regional cohesion.

Historically, ECOWAS's record of managing political crises has been comparatively strong: it deployed ECOMOG peacekeeping forces in Liberia (1990) and Sierra Leone (1997), facilitated dialogue in Guinea-Bissau, and, in The Gambia in 2017, successfully compelled President Yahya Jammeh to accept electoral defeat through a combination of diplomacy and the credible threat of intervention—widely regarded as one of its greatest diplomatic achievements. The Sahel crises differ from these earlier cases in that terrorism significantly complicates governance and security, the military governments enjoy broader domestic support than many previous juntas, geopolitical competition among external actors has intensified, and public attitudes toward foreign intervention have shifted—suggesting that strategies effective in earlier crises may require adaptation to contemporary regional realities.

These experiences indicate that defending democracy requires more than sanctioning unconstitutional governments. ECOWAS's response was legally justified and normatively consistent, but its emphasis on punitive measures was not matched by equivalent investment in the structural drivers of instability. A more balanced strategy—combining the defence of democratic norms with proactive investment in governance reform, economic development, conflict prevention, and security sector transformation—would strengthen both ECOWAS's legitimacy and the resilience of democratic institutions across West Africa.

The Alliance of Sahel States and Its Implications for Regional Integration

The establishment of the AES marks one of the most significant geopolitical developments in West Africa since ECOWAS's founding in 1975. It emerged against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between ECOWAS and the military-led governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and represents a deliberate attempt by the three states to redefine regional cooperation around sovereignty, mutual defence, and reduced dependence on external actors. Supporters view it as an innovative response to the Sahel's distinctive security challenges; critics question its institutional sustainability and its implications for West African integration more broadly.

Formation and Objectives

The AES was formally established on 16 September 2023 through the Liptako-Gourma Charter, committing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to mutual assistance against external aggression or threats to territorial integrity. Its immediate catalyst was the diplomatic crisis following the Niger coup: after ECOWAS threatened military intervention to restore President Bazoum, Mali and Burkina Faso declared that any attack on Niger would be considered an attack against them, an unprecedented declaration of solidarity that laid the alliance's foundation. Over time, the AES expanded beyond collective defence into foreign policy coordination, economic integration, infrastructure development, border management, and counterterrorism, and the three states'

subsequent withdrawal from ECOWAS transformed it from a security pact into an alternative framework for regional cooperation.

The alliance pursues several interconnected objectives: collective defence against external threats and terrorist attacks; counterterrorism cooperation through intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and border surveillance; the promotion of national sovereignty and reduced dependence on former colonial powers; economic cooperation in trade, infrastructure, energy, and agriculture, alongside early-stage discussions of monetary cooperation; and diplomatic coordination intended to strengthen the three states' collective bargaining power in international forums.

Institutional Capacity and Comparison with ECOWAS

Compared with ECOWAS, the AES remains a young and institutionally thin organization. Its framework currently consists primarily of meetings of heads of state, ministerial consultations, military coordination committees, and intelligence-sharing arrangements; unlike ECOWAS, it does not yet possess a regional parliament, a community court, a permanent commission, or extensive legal frameworks governing trade and free movement. Many analysts accordingly regard it as primarily a security alliance rather than a fully developed regional organization.

Variable	ECOWAS	AES
Year established	1975	2023
Membership	12+ West African states	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger
Primary objective	Economic integration, democracy, security	Security, sovereignty, political cooperation
Institutional framework	Highly developed	Emerging
Parliament	Yes	No
Court of justice	Yes	No
Trade liberalization	Extensive	Limited
Free movement	Established protocol	Under discussion
Peacekeeping experience	Extensive	Limited

The comparison shows that ECOWAS possesses considerably greater institutional capacity and economic depth, while the AES currently enjoys stronger political cohesion among its three members owing to shared security priorities and similar political systems—cohesion reinforced by extensive shared land borders, which facilitate military coordination and intelligence exchange, and by strong domestic public support for closer cooperation among the military governments.

