# THE AES COUNTRIES' EXIT FROM ECOWAS AND THE BUILDING OF REGIONAL SECURITY

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## SUMMARY

→ **The decision by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS represents a major strategic shift[1] in this decade. The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States already brought with it a new configuration in West Africa following the decline of the G5 Sahel. The strategic surprise, however, lies in the disputed application of procedural rules pertaining to how member countries can exit the Community. While the consequences of this strategic exit are still difficult to measure for either of the two communities, the move towards regional minimalism was driven by the AES countries' need for greater autonomy in their collective defence.**

## INTRODUCTION

The ECOWAS Treaty, revised in 1993, marked the institutionalisation of a policy of security and good governance. The new status quo was set out in greater detail in the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, and subsequently by the 2001 Additional Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy.

The revision of the Lagos Treaty modified the original principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the Member States by calling for the promotion and consolidation of a democratic system of government in each State. Thus, the Community framework was extended to include oversight of the running of national institutions, the appointment of governments and the promotion of human rights. Historically speaking, ECOWAS was marked by the ideological and institutional euphoria that promoted political orthodoxy, as defined by the Western historical model of liberal democracy, during the third wave of democratisation in Africa. In accordance with this principle, in the event of a breach of the constitutional order, ECOWAS had the power to intervene in its member countries to facilitate its restoration.

Based on this extended normative framework, ECOWAS imposed sanctions on the regimes created by military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The sanctions polarised opinions around the controversy over the differentiated application of ECOWAS rules to the unconstitutional changes

of government taking place in the subregion. These sanctions were particularly controversial as they came at a time when all three countries were facing unprecedented pressure from the terrorist threat, against which the ECOWAS defence mechanism had shown its limitations. On 28 January 2024, against this backdrop of institutional tension between the Community framework and the above-mentioned Member States, the latter jointly decided to pull out of the Community, subsequent to the founding of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) a few months earlier. This new stance has re-shaped the regional map and called into question the process of building peace and stability in the region as the security threat becomes increasingly hybrid and trans-national.

This paper analyses the principal reasons for the exit of these three countries from ECOWAS, the issues at stake, and the implications for peace and stability in West Africa, as well as the impact of the split on the West African regional security architecture.

## 1. IS THE EXIT OF THE CENTRAL SAHEL COUNTRIES FROM ECOWAS A STRATEGIC SURPRISE?

The Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) has been facing a series of overlapping threats for more than a decade. The most important strategic marker is the manifestation of illegitimate violence in the form of terrorism. Analysis of the typology of the terrorist threat through the lens of its actors reveals the presence of hybrid trans-national actors (actors of international jihad, actors of trans-national organised crime) as well as actors of local conflict operating on multiple fronts (insurrectionary violence, intra- and inter-community violence, etc.). Despite the efforts deployed by governments to combat the phenomenon, the complexity of the crisis has revealed their capacity gaps, particularly in terms of adapting their defence and security systems to respond effectively to the asymmetric threat. The resulting increase in the vulnerability of national populations (displacement of populations, pressures on local and national economies) has

crystallised internal tensions within the States. The terrorist threat is therefore clearly a security challenge for the region as a whole, given the region's territorial continuity, cultural and religious proximity, and similar vulnerabilities.

The nature of the security threat, combined with the capacity weaknesses of the individual States, has brought renewed relevance to the ECOWAS doctrine of collective security, institutionalised through the Abuja Protocol in 1999. It should be noted that collective security is based on the principles of a common definition of the threat and solidarity in defence against aggression. Article 25 of the Protocol sets out the conditions for the use of the ECOWAS Standby Force (which replaced ECOMOG in 2004) in six possible intervention scenarios.[2] All analyses agree that the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) is a model operational concept on the regional scale insofar as it provides a better structural and functional set-up and theoretically ensures the permanent operational availability of the forces required for preventive deployment and rapid reaction. However, with the Malian crisis intervention, the ESF was revealed to have an ill-adapted operational structure and serious logistical weaknesses. This was the essence of Aimé Barthélémy Simporé's analysis when he argued that 'in the case of the Malian crisis, the ECOWAS Standby Force, despite its shortcomings, has demonstrated that it remains fully relevant. It has given ECOWAS a legitimate capacity for constraint and a strategic and operational planning tool. However, although it has the merit of existing, the ESF has, in the light of the Malian crisis, shown unsuspected structural and functional limitations'.[3] Its ineffectiveness was paradoxical given that ECOWAS had just updated its frameworks with the adoption of a counter-terrorism strategy and implementation plan in 2013. Previous peacekeeping successes, such as the deployment of the ECOMOG mechanism in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI 2003-2004) and Liberia (ECOMIL 2003), to name but two examples, were not replicated during the Malian crisis, although it should be pointed out that terrorism is more complex in nature than traditional conflicts.

