

ECOWAS at the Crossroads: The Withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Future of Regional Security Governance in West Africa

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Abstract:

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has unsettled the political and security order of the region. The three military governments described the exit as a matter of sovereignty, but the episode also points to a deeper structural problem: security threats across West Africa are becoming more interconnected even as the institutions meant to manage them grow more divided. This paper examines the political and institutional drivers behind the withdrawal and assesses what it means for regional security cooperation, counter-terrorism, and the wider trajectory of West African integration. Drawing on a qualitative documentary research design, the study works from scholarly literature, ECOWAS documents, policy reports, and security assessments, and applies Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to make sense of the continuing interplay between security dynamics in the Sahel and coastal West Africa. The analysis shows that the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has given the three countries an alternative political and security framework, but has not severed their geographic, economic, or security ties to the rest of the region. What the withdrawal has produced is institutional fragmentation rather than a genuine separation of security fates, since terrorism, arms trafficking, organised crime, and displacement continue to move across the ECOWAS–AES divide. The paper argues that the underlying problem is not a loss of regional security interdependence but the erosion of the institutional channels through which that interdependence used to be managed. It concludes that the future of security governance in West Africa depends on whether ECOWAS and the AES can sustain practical cooperation despite their political disagreements, and it calls for continued diplomatic engagement, institutional adaptation, and closer attention to the links between democratic governance, sovereignty, and human security.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, Regional security governance, Regional integration, Regional Security Complex Theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Regional integration has long served as one of Africa's central strategies for building peace, economic cooperation, and collective security. The Economic Community of West African States, founded in 1975, illustrates this trajectory well. What began as an economic project has, over five decades, grown into an organisation with a stake in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, democratic governance, and regional security (Awotayo et al., 2026). That expansion reflects a hard lesson: political instability and violent conflict can undo the economic and social gains that regional integration is meant to deliver. In response, ECOWAS built instruments for responding to unconstitutional changes of government and positioned itself as an active participant in managing the region's political and security crises (Börzel & Risse, 2016; ECOWAS, 2008).

That growing political role has, however, produced a persistent tension between regional authority and state sovereignty. The resurgence of military rule in West Africa has sharpened this tension considerably. Mali and Guinea experienced coups in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023. ECOWAS answered each of these ruptures by demanding a return to constitutional order, and in Niger's case, by imposing sanctions and weighing military intervention. From the perspective of the Sahelian juntas, these responses looked like external pressure that did little to address the insecurity and governance failures their populations were actually living with. This clash between democratic conditionality, sovereignty, and security sits at the heart of the rupture that eventually opened between ECOWAS and the three states (Aina et al., 2026; Chukwudi et al., 2025).

Matters came to a head in January 2024, when Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS, following years of friction over sanctions, political transitions, and the organisation's handling of the coups. The withdrawal took formal effect on 29 January 2025, marking the first time in ECOWAS's history that member states have left the bloc, and producing a substantial institutional rupture within the group (ECOWAS, 2025a).

This was never simply a standoff between military governments and a regional body. The three states had already built an alternative framework for security and political cooperation, the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, or AES). What started as a mutual defence pact evolved into a broader political project through which Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger sought greater autonomy in security and foreign policy. Recent scholarship treats the AES less as an administrative side effect of leaving ECOWAS and more as a genuine reconfiguration of regionalism in West Africa (Aina et al., 2026; Osuchukwu et al., 2025).

The security implications of this rupture are significant. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger occupy a strategic position between the Sahel and coastal West Africa, and terrorism, organised crime, arms trafficking, and population displacement move across borders in that space with little regard for institutional lines. The geographic and security realities of the region simply do not track the political separation between ECOWAS and the AES. Trade routes, transport corridors, and population flows continue to link the three

countries to the coast, and ECOWAS's own decision to keep the movement of persons, trade, and diplomatic relations open on a transitional basis after the withdrawal reflects just how entangled political membership and regional interdependence remain (ECOWAS, 2025a).