Strengths, Constraints, and Implications for ECOWAS Integration

The AES's principal constraints are economic and institutional. The combined economies of its three members remain relatively small, marked by high poverty, limited industrialization, heavy dependence on primary commodities, and fiscal constraints that restrict their capacity to finance ambitious regional initiatives independently; the alliance also lacks the mature institutions required to implement long-term integration programmes, and its international legitimacy remains less

established than ECOWAS's, with international financial institutions and investors continuing to regard ECOWAS as West Africa's principal regional organization. Its future is, moreover, closely tied to the survival of the current military regimes, and, despite political disagreements, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remain economically interconnected with ECOWAS through trade corridors passing via Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Senegal—meaning that complete economic separation would impose significant costs on all parties.

The coexistence of ECOWAS and the AES carries several implications for regional integration. It raises the prospect of institutional fragmentation, with two organizations pursuing different political priorities in ways that complicate policy coordination on trade, migration, infrastructure, and security. Separate security structures could reduce intelligence sharing and operational coordination against extremist groups that themselves operate across national borders. The withdrawal of three geographically strategic, landlocked states complicates cross-border commerce, customs harmonization, and transport-network coordination, and threatens the free-movement benefits that millions of traders, migrant workers, students, and transport operators have relied on for decades. Finally, the emergence of two competing regional blocs risks weakening West Africa's collective bargaining power within the African Union, the United Nations, the AfCFTA, and international financial institutions.

The AES should be understood neither as a temporary arrangement nor as an immediate substitute for ECOWAS. Its creation reflects genuine dissatisfaction with aspects of regional governance and external security partnerships, but it currently lacks the comprehensive economic frameworks, supranational institutions, and dispute-resolution mechanisms associated with successful regional integration. From a neo-functional perspective, integration requires gradual expansion from security cooperation into economic, political, and social sectors; whether the AES can achieve such deepening remains uncertain, but its emergence is itself an important signal that ECOWAS must address concerns about governance, legitimacy, and responsiveness to member states' security priorities.

Broader Implications for Regional Integration and Global Security

The resurgence of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, together with the emergence of the AES, has fundamentally altered West Africa's political and security architecture, with implications extending well beyond domestic politics into regional security, democratic governance, economic cooperation, migration, and international diplomacy.

Security, Counterterrorism, and Democratic Governance

The withdrawal of the three states has disrupted ECOWAS's traditionally coordinated approach to intelligence sharing, mediation, and peacekeeping, even though Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger occupy a strategically important corridor connecting North Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, making their cooperation essential to addressing terrorism, arms and human trafficking, and organized crime. The AES contends that a more tightly focused alliance among states facing similar threats will improve military effectiveness; whether this proves more successful than broader ECOWAS-led cooperation will depend on sustained political commitment, adequate resources, and respect

for international humanitarian law. Groups affiliated with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara continue to exploit weak governance and porous borders, and while military-led governments have prioritized counterterrorism spending and joint AES patrols, security analysts caution that force alone cannot eliminate terrorism—sustainable counterterrorism additionally requires effective governance, economic opportunity, community engagement, and respect for human rights.

The recurrence of coups also poses a direct challenge to the democratic governance ECOWAS has promoted since the 1990s. The initial popularity of some military governments reflects dissatisfaction with governance performance rather than a wholesale rejection of democracy, but prolonged military rule carries its own risks, including restrictions on civil liberties and delayed transitions to constitutional governance. The long-term legitimacy of any government, civilian or military, ultimately rests on the same foundation: its capacity to deliver security, accountability, and inclusive development while respecting the rule of law.

Economic Integration, Free Movement, and Investment

The three withdrawing states depend heavily on trade routes through neighbouring ECOWAS states for access to international markets, so disruptions to customs cooperation and transport corridors could raise transaction costs, deter investment, and delay cross-border infrastructure projects; economic interdependence, however, may also encourage continued practical cooperation between the AES and ECOWAS despite their political disagreements. The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons has facilitated labour mobility, commerce, and cultural exchange for decades, and continued institutional tension risks new restrictions that would particularly affect border communities, traders, and seasonal workers. Political instability generally reduces investor confidence, particularly in sectors requiring long-term commitments such as infrastructure and energy, although the military governments' diversification toward non-traditional partners may open new investment opportunities in mining, agriculture, and infrastructure—benefits that will ultimately depend on transparent governance and macroeconomic stability.

