



THE FORMATION OF A NEW ALLIANCE POST-ECOWAS EXPULSION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WEST AFRICAN SECURITY

OLANIYI PIUS OKI

Department of Political Science,
Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna
Olaniyi.oki2020@nda.edu.ng

Abstract

This study investigates the shifting security dynamics in West Africa following the expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS due to recent military takeovers. The resurgence of military governments in these nations has led to the formation of a strategic alliance, posing significant challenges to regional stability and security. Utilizing the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, the study examines how security threats are interconnected within the region, creating a "security complex" that influences regional and international responses. The research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology, relying on qualitative data from secondary sources such as academic journals, reports, and news articles. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the strategic realignment of these countries and the consequences of their alliance on regional governance, security frameworks, and the capacity of ECOWAS to uphold democratic standards. The study also evaluates the role of external powers and non-state actors in shaping West Africa's security landscape. The findings underscore the need for a redefined security strategy that addresses the root causes of instability, including governance failures, economic difficulties, and the influence of extremist groups. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing regional security cooperation and promoting sustainable governance in West Africa.

Keywords: *West Africa, military coups, ECOWAS, regional security, Sahel Alliance, governance.*

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975 to foster economic integration and political stability, has long been a central actor in promoting order and cooperation in the region. Yet, the resurgence of military coups across West Africa has exposed the fragility of its governance framework and tested its capacity to enforce democratic norms. In response to unconstitutional changes of government, ECOWAS has imposed stringent sanctions, including suspensions and, in recent cases, the unprecedented expulsion of affected countries (BBC News, 2023). These measures underscore the gravity with which



ECOWAS views the threats to regional stability and the potential unraveling of its democratic protocols (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2023).

The persistence of coups in the region cannot be understood outside its historical context. Legacies of colonial rule, weak institutional frameworks, economic marginalization, and systemic corruption have combined to create conditions of instability, where disillusionment with civilian governments often paves the way for military intervention (Adebajo, 2022). Mali, for example, has experienced repeated coups since independence in 1960, the most recent in 2020 and 2021, driven by public frustration with the state's inability to address jihadist insurgencies in the north and center of the country (Wing, 2021). Burkina Faso followed a similar trajectory, with successive coups in 2022 and 2023 triggered by mounting insecurity from Islamist militant violence (Harsch, 2023). Niger's 2023 coup was likewise linked to discontent over worsening security conditions and socio-economic grievances (Al Jazeera, 2023). Together, these cases highlight the interconnected drivers of political instability in the Sahel.

The expulsion of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS has deepened their political isolation but also catalyzed new alignments. In January 2024, the three states announced the formation of a strategic bloc now commonly referred to as the "Sahel Alliance." This partnership is framed around collective security priorities, particularly the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, but it also serves as a political response to their exclusion from ECOWAS structures (Devermont, 2023). By consolidating cooperation outside ECOWAS, the alliance represents a significant recalibration of regional power dynamics and raises questions about the future of West African integration (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The emergence of this alliance illustrates the delicate balance between domestic politics, security imperatives, and regional governance in West Africa. It further exposes the dilemmas faced by ECOWAS: how to uphold its principles of democracy and constitutional order without undermining regional cohesion, especially in contexts where existential security challenges take precedence over political reforms (Adebajo, 2022).

Against this background, the objectives of this study are threefold: first, to examine the historical and structural factors that have enabled the resurgence of military coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; second, to analyze the motivations underpinning their strategic



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cooperation through the Sahel Alliance; and third, to assess the implications of their expulsion from ECOWAS for regional security and political stability. The study also seeks to propose policy options for strengthening regional governance mechanisms and promoting sustainable stability in West Africa.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the nexus between political instability and regional security. By interrogating the drivers of coups and the emergence of new political-military alignments in the Sahel, the study offers insights into how regional organizations might recalibrate their strategies in responding to unconstitutional changes of government. In doing so, it highlights potential pathways for reconciling the imperatives of security with the promotion of democratic governance—an enduring challenge for West Africa’s fragile political order.

