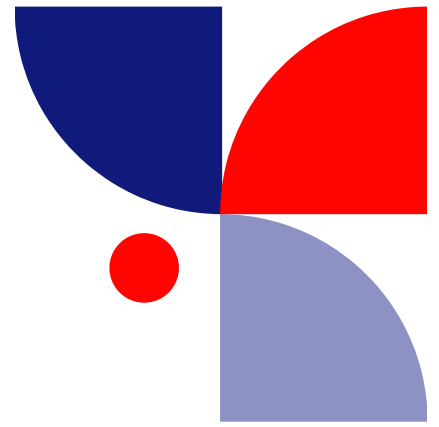




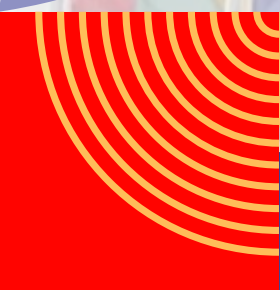
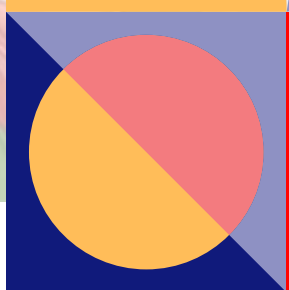
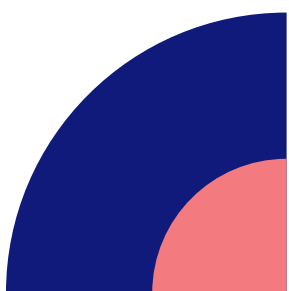
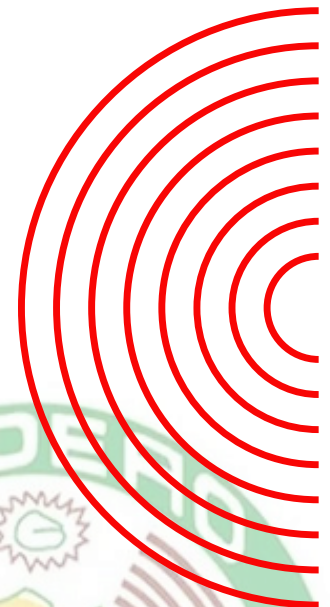
RESEARCH ENTERPRISE SYSTEMS



OPINION PIECE

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Breaking the bonds?: Implications of the Sahel states' exit from ECOWAS



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This paper is based entirely on desk research. No original fieldwork or interviews were conducted. All information are attributed to their sources, and any errors remain responsibility of the authors.

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Background

ECOWAS was established in 1975 with the vision of fostering economic cooperation, political stability, and collective security across West Africa. For five decades now, it achieved significant milestones, including the implementation of the Economic Community's Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which boosted intra-regional trade to 15% of total commerce by 2022 (ECOWAS Annual Report, 2023). Its peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, played a decisive role in stabilizing conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s, setting a precedent for African-led conflict resolution (Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War*, 2002). It has adopted in 2008, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework with a strategy to fast-track regional integration and consolidate peace and security against the backdrop of emerging violent extremism, insurgencies and cross-border criminal networks. Furthermore, ECOWAS articulated a succeeding vision to effectively transition into a peaceful, integrated and prosperous ECOWAS for the people by 2050.

Yet, these accomplishments and plans now face existential strain. In 2024 Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS and formed the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES). This development marks a pivotal moment in the history of West African regionalism. It has not only challenged the bloc's bond, but has also highlighted systemic tensions in its governance framework manifesting in three key aspects:

- **Sovereignty vs. Supra-nationalism:** The bloc's suspension of post-coup governments, a policy enshrined in its 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, was perceived by the AES states as punitive overreach. Mali's 2023 diplomatic cable captured this sentiment: "ECOWAS prioritizes procedure over survival". This mirrors the dilemma faced by ASEAN in 1997, which adopted flexible engagement to balance collective norms with respect for diverse political contexts (Acharya, *Constructing Global Order*, 2018);
- **Urgency vs. institutional Delays:** While jihadist violence surged by 320% in the Sahel between 2015 and 2023 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024), ECOWAS's consensus-driven model struggled to deliver timely support. The Accra Initiative (2017), though promising, lacked funding parity with the AES states' bilateral security agreements with Russia, leaving a vacuum exploited by terror groups;
- **Uniform Sanctions vs. Asymmetric Impacts:** ECOWAS's 2023 sanctions on Niger, triggered by its coup, have negatively impacted the people, contracted the economy by 4.2% (World Bank, 2024) and severed critical trade ties.