Geopolitical Competition

The changing political landscape has intensified competition among external actors in the Sahel. France, historically the dominant external security actor through Operations Serval and Barkhane, has withdrawn its forces from all three countries amid growing public criticism, creating openings for other actors. Russia has expanded military cooperation and security assistance, with the transition from the Wagner Group to the Africa Corps reinforcing Moscow's regional presence, though concerns persist regarding the accountability and transparency of this partnership. China has instead emphasized infrastructure, trade, and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative and bilateral agreements, its policy of non-interference making it an attractive partner for several governments, while Türkiye has expanded cooperation in defence industries, education, and trade. The African Union continues to advocate constitutional governance while supporting mediation broadly complementary to ECOWAS's approach; the United Nations remains engaged through

humanitarian and development programmes even after the 2023 conclusion of the MINUSMA peacekeeping mandate in Mali; and the European Union, while historically a partner in governance and security-sector reform, has had to reassess its engagement strategies amid recent political changes. Political fragmentation within the region could slow the harmonization of customs procedures and trade policy under the AfCFTA, although both ECOWAS and the AES retain economic incentives to cooperate within the broader continental integration agenda.

Collectively, these dynamics illustrate that the crisis is not reducible to a contest between two regional organizations; it is a test of whether security, governance, and economic cooperation can be sustained across a fragmenting regional order. ECOWAS remains the most institutionally developed organization in West Africa, but its effectiveness depends on the confidence of member states and citizens alike, while the AES highlights legitimate concerns about sovereignty and security without yet offering a comprehensive alternative in economic integration, legal harmonization, or long-term institutional development. Future regional stability may therefore depend less on either organization prevailing than on constructive engagement between them.

Future Scenarios and Policy Recommendations

The withdrawal of the three Sahelian states and the consolidation of the AES have generated competing visions of regional cooperation, and the region's future trajectory will depend on how ECOWAS and the AES respond to evolving political, security, and economic realities. Four broad scenarios can be identified.

Under a scenario of reconciliation and reintegration, sustained diplomatic engagement would reduce tensions, facilitate negotiated democratic transitions, and progressively lift ECOWAS sanctions, culminating in the reintegration of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger into ECOWAS institutions; this outcome would strengthen regional solidarity but requires compromise on both sides, with ECOWAS adopting a more flexible approach and the military-led governments demonstrating credible commitments to democratic transition. A more probable medium-term scenario is the continued coexistence of ECOWAS and the AES as separate but interacting organizations, with ECOWAS coordinating economic integration for most West African states, the AES concentrating on security cooperation among its members, and practical cooperation continuing on trade, border management, and counterterrorism despite political differences—an arrangement that reflects current realities but risks policy duplication and competing diplomatic priorities. A more pessimistic scenario of permanent regional fragmentation would involve the AES's expansion to additional states experiencing instability, declining implementation of ECOWAS protocols, weakening collective security, and greater openings for terrorist and criminal networks, with consequent damage to AfCFTA implementation and West Africa's influence within continental and global institutions. Finally, a transformational scenario would see ECOWAS use the current crisis as an opportunity for institutional reform - strengthening early warning systems and preventive diplomacy, enhancing citizen participation, reviewing sanctions mechanisms to minimize humanitarian impact, and expanding support for democratic institution-building and youth employment - positioning a reformed ECOWAS to restore public confidence and retain its leadership role in African regional integration. Of these four, the second scenario - parallel

coexistence with continued practical cooperation - appears most consistent with current regional trends, though its persistence does not preclude gradual movement toward either reconciliation or the more transformational reforms outlined below.