Literature Review:

Overview of the Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa has sparked widespread concern among scholars, policymakers, and regional organizations. Historically, the region has been plagued by political instability, and the recent wave of military coups has reignited fears of a return to authoritarianism. This resurgence, occurring primarily in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023, has prompted a re-evaluation of the underlying factors contributing to the recurrence of coups and the effectiveness of regional and international responses.

One of the key drivers of the resurgence of military coups is the persistent failure of democratic governance to address the socio-economic and security challenges facing many West African countries. According to Nsaibia and Bala (2023), the inability of civilian governments to manage escalating security threats, particularly from jihadist insurgencies, has eroded public confidence in democratic institutions. In Mali, for instance, the government’s failure to contain Islamist militancy in the north, coupled with widespread corruption, created a fertile ground for the military to justify its intervention as a necessary step to restore order (Nsaibia & Bala, 2023). Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the military justified its 2022 and 2023 coups by citing the government’s inability to curb the rising violence from extremist groups (Harsch, 2023).



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Economic factors also play a crucial role in the resurgence of coups. Scholars such as Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2022) argue that chronic poverty, unemployment, and economic mismanagement have led to widespread disillusionment with civilian governments, making military intervention appear as a viable alternative for many citizens. The 2023 coup in Niger, for example, was partially driven by public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of economic issues, including high inflation and unemployment rates (Gyimah-Boadi & Yakah, 2022). The military capitalized on this discontent, positioning itself as a force capable of addressing the economic grievances of the population.

Moreover, the legacy of weak state institutions and the fragility of democratic processes in West Africa have contributed to the recurrence of military coups. Many countries in the region have struggled to build robust institutions that can enforce the rule of law, ensure accountability, and protect civil liberties. According to Barka and Wentzel (2023), the weakness of these institutions has made it easier for military leaders to seize power, often with little resistance from the populace or the political elite. The lack of strong, independent judicial systems and legislative bodies has also meant that there are few checks on executive power, leading to governance failures that the military can exploit (Barka & Wentzel, 2023).

The role of external actors and international organizations in either mitigating or exacerbating the conditions for coups has been a subject of debate. While organizations like ECOWAS have been active in condemning coups and imposing sanctions, their effectiveness in preventing coups has been questioned. As Bah (2023) notes, the imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS has sometimes worsened the economic conditions in affected countries, further destabilizing them and making it harder to restore democratic governance. Additionally, external powers, particularly those with strategic interests in West Africa, have often been accused of prioritizing stability over democracy, sometimes tacitly supporting military regimes if they align with their security or economic interests (Bah, 2023).

Another important aspect of the resurgence of military coups is the role of regional dynamics and the spill over effects of instability in neighbouring countries. The Sahel region, in particular, has been a hotspot for insecurity, with the spread of jihadist groups across borders contributing to a regional security crisis. According to Chauzal and Van Damme (2022), the interconnectedness of security challenges in the Sahel has made it difficult for individual states to manage these threats on their own, leading to a domino effect where instability in one



country triggers coups in others (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2022). This regional instability has been compounded by the failure of regional organizations like ECOWAS and the African Union to develop effective, coordinated responses to the security threats in the Sahel. The resurgence of military coups in West Africa is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and security factors. The failure of democratic governments to address these challenges has led to a loss of public confidence, creating an environment in which military interventions are perceived as necessary corrections. The weakness of state institutions, the impact of external actors, and the regional dynamics of insecurity have all contributed to the recurrence of coups. Addressing these underlying issues will require a concerted effort by regional and international actors to strengthen democratic governance, improve economic conditions, and develop effective security strategies in West Africa.