How does this withdrawal challenge the dream of an integrated, stable, secure and prosperous West African regional bloc? How can ECOWAS uphold shared principles while accommodating the Sahel's unique vulnerabilities? This paper argues that an adaptive ECOWAS remains the critical engine for West African regional stability and prosperity and African effective integration.

Interrogating the exit: Why the Sahel states left ECOWAS

The challenge to the unity and cohesion of the West African regional bloc ECOWAS is woven through three main interrelated factors that led to the exit of the Sahel States.

- **Political factors:** The post-coup sanctions imposed by ECOWAS, though rooted in its protocols, were perceived by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as a violation of national sovereignty as reflected in this sentiment: "ECOWAS prioritizes procedure over survival" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bamako). This tension mirrors the challenge faced by ASEAN in 1997, when the bloc adopted flexible engagement to balance collective norms with respect for diverse political contexts (Acharya, *Constructing Global Order*, 2018, p. 45). The Sahel states argue that ECOWAS's rigid enforcement of democratic principles ignores their unique needs and challenges.
- **Public safety factors:** The Sahel has become the epicenter of jihadist violence in Africa, with attacks increasing by 320% between 2015 and 2023 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024, p. 4). Despite this escalation, ECOWAS's consensus-driven model proved inadequate in delivering timely support. The Accra Initiative (2017), designed to enhance regional counterterrorism cooperation, lacked sufficient funding and operational capacity, forcing the Sahel states to seek alternative partnerships. Notably, bilateral agreements with Russia's Wagner Group provided immediate military assistance, contrasting sharply with ECOWAS's protracted decision-making processes. As Niger's Defense Minister starkly noted, "You can't debate terrorism in committee rooms while villages burn" (Niamey, 2023).
- **Economic factors:** ECOWAS's 2023 sanctions on Niger, imposed following the coup, had devastating humanitarian and economic consequences. The country's economy contracted by 4.2%, while trade with Nigeria plummeted by 68% (World Bank, 2024, p. 23). Food inflation soared to 28%, exacerbating poverty and instability. These measures were perceived as collective punishment, undermining the bloc's solidarity. By failing to account for the disproportionate impact of sanctions on civilian populations, ECOWAS was seen to alienate the very states it sought to reintegrate.

Implications for regional integration

This section analyzes the multidimensional consequences of the exit, examining how sovereignty assertions, security imperatives, and economic implications are reshaping West Africa's geopolitical landscape as well as the continental dimensions therefrom.

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- **Sovereignty and Political implications:** The AES states framed their withdrawal as an act of strategic sovereignty through three key assertions: a) **Post-Coup Sanctions as Collective Punishment:** ECOWAS's suspension policy became a flashpoint when applied to the Sahel. Mali's Finance Minister Alousséni Sanou captured this at the Bamako Economic Forum (2024): "When Abuja imposes sanctions that starve our people while terrorists attack our villages, we must choose survival over procedure." b) **Diplomatic Double Standards:** Leaked cables from Niger's Foreign Ministry (2023) revealed deep frustration: "ECOWAS applies democratic standards selectively." In contrast, the regional bloc's delayed responses to constitutional manipulations in coastal states (e.g., Guinea's 2021 coup) and phased recovery on Cote d'Ivoire 2011 post election crisis contrasted sharply with its swift sanctions against the Sahel; c) **Institutional Alternatives:** The Liptako-Gourma Charter (2023) institutionalized the AES's rejection of external interference, prioritizing African-led security solutions, financial autonomy (e.g., BCID-AES), and non-aligned diplomatic positioning. The sovereignty-supra-nationalism dichotomy has eroded trust in ECOWAS's legitimacy, with the AES now functioning as a parallel sub-regional bloc.