The questioning of ECOWAS's capacity to deliver on its vision of collective security has been accentuated by the spread and consolidation of terrorism and trans-national organised crime in Burkina Faso and Niger. Sampson Kwarkye commented on the low level of support among ECOWAS Member States for the 2020-2024 Action Plan to Eradicate Terrorism. While the proliferation of counter-terrorism initiatives, such as the G5 Sahel and the Accra Initiative, has contributed to a decline

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1  General report of the strategic research forum on 'Rupture et anticipation stratégiques : Enjeux, défis et postures pour les États' (Strategic disruption and anticipation: issues, challenges, and stances for the States), held from 27 to 28 July 2023, by the CNES-BF.

2  Aimé Barthélémy Simporé, 'Les menaces dans la bande Sahélo-Saharienne : la crise malienne', Revue de Défense nationale, No. 763, October 2013 (our translation).

3  Ibid.

in Member States' interest in ECOWAS, there is no denying the impact of the slow pace of deployment. According to Sampson Kwarkye, 'there were complaints about the length of time it took ECOWAS to organise the Ouagadougou extraordinary summit, which was requested for February 2017 but was held in September 2019'.[4]

The humanitarian crisis and the many civilian and military casualties suffered in the wake of the terrorist attacks have sparked renewed political instability in all three countries due to the political and military tensions they have engendered. In response to the remilitarisation of political power, ECOWAS adopted a policy of systematic sanctions ranging from exclusion from the governing bodies to economic sanctions. Despite the fact that sanctions have been applied with varying degrees of severity from one country to another, there has been limited use of diplomatic tools to resolve internal crises. Similarly, counter-productive economic sanctions have gradually transformed national opinion into support for the political choices of the new leaders, including military ones. Faced with major economic difficulties, notably linked to the financing of the fight against terrorism, economic sanctions against countries whose economic structures are already fragile have an even greater impact on people already suffering from more than a decade of inflation.

Given the ineffectiveness of the security response, ECOWAS' lack of solidarity in the face of the terrorist threat, and the counter-productivity of the economic sanctions, the threat of military intervention following the military coup in Niger triggered a stance of preventive solidarity on the part of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger with the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), raising prospects of a re-shaping of the regional map. The reasons given by the outgoing States for their decision to exit shed light on their regional minimalist stance. The conclusions of the MSC ministerial meeting refer to '(i) a perception that ECOWAS is moving away from the "pan-African ideals of its founding fathers"; (ii) the perceived influence of foreign powers hostile to ECOWAS; (iii) a feeling of abandonment by ECOWAS in the fight against terrorism; and (iv) the "illegal, illegitimate, inhumane, and irresponsible" sanctions imposed by ECOWAS'.[5]

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**4**   Sampson Kwarkye, 'Slow progress for West Africa's latest counter-terrorism plan', ISS Today, 17 February 2021

**5**   See ECOWAS Commission, 'Conclusions of the Meeting' contained in the Report of the Extraordinary Session of the Mediation and Security Council (MSC) at Ministerial Level on the Proposed Withdrawal of Three Member States from ECOWAS, Abuja, 8 February 2024, p. 5.

## 2. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF AN EXIT FOR REGIONAL PEACE AND STABILITY?

The 'immediately effective' withdrawal of the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS is a matter of both theoretical and practical interest. Article 91 of the revised Treaty stipulates that any Member State wishing to withdraw from ECOWAS 'shall give one year's notice in writing to the Executive Secretary who shall inform Member States thereof. At the expiration of this period, if such notice is not withdrawn, such a State shall cease to be a member of the Community'. The immediate nature of withdrawal, which is not provided for under the Treaty procedures, raises the question of whether the legal effects of the Treaty continue to apply.

■ **In the short term,** the withdrawal of three member countries, which is without precedent in the history of ECOWAS, could have far-reaching implications, not only for those countries, but also for all the other countries in the region, in terms of the mobility of goods and people, trade, and regional sectoral policies. Upon expiry of the year's notice provided for in the 1993 Treaty, withdrawal shall entail all the ensuing legal effects, such as the withdrawal of the AES countries from the ECOWAS institutions.