This produces a sharp paradox. Politically, West Africa is fracturing into two competing visions of regional order, one organised around ECOWAS and the other around the AES. At the security level, however, the threats facing both spaces remain deeply connected: instability in one area spills into its neighbours regardless of which bloc those neighbours belong to. The question this raises is not only whether the withdrawal weakens ECOWAS, but whether West Africa can sustain effective security cooperation when its political institutions no longer map onto the geographic and security space, they are meant to govern.

Much of the existing literature has focused on the wave of coups in West Africa, the crisis of democratic governance, ECOWAS's sanctions regime (Awotayo et al 2024), and the emergence of the AES, along with the political and economic consequences of the withdrawal for regional integration. Less attention has gone to the relationship between institutional fragmentation and the security interdependence that persists regardless of it. The central question this paper takes up is how regional security governance can remain effective when the states most exposed to Sahelian insecurity now sit outside the organisation that has traditionally coordinated collective responses to it.

This paper therefore examines what the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS means for the governance of security in West Africa, with three objectives: first, to trace the political and institutional dimensions of the withdrawal; second, to assess its consequences for security cooperation and counter-terrorism in the region; and third, to consider its broader implications for regional integration and the future of security governance. The study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in documentary research across scholarly literature, official institutional records, policy documents, and relevant security reports.

The argument advanced here is that the ECOWAS–AES rupture has produced institutional fragmentation within a regional security complex that otherwise remains intact. The withdrawal has changed the political machinery through which cooperation is organised, but not the geographic and security interdependence linking the Sahelian and coastal states. The pressing question for West African regionalism is whether political disagreements can be kept from hardening into operational divisions in areas such as intelligence sharing, border management, and counter-terrorism. Regional Security Complex Theory offers a useful lens for examining this paradox and for weighing the prospects of a more flexible approach to regional security cooperation.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Regional integration and the sovereignty question

Regional integration describes the process by which states within a shared geographic space build institutions, rules, and cooperative arrangements to pursue common interests. It typically begins with economic cooperation, but often extends into political governance, peace, and security once member states recognise that certain problems are better handled collectively than alone. ECOWAS fits this pattern closely: founded in 1975 with an economic mandate, it has since taken on roles in conflict management, democratic governance, and regional security, so that its current remit spans economic, political, and security objectives all at once (Börzel & Risse, 2016; ECOWAS, 2008).

That trajectory has never been free of tension. Deeper integration asks governments to accept common obligations and tolerate external constraints on domestic political authority, and states do not always accept those constraints willingly. The ECOWAS–AES crisis illustrates this tension in stark terms. Military governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger treated ECOWAS’s sanctions and demands for political change as unwelcome interference, while ECOWAS treated constitutional restoration as essential to regional stability. The dispute, in other words, was never only about membership; it raised a more fundamental question about how much political authority states are willing to delegate to a regional institution, and under what circumstances that delegation still counts as legitimate.

2.2 Regional security governance in a borderless threat environment

Regional security governance refers to the institutions, norms, and cooperative mechanisms that allow states and other actors within a region to respond collectively to shared threats. It extends beyond traditional interstate defence because contemporary security challenges rarely stay within national borders. Terrorism, organised crime, trafficking, cross-border migration, displacement, and insurgency can originate in one state and produce consequences in several others (Awotayo et al., 2026).

This is precisely the dynamic at work in West Africa. No single country’s approach to Sahelian security can capture the full picture of a threat environment that spans the Sahel and the coastal states together. Political instability, the movement of armed groups, and illicit trafficking all carry consequences well beyond national borders, which is exactly why cross-border information-sharing and coordinated security operations matter. Seen this way, the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is less a membership problem than a governance dilemma: the institutions through which cooperation is organised have shifted, but the underlying security realities have not.

2.3 ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States: two models of order

ECOWAS has evolved from an organisation focused narrowly on economic integration into a body with real political and security weight. Its involvement in regional crises and its defence of constitutional governance have given it an authority that extends well beyond trade. That expanded role has also drawn criticism, particularly over whether its enforcement of democratic norms has been matched by an equal responsiveness to the security and socio-economic needs of the populations affected by its decisions.