- Socio-economic implications: ECOWAS sanctions triggered severe humanitarian and trade disruptions. The 2023 sanctions on Niger, in particular freezing billions in assets and sealing borders, led to a devastating cost. Trade with Nigeria, Niger’s economic lifeline, collapsed by 68%, while food prices soared beyond the reach of ordinary citizens as captured in the table below:

Indicators	Pre-sanctions (2022)	Pre-sanctions (2024)	Source
Niger-Nigeria Trade	\$1.4 billion	\$448 million (-68%)	AfCFTA, 2025
Food Inflation	12%	28%	World Bank, 2024
BCID-AES Capital	N/A	\$100 million	AES Summit, 2024

In the markets of Niamey and the farming communities along the Niger-Nigeria border, ECOWAS solidarity came to be seen not as a promise but as a weapon. The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and its Confederal Bank for Investment and Development (BCID-AES) were reported as more than pragmatic alternatives; but acts of economic self-preservation and determination, as Burkina Faso's President Ibrahim Traoré poignantly declared in 2023, "ECOWAS solidarity had become a weapon against the poor," crystallizing the perception that the bloc's sanctions regime disproportionately harmed civilian populations while failing to address security imperatives.

The strategic pivot toward financial autonomy has triggered three seismic shifts across West Africa, each with profound implications for regional stability. The general economic landscape has undergone dramatic contraction. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), once covering nearly all member states, now excludes 15% of its original market base following the Sahel withdrawal. Perhaps more consequentially, negotiations surrounding the Eco currency, a decades-long project have ground to a complete halt. The resulting trade vacuum has created supply chain disruptions, with Nigerian manufacturers reporting a 42% decline in raw material imports from Niger (Afreximbank, 2024).

- Safety, Security and Counter-terrorism implications: The Sahel's public safety and security crises exposed ECOWAS's operational limitations as Jihadist expansion became widespread, attacks surged 320% (2015–2023), with groups like JNIM controlling 40% of rural Mali (ACLED, 2024). ECOWAS' Accra Initiative delivered only 18% of pledged funds (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). The security dynamics have entered a dangerous new phase. With ECOWAS border monitoring systems now handicapped, jihadist groups like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) exploit governance gaps along the Mali-Niger-Burkina tri-border area. ACLED data reveals a 17% increase in cross-border attacks in 2024 alone. Simultaneously, coastal states confront a secondary crisis as over 120,000 displaced persons flee north-to-south (IOM, 2024), overwhelming reception centers in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

Closely related to security implications is geopolitical concerns. The geopolitical order is undergoing rapid realignment. Russia's security footprint now extends to training 60% of AES forces through Wagner Group partnerships (ICG, 2024), while China has committed \$280 million to BCID-AES infrastructure projects, including the controversial Niamey-Ouagadougou rail corridor. This eastward pivot fundamentally alters West Africa's traditional diplomatic calculus, with the AES states increasingly operating as a strategic counterweight to ECOWAS's orientation.

AFRICA

Beyond West Africa geopolitics, the Sahel crisis threatens the coherence of pan-African frameworks. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) faces divergence as AES states introduce independent tariff regimes, such as the 20% import surcharge announced in 2024. The African Union's peace and security architecture risks fragmentation as competing security blocs emerge, exemplified by AES–Russia joint military exercises. Financial integration is also under strain: the BCID-AES gold-backed settlement unit bypasses the Continental Payment System's currency-clearing mechanisms. These are not isolated incidents but early warning signs of institutional drift across the continent. Reversing this fragmentation requires a calibrated approach that balances sovereignty with collective stability. One option is to pursue a three-track reintegration framework.