Withdrawal could also have an impact on the security sector, particularly in terms of intelligence sharing and participation in counter-terrorism initiatives, notably the Accra Initiative and the activities of the Joint Multinational Force. It could also result in the AES countries' diplomatic and political isolation on the international stage.

■ **In the medium and long term,** their exit could lead to a redefinition of economic relations in West Africa, requiring significant adjustments at national, regional, and extra-regional levels. The successful implementation of a post-ECOWAS economic strategy will depend on the capacity to strengthen their economic resilience. This is where a cautious decision by the AES members to reaffirm their membership in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) will likely come in, to cushion the economic shocks associated with their abrupt exit from ECOWAS. Given the extroverted nature of the economies of the ECOWAS member countries, an

exit could also present opportunities for reform and endogenous development. The need to diversify national economies, to create complementary cross-country economic hubs based on supply and demand and comparative advantages, and to seek new trading partners, could ultimately lead to innovative development initiatives, potentially creating jobs and fostering inclusive growth.

## 3. STRATEGIC EXIT… AND THEN WHAT?

Beyond the implications mentioned above, a major political issue could arise in the event of a succession in one of the three countries leading to a different political vision. In such a case, it is to be feared that political shifts could have an impact on the processes underway.

That being said, the decision to withdraw from ECOWAS is a sovereign and reasoned choice that provides an opportunity for the AES countries to leverage their autonomous capacities to meet the challenges ahead, as they see fit.

- **Decision-making autonomy:** defining their own economic, political, and security priorities.

- **The opportunity to build on alternative partnerships:** withdrawal from ECOWAS comes at a time when traditional alliances, particularly with the West, are being called into question and greater regional autonomy is being sought. As such, the AES countries will be able to establish relations with organisations or states sharing common interests and challenges within and outside the West African region, on the basis of shared interests and 'win-win' relationships. This position does not exclude continued cooperation with individual ECOWAS member countries or with ECOWAS as it currently stands.

However, the challenges in terms of collective security remain significant. Article 2 of the Liptako-Gourma Charter states that collective defence and mutual assistance are the main objectives for the creation of the Alliance. The concept of defence solidarity is set out in Article 6, which states that 'Any attack on the sovereignty or territorial integrity of one or more of the Contracting Parties shall be considered an act of aggression against the other Parties and shall give rise to a duty of assistance and help on the part

of all the Parties, individually or collectively, including the use of armed force, in order to restore and ensure security within the area covered by the Alliance'. Collective security blocs are now emerging in West Africa. The AES bloc covers nearly 60% of the total ECOWAS territory, and the ECOWAS bloc, now comprising the littoral states, covers approximately 40% of the original territory.

This new configuration points to two potential scenarios: in the short term, bilateral cooperation on security matters with each of the AES's neighbouring countries. Indeed, in anticipation of a spillover of terrorism into the Gulf of Guinea, the coastal countries should establish relations with the AES bloc for purposes of information sharing and/or joint operational engagement. In the medium term, inter-regional cooperation between the AES and ECOWAS.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF PEACE AND STABILITY

Preserving peace and stability in West Africa is a key priority.

- **For ECOWAS:** the questioning of the community framework should be taken as an opportunity to readjust its integration model. The need to emphasise its vision of creating an ECOWAS of the peoples must make room for increasing targeted investment to bring economic integration to fruition. Its legitimacy as a player in the political arena and as a catalyst for peace and security will be built on the foundation of its economic success.

- **For both blocs:** the major trends emerging in relation to terrorism highlight obvious operational imperatives. There is a need to articulate clear concepts for the use of operational forces based on the coordination and logistical capacities of each bloc in order to avoid any further unfortunate experiences.

- **The need for security cooperation between the two blocs:** given the territorial continuity between the two blocs and the nature of the threat, there is a need for dialogue and targeted co-operation in the area of security. Future peace and stability in the sub-region will depend on the ability of the blocs to interact.

## CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is a significant development that reflects the continuing security, economic, and political challenges facing West Africa. As these countries seek to redefine their regional relationships and address their own national challenges, ECOWAS must reflect on its role and its capacity to promote regional integration and cooperation in an environment marked by constant and rapid change.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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