Drawing on this analysis, several policy recommendations follow. ECOWAS should prioritize inclusive political dialogue with the military-led governments rather than relying predominantly on punitive measures, while directing regional efforts toward the structural causes of instability—weak governance, corruption, youth unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, and inadequate public service delivery. Member states should strengthen electoral management bodies, judicial independence, anti-corruption agencies, and legislative oversight, treating democracy as accountable governance rather than merely periodic elections. Regardless of institutional differences, ECOWAS and the AES should maintain operational cooperation against terrorism - intelligence sharing, border surveillance, joint operations, counter-radicalization, and civilian protection- insulated as far as possible from political disagreement. ECOWAS's sanctions policy should be reformed to favour targeted measures against political and military elites over broad economic restrictions that disproportionately affect ordinary citizens, with strengthened humanitarian exemptions for vulnerable populations. The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network should be strengthened through improved intelligence analysis, closer collaboration with civil society, and enhanced digital monitoring, since preventive action is considerably less costly than crisis response. Given that young people constitute the Sahel's largest demographic group and are disproportionately affected by unemployment and insecurity, regional investment should prioritize vocational education, entrepreneurship, agricultural modernization, and digital innovation. Closer coordination between ECOWAS and the African Union would improve policy consistency on mediation and post-conflict reconstruction, while external partners should align security assistance with African-led priorities and avoid fostering excessive dependence on any single actor. Finally, all parties should preserve practical cooperation on trade, transport, customs administration, energy, and migration even where political differences persist, since economic interdependence remains one of West Africa's greatest strengths.

Conclusion

The resurgence of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger represents one of the most profound challenges to regional integration in West Africa since ECOWAS's establishment nearly five decades ago. The coups have exposed longstanding governance deficits, persistent insecurity, socioeconomic inequality, and declining public confidence in democratic institutions, while highlighting the limitations of existing regional mechanisms for preventing unconstitutional changes of government. The emergence of the AES has introduced a new dimension to regional politics: while it reflects legitimate concerns regarding sovereignty, security, and self-reliance, it currently lacks the institutional depth, economic integration mechanisms, and legal architecture necessary to replace ECOWAS as the principal framework for regional cooperation, and should be understood as an indicator of dissatisfaction with the existing regional order rather than as a signal of ECOWAS's end.

This study has shown that the causes of the recent coups are multidimensional, rooted in weak governance, ineffective public institutions, widespread corruption, persistent poverty, youth unemployment, violent extremism, and fragile state capacity rather than in military ambition alone. Sustainable regional stability accordingly requires more than restoring constitutional order; it demands comprehensive governance reform, inclusive development, and strengthened security institutions. ECOWAS remains indispensable to West African integration because of its extensive legal framework, established institutions, peacekeeping experience, and economic achievements, but preserving its relevance will require reforms that balance the defence of democratic norms with greater responsiveness to member states' security and developmental needs. A strategy combining preventive diplomacy, institutional reform, targeted sanctions, economic cooperation, and citizen-centred governance is more likely to foster durable peace than one relying exclusively on coercive measures.

Ultimately, the future of West African integration depends not on whether ECOWAS or the AES prevails, but on whether the region can build cooperative institutions capable of addressing shared challenges while respecting both constitutional governance and the legitimate security concerns of its peoples. A renewed commitment to dialogue, regional solidarity, and inclusive development offers the most promising pathway toward a stable, prosperous, and integrated West Africa.

References

- Adebajo, A. (2002). *Building peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- African Union. (2023). *African governance report 2023*. African Union Commission.
- Asante, S. K. B. (2018). *Regionalism and Africa's development: Expectations, reality and challenges*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bach, D. C. (Ed.). (2016). *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, institutions and trans-state networks*. Routledge.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Economic Community of West African States. (1993). *Revised treaty of the Economic Community of West African States*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Economic Community of West African States. (1999). *Mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Economic Community of West African States. (2001). *Protocol on democracy and good governance*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Economic Community of West African States. (2024). *ECOWAS revised treaty and protocols*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Fawole, W. A., & Ukeje, C. (Eds.). (2005). *The crisis of the state and regionalism in West Africa*. CODESRIA.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social and economic forces, 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2024). *The Sahel crisis and regional security challenges*. International Crisis Group.
- Kipo-Sunyehzi, D. D., & Lambon, P. J. (2025). Military coups in West Africa: An analysis of the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States. *Africa Review*, 17(3), 237–250.
- Nugent, P. (2019). *Africa since independence: A comparative history* (3rd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Okolo, B., & Akinyemi, A. (2023). Military coups and democratic governance in West Africa. *African Security Review*, 32(4), 301–317.
- Thurston, A. (2024). *Military coups, jihadism and insecurity in the Central Sahel* (West African Papers No. 43). OECD Publishing.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Human development report 2023/2024*. UNDP.
- Yabi, G. O. (2024). ECOWAS, the Sahel coups and the future of West African integration. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 15(1), 45–63.