The first track, institutional restructuring, would give the Sahel a permanent voice within ECOWAS, such as reserved parliamentary seats, while applying the subsidiarity principle to delegate certain security functions, like counterterrorism, to AES-led brigades. Flexibility could be codified through an ECOWAS- mechanism similar to the ASEAN's, allowing opt-outs from sensitive policies without undermining the wider community.

The second track, economic confidence-building, would establish cross-border special economic zones at key frontiers, modeled on the EU–Switzerland agreements, enabling sustainable duty-free trade despite political tensions. Sanctions could be subject to a “sunset clause,” mandating review every six months and incorporating humanitarian exemptions. A blockchain-enabled Digital E-TLS system could further rebuild trust by ensuring transparent, tamper-proof certification of goods.

Third, recent developments should suggest potential for financial system coordination as consensus is emerging with Niger's Finance Minister Mamadou Diop (2025) who articulated a shared principle: "Our parallel systems should speak the same monetary language." This aligns with: BCID-AES's stated goal of "complementarity not competition" (AES Charter Art.12) and ECOWAS's long-standing monetary convergence criteria.

Fourth, a strategic alignment, would seek to integrate these measures into broader African frameworks, preventing the emergence of permanent alternative systems. This will require early and decisive action. As Burkina Faso's Trade Minister warned in the Ouagadougou Declaration of March 2024: “Without structural changes by 2025, alternative systems will become irreversible.”

By combining these approaches, ECOWAS can transform the current economic fragmentation into an opportunity to build a more resilient, equitable regional economy - one that learns from past crises while innovating for future challenges.

The choice for ECOWAS is crucial. It can either make the bold reforms that first earned it a reputation as Africa's integration pioneer, or risk becoming an observer in a region where its authority once set the rules. Thus, the withdrawal of the Sahel states is not a rejection of ECOWAS but a call for bolder reform. By addressing these systemic tensions, the bloc can reclaim its role as a unifying force in West Africa.



[Nigeria strengthens military ties with breakaway Sahel states amid insecurity](#) | Bi Contributor | 26 July 2025

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Flexible and Adaptive Regionalism: A Learning Curve for ECOWAS

Across the world, regional organizations have struggled to reconcile collective governance with the sovereignty of their member states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) offers an instructive precedent through its principle of flexible engagement. When Myanmar joined ASEAN in 1997 during a period of deep international isolation, the bloc adopted a phased approach that blended normative commitments with pragmatic engagement. This adaptive model helped preserve unity while accommodating political realities, a balance that ECOWAS could now draw upon in its own time of crisis. A similar spirit of flexibility could guide three critical reforms.

First, ECOWAS could introduce an “Associated Member” status, creating a middle ground between full membership and suspension. Such a designation would allow states in political transition to continue participating in essential technical committees, benefit from emergency stabilization funds, and progressively regain full privileges as democratic reforms are verified. This would prevent total exclusion while maintaining clear incentives for progress.

Second, ECOWAS’s economic policy should recognize the diversity of its members’ circumstances. The current one-size-fits-all application of the Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) can be counterproductive, particularly in fragile Sahel economies. A five-year transition period for these states, modeled on ASEAN’s Minus X mechanism, could grant temporary exemptions for sensitive sectors, link tariff reductions to measurable mutual commitments, and safeguard core trade flows while preserving room for tailored policy measures.

Third, the bloc’s crisis response mechanisms would benefit from decentralization. The existing Abuja-centric mediation model could be complemented by a “Troika Plus” system, rotating leadership among sub-regions, ensuring dedicated Sahel representation, and establishing standing joint task forces to manage border security. This approach would distribute responsibility more evenly and bring decision-making closer to the affected regions.

Strengthen the Role of Track II Actors in ECOWAS Mediation and Preventive diplomacy.