It was against this backdrop that the Alliance of Sahel States took shape. Originally conceived as a mutual defence pact among Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, it has since grown into a political project as well. The AES is best understood not merely as a reaction to ECOWAS sanctions, but as a deliberate attempt by the three governments to build an alternative mechanism for security cooperation and political coordination. None of this means that ECOWAS and the AES now operate as two genuinely separate security spaces. The AES states remain geographically bound to their ECOWAS neighbours, and people, goods, armed groups, and illicit networks continue to cross between them. The conceptual puzzle this creates is institutional fragmentation occurring alongside undiminished regional interdependence.

2.4 Regional Security Complex Theory as an analytical lens

This study draws on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, to make sense of that puzzle. RSCT holds that security relationships among geographically proximate states are typically so intertwined that they cannot be understood in isolation from one another; security dynamics, in this view, tend to operate at a regional rather than a purely state-centric level (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory is well suited to this study because the security problems facing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger do not stop at their borders. Violent extremism, trafficking, arms flows, and displacement in these countries carry direct consequences for their neighbours. RSCT also helps explain the paradox at the centre of this paper: political relations across the region are pulling apart even as security relations remain, and in some respects grow more, interconnected.

That said, the theory has limits. It illuminates the significance of geographic proximity and interlinked security arrangements, but it cannot fully account for the political calculations of individual leaders and governments. This study therefore uses RSCT mainly to explain the persistence of security interdependence between the Sahel and coastal West Africa, while relying on documentary evidence to examine the political and institutional dimensions of the rupture itself.

The working premise of this paper is that in a threat environment that is transnational and geographically interconnected, institutional withdrawal does not end regional cooperation outright. What it can do instead is open a gap between the institutions through which security cooperation is organised and the geographic space in which insecurity actually plays out.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, documentary research design to examine what the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS means for regional security governance in West Africa. A qualitative approach suits this task because the central concerns here — political change, institutional response, security relations, and the layered meanings of sovereignty and regional authority — are interpretive in nature rather than the kind of phenomena that lend themselves to statistical measurement. The study relies entirely on secondary sources: peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, ECOWAS treaties and official statements, reports from international organisations, policy

documents, and relevant security assessments. Particular weight is given to material from ECOWAS, the African Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, and other established research institutions, alongside scholarly work on regional integration, democratic governance, military intervention, and Sahelian security.

Documents were selected on the basis of relevance, credibility, and their contribution to the study's research questions. The material examined covers the evolution of ECOWAS's political and security mandate, the coups and democratic conditionality disputes in West Africa, the relationship between ECOWAS and the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, counter-terrorism and cross-border insecurity, and the consequences of the withdrawal for regional integration and security governance.

The analysis proceeds through thematic content analysis, examining recurring arguments, events, patterns, and relationships across the selected documents. Five analytical themes guided this process: political and institutional tensions between ECOWAS and the three Sahelian states; competing understandings of sovereignty and regional authority; the emergence of the AES; the implications for counter-terrorism and cross-border security; and the consequences of withdrawal for regional integration.

Documentary research has real limitations, and this study takes them seriously. Policy reports and other secondary sources can carry selective interpretations, and official documents often reflect the interests of the institutions or governments that produce them. To manage this, the study cross-checks evidence across different categories of documents and gives more weight to sources with identifiable authorship, institutional standing, and a clear evidentiary basis. No single documentary source is treated as authoritative on its own.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Political and institutional drivers of the ECOWAS–AES Rupture

The withdrawal of the three states from ECOWAS followed a steady deterioration in relations between the military-led governments and the regional body. The coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger placed the question of unconstitutional government squarely at the centre of ECOWAS's regional agenda. ECOWAS treated the restoration of constitutional government as a precondition for regional stability, while the military governments pushed back against sanctions, transition timelines, and the possibility of outside intervention as challenges to their legitimacy. This was never simply a dispute about military rule; it exposed genuinely competing views of legitimacy, sovereignty, and security across the region (Aina et al., 2026; Chukwudi et al., 2025).