TABLE 1: Timeline of Military Coups in West Africa (2010-2023)

| Year | Country | Date of Coup | Key Figures Involved | Reasons for Coup | Outcome | Source |
|------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------------|--|---|---|
| 2010 | Niger | February 18, 2010 | Salou Djibo | Dissatisfaction with President Mamadou Tandja's rule | Establishment of a military junta | BBC News (2010) |
| 2012 | Mali | March 22, 2012 | Amadou Sanogo | Government's failure to address Tuareg rebellion and Islamist threat | Overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré | International Crisis Group (2012) |
| 2020 | Mali | August 18, 2020 | Assimi Goïta | Corruption, insecurity, and poor governance | Overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta | Wing (2021) |
| 2021 | Mali | May 24, 2021 | Assimi Goïta | Discontent with the transitional government | Assimi Goïta assumes power as interim president | African Union Peace and Security Council (2021) |
| 2022 | Burkina Faso | January 24, 2022 | Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba | Insecurity due to jihadist insurgency | Overthrow of President Roch Marc | Harsch (2023) |



| Year | Country | Date of Coup | Key Figures Involved | Reasons for Coup | Outcome | Source |
|------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--|---|-------------------|
| | | | | | Christian Kaboré | |
| 2022 | Burkina Faso | September 30, 2022 | Ibrahim Traoré | Perceived inability of military government to deal with insecurity | Overthrow of Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba | Harsch (2023) |
| 2023 | Niger | July 26, 2023 | Abdourahamane Tchiani | Disillusionment with government's handling of security and economic issues | Overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum | Al Jazeera (2023) |

Sources: (BBC News, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2012; Wing, 2021; African Union Peace and Security Council, 2021; Harsch, 2023;)

Historical Context of Political Instability in the Region

The history of political instability in West Africa is deeply intertwined with the legacies of colonialism, weak state institutions, economic underdevelopment, and pervasive corruption. These factors have contributed to a cycle of instability, where dissatisfaction with civilian governments often leads to military interventions. The colonial legacy, in particular, left many West African countries with arbitrary borders, diverse ethnic groups, and fragile state structures that have struggled to maintain cohesion and stability since independence (Adebajo, 2022).

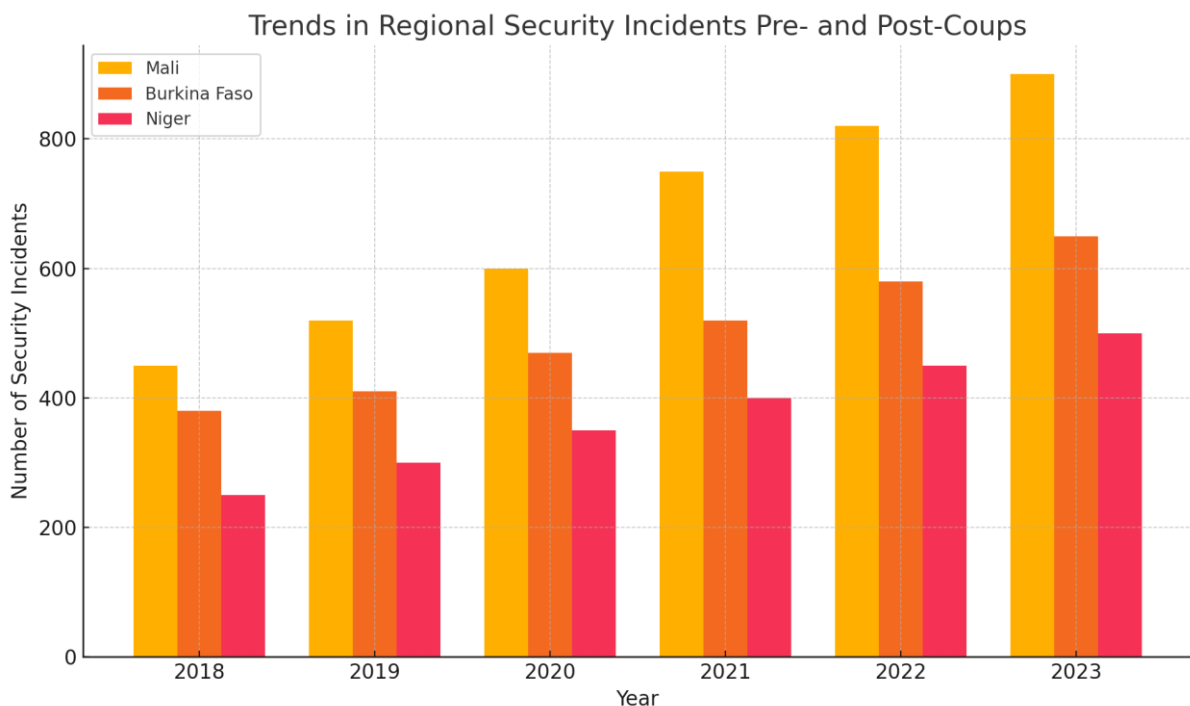
In the post-independence era, many West African countries experienced frequent coups and military rule, as military leaders justified their takeovers as necessary to restore order and address the failings of civilian governments. For instance, Mali has experienced multiple coups since gaining independence in 1960, with the most recent ones in 2020 and 2021 resulting from widespread discontent over the government's failure to address security challenges posed by jihadist groups in the northern and central regions of the country (Wing, 2021). Similarly, Burkina Faso's coups in 2022 and 2023 were driven by frustrations over the government's inability to curb escalating violence by Islamist militants (Harsch, 2023). In Niger, the 2023 coup was driven not only by mounting insecurity but also by widespread dissatisfaction with