- The crisis response approach should also benefit from Track II diplomacy engaging the knowledge and experiences of former West African diplomats and regional civil society actors that have served in the trouble country/zone of in crises states. The core intervention would entail mapping and updating sub-national mediation mechanisms with a view to empower engagements across West Africa region;

- Building Human Bridges, The Youth Solidarity Initiative: While institutional reforms can strengthen governance frameworks, lasting reconciliation depends on investing in West Africa's most valuable asset, its people. A comprehensive and sustainable youth exchange program, pursued on a transparent, accountable and merit-based basis, could nurture the next generation of regional leaders through a combination of academic, professional, cultural and leadership immersion.

Learning from Within : The Ivory Coast Model of Phased Reintegration

Drawing lessons from past crises, particularly Ivory Coast's post-2011 recovery, ECOWAS can craft a roadmap for reconciliation that balances accountability with pragmatism. Ivory Coast's experience offers a proven template. ECOWAS's graduated sanctions relief program, tied to verifiable reforms, spurred an 8.5% GDP rebound within three years, restored 92% of intra-regional trade by 2015, and revived private sector confidence with a 40% surge in foreign direct investment. Applied to the current context, this model suggests a phased reintegration of the Sahel states into the ETLS. An initial 12-month phase could prioritize humanitarian and economic essentials, lifting tariffs on medicines, fertilizers, and other critical goods. This confidence-building measure would alleviate civilian suffering while signaling openness to dialogue. A subsequent 24-month phase might expand access to manufactured goods, contingent on institutional reforms. Full ETLS reinstatement would follow only after sustained compliance, verified through joint trade certification bodies and a digital tracking system to ensure transparency. Complementary measures could stabilize the transition. A \$250 million ECOWAS Solidarity Fund might cushion sanctioned sectors, while cross-border trade hubs staffed by neutral arbiters could mitigate disputes. The key lies in reciprocity, each ECOWAS concession met with verifiable reforms from the AES, ensuring reintegration is neither punitive nor unconditional.

A transitional financial architecture could bridge the divide. A multilateral clearinghouse mechanism, overseen by neutral parties like Afreximbank and the African Development Bank, might harmonize currency exchange, infrastructure financing, and risk mitigation. ECOWAS could provide liquidity for the proposed Eco currency, while the AES gradually transitions from the CFA franc, backed by its gold reserves. Jointly managed projects in energy and agribusiness, facilitated by Africa50, could serve as pilot initiatives. Implementation would require deliberate stages: technical working groups (2024–25) to align payment systems, sector-specific pilots (2026–27), and ultimately a unified governance framework (2028 onward). Such a pathway acknowledges the Sahel's desire for monetary sovereignty while preserving the benefits of regional integration.

Conclusion

The diplomatic void left by ECOWAS-AES tensions has been swiftly filled by external actors as well. Russia, capitalizing on anti-Western sentiment, has transitioned from informal Wagner Group operations to formal defense pacts, embedding itself in Sahelian security architectures. Simultaneously, its state nuclear firm, Rosatom, has sidestepped EU sanctions to secure uranium contracts in Niger, anchoring Moscow in the region's resource economy. China, meanwhile, has expanded its footprint through infrastructure diplomacy. Belt and Road Initiative projects, once concentrated in coastal states, now stretch into the Sahel, while Huawei's "Digital Sahel" initiative builds alternative telecom networks outside ECOWAS-approved channels. These parallel systems risk undermining regional harmonization, particularly the ETLS, and could render ECOWAS irrelevant in its own backyard.

The ASEAN experience proves regional organizations can adapt without abandoning core values. By implementing differentiated engagement frameworks, culture-forward confidence building, and security coordination mechanisms. ECOWAS can transform this crisis into what Ghanaian scholar Akosua Ampofo terms "a necessary evolution." The bloc's future hinges on recognizing that resilience requires both steadfast principles and adaptive implementation. Overall, the ECOWAS remains the critical engine for regional stability and prosperity. Rather than seeing the exit as a signal towards the disintegration of ECOWAS, it should be seen as an opportunity for bolder reform and innovation to address diversity while upholding unity. By so doing,

instead of breaking the bonds that bind the region together, ECOWAS will re-emerge as a stronger, more efficient and adaptive regional bloc.

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