4.2 The fragmentation of regional security cooperation

The most consequential security effect of the withdrawal is the widening gap between political arrangements and the geographic reach of the region's security threats. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remain caught up in a shared regional context of terrorism, organised crime, arms trafficking, and displacement, none of which respects the institutional line separating the AES from ECOWAS. This is the central contradiction that

Regional Security Complex Theory helps to expose: geographic proximity and cross-border interaction keep producing security interdependence even as the institutional basis for managing that interdependence becomes more fragmented (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Varga, 2020).

4.3 Counter-terrorism and the security governance dilemma

The ECOWAS–AES rupture is unfolding against the backdrop of an active and severe security crisis in the Sahel. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remain among the countries most affected by violent extremism in the region; in 2024, the Sahel accounted for more than half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2025). The point here is not that withdrawal itself weakens counter-terrorism efforts in any direct sense, but that the rupture makes the institutional coordination of a fundamentally regional problem considerably harder to sustain.

4.4 Regional integration under institutional fragmentation

The withdrawal also raises a harder question about the durability of West African unity. Membership in ECOWAS and regional interdependence are not the same thing. Even after leaving the organisation, the economies, populations, and transport networks of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remain closely tied to their neighbours. That ongoing interdependence is visible in ECOWAS's own post-withdrawal arrangements for movement, residence, and trade, and in the contingency measures it adopted in April 2025 covering market access and peace and security cooperation (ECOWAS, 2025a, 2025b).

4.5 Implications for Nigeria

Nigeria occupies a particularly consequential position in this evolving landscape. Given its geography, its history within ECOWAS, and its military and economic weight, Abuja has as much at stake in the ECOWAS–AES rupture as any state in the region. Security is the most immediate concern: instability in Niger is not a distant or external matter for Nigeria. Nigeria therefore has a direct interest in preventing the political divide between ECOWAS and the AES from hardening into an operational divide in regional security cooperation.

4.6 Reconfiguration, not collapse

The evidence here does not support reading the withdrawal as a wholesale failure of regional integration in West Africa. People and goods continue to move across the ECOWAS–AES boundary, shared security threats persist, and diplomatic channels remain at least partially open, all of which points to something more complicated than outright collapse. A more accurate description is that West African regionalism is undergoing institutional refashioning rather than disintegration. This idea — that institutional fragmentation can coexist with a durable regional security complex defined by political separation and continuing security interdependence — sits at the core of this study's argument.

5. CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS stands as one of the most consequential institutional developments in contemporary West African regionalism. This analysis has shown that the rupture emerged from the interaction of military rule, ECOWAS's insistence on constitutional governance, sanctions, sovereignty concerns, and dissatisfaction with the regional response to insecurity. The emergence of the AES gave the three states an alternative political and security framework, but it did not undo their geographic, economic, and security ties to the wider region.

These findings support the central claim drawn from Regional Security Complex Theory: institutional separation does not automatically produce security separation. The withdrawal has reshaped the institutional architecture of West African regionalism, but geographic proximity and transnational security threats continue to bind the Sahelian and coastal states together. Regional integration, in this sense, is being reconfigured rather than dismantled. What happens next in West African security governance will depend on whether ECOWAS, the AES, and individual states such as Nigeria can sustain practical cooperation despite their political differences.

5.1 Recommendations

ECOWAS and the AES should keep structured diplomatic channels open even where disagreements over governance and regional norms remain unresolved, with dialogue focused first on practical areas of shared interest such as security, border management, trade, and population movement. Regional security cooperation should not depend entirely on formal ECOWAS membership. Mechanisms for intelligence exchange, border surveillance, counter-terrorism, and responses to transnational crime should be built to accommodate cooperation between ECOWAS member states and AES countries alike. ECOWAS should continue to defend constitutional governance while strengthening its capacity to engage constructively with governments undergoing political transitions. Sanctions and other coercive measures should be paired with sustained diplomatic engagement and a clearer accounting of their humanitarian and security consequences.

Nigeria should draw on its geographic position, economic weight, and diplomatic standing to help keep communication open between ECOWAS and the AES, using its diplomacy to preserve regional security cooperation while encouraging gradual political reconciliation.

ECOWAS should promote functional forms of regional integration, protecting trade, movement, infrastructure, and security cooperation even where formal political relations remain strained. That kind of flexibility can preserve regional interdependence without requiring immediate political reintegration.

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