the government’s inability to deliver on socio-economic needs, including food, services, and economic stability (Melly, 2024).

- The persistence of political instability in West Africa can also be attributed to the weak institutional frameworks in many countries, which have struggled to enforce the rule of law and maintain accountability among political leaders. Corruption and economic mismanagement have further eroded public trust in civilian governments, making military interventions appear as viable alternatives in the eyes of some segments of the population (Adebajo, 2022). The recurrence of coups in the region underscores the need for more robust democratic institutions, stronger rule of law, and effective governance to address the underlying causes of instability.

Fig. 1



Source: (International Crisis Group, 2023; African Union Peace and Security Council, 2023).

The Role and Response of ECOWAS, Including the Expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso



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The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been at the forefront of regional efforts to maintain political stability and enforce democratic norms in West Africa. Founded in 1975, ECOWAS has traditionally played a key role in mediating conflicts, promoting economic integration, and fostering democratic governance among its 15 member states. However, the recent wave of military coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2023 has presented one of the most significant challenges to the organization's authority and effectiveness.

ECOWAS's response to these coups has been characterized by a mix of diplomacy, sanctions, and, in some cases, threats of military intervention. After the military coup in Mali in August 2020, which ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, ECOWAS quickly condemned the coup and imposed sanctions, including the suspension of financial flows and a blockade on the country's borders (ICG, 2021). The organization also demanded the immediate restoration of civilian rule, which led to the establishment of a transitional government. However, the May 2021 coup during which Vice President Assimi Goïta deposed both President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane further derailed ECOWAS's democratic restoration efforts (Frontiers, 2023). The situation in Niger followed a similar trajectory. In July 2023, Niger experienced a military coup that toppled President Mohamed Bazoum. ECOWAS's response was swift and severe, including the imposition of economic sanctions, travel bans, and the suspension of Niger from the organization's activities (BBC News, 2023). The organization also threatened military intervention if the junta did not return power to the civilian government, marking one of the most assertive stances taken by ECOWAS in recent years. Despite these measures, the junta remained defiant, and the crisis in Niger persisted, raising questions about the effectiveness of ECOWAS's strategy (The Guardian, 2023).

In Burkina Faso, ECOWAS faced a similar challenge when the military seized power in January 2022, overthrowing President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. The organization's response included the suspension of Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, as well as targeted sanctions against the coup leaders. However, the sanctions had limited impact, as the military leadership in Burkina Faso, much like in Mali and Niger, prioritized national sovereignty over regional pressures (Reuters, 2023).

The expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS represents a significant shift in the organization's approach to dealing with unconstitutional changes of government. This



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unprecedented move has been seen as both a reflection of ECOWAS’s commitment to upholding democratic norms and an acknowledgment of the severe threat these coups pose to regional stability (Bah, 2023). However, the effectiveness of expulsion as a deterrent has been debated, with some analysts arguing that it has further isolated these countries, pushing them closer to non-regional powers such as Russia and China, which have shown willingness to engage with the military regimes (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Moreover, the persistent instability in these countries has exposed the limitations of ECOWAS’s existing mechanisms for conflict resolution and governance enforcement. According to Nwankwo and Olusola (2023), ECOWAS’s reliance on sanctions and diplomatic pressure, without addressing the underlying causes of instability such as governance failures and economic deprivation, has proven inadequate. The organization’s strategy has also been criticized for being reactive rather than proactive, often intervening after crises have already escalated (Nwankwo & Olusola, 2023).

Despite these criticisms, ECOWAS remains a crucial actor in West African security and governance. The organization has continued to advocate for dialogue and negotiations, seeking to bring the military juntas back to the table to discuss the return to civilian rule. However, the success of these efforts will depend on ECOWAS’s ability to adapt its strategies to the evolving political landscape in West Africa, including the possibility of engaging with non-traditional actors and exploring new forms of regional cooperation (Sarr 2023) Therefore is imperative to note that ECOWAS’s response to the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the organization in maintaining regional stability and promoting democracy. While the expulsion of these countries underscores ECOWAS’s commitment to democratic norms, it also reveals the challenges the organization faces in enforcing these norms in a region beset by complex security and governance issues. Moving forward, ECOWAS will need to reassess its strategies and consider more holistic approaches to addressing the root causes of instability in West Africa.

Table 2: Impact of ECOWAS Sanctions on Affected Countries’ Economies

| Country | Sanctions Imposed | Economic Impact | Source |
|---------|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Mali | Trade embargo, border closures, and asset freezes (2020) | Severe disruption of trade, significant inflation, decreased | International Crisis Group (2020) |



| Country | Sanctions Imposed | Economic Impact | Source |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| | | foreign investment, and shortages of essential goods. | |
| Burkina Faso | Suspension from ECOWAS, freezing of assets, and travel bans (2022) | Reduced economic activity, increased poverty, disruption of regional trade, and challenges in accessing international aid. | African Union Peace and Security Council (2022) |
| Niger | Economic and financial sanctions, including suspension of financial assistance and freezing of assets (2023) | Economic contraction, difficulties in servicing debts, loss of regional trade partnerships, and increased inflation. | Al Jazeera (2023) |

Sources: (International Crisis Group, 2020; African Union Peace and Security Council, 2022;).

Emergence of the Sahel Alliance as a Response to ECOWAS Sanctions

Fig. 2



Sources: (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alliance_of_Sahel_States)

The emergence of the Sahel Alliance, formed by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, represents a significant geopolitical shift in West Africa. This alliance arose in response to the sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following military coups in these countries. The Sahel Alliance, which marks a departure from traditional regional alignments, reflects the growing disillusionment with ECOWAS among these states and highlights the complex interplay between regional security concerns and national sovereignty.



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The Sahel Alliance was formally announced in September 2023, following a series of discussions between the military leaders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. These countries had all experienced military coups within a short span of time, Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022 and 2023, and Niger in 2023. ECOWAS responded to each coup with sanctions, including the suspension of these countries from the organization, travel bans, asset freezes, and economic sanctions aimed at pressuring the juntas to restore civilian rule (International Crisis Group, 2023). However, instead of compelling these regimes to capitulate, the sanctions contributed to the consolidation of a new alliance that challenges ECOWAS's authority in the region.

The formation of the Sahel Alliance is rooted in shared security concerns, particularly the ongoing fight against jihadist groups that have plagued the Sahel region for years. These countries have argued that their military takeovers were necessary to restore security and stability, which had been deteriorating under the previous civilian governments. The alliance is intended to enhance cooperation in counterterrorism efforts, with a focus on joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and border security (Devermont & Brown, 2023). The leaders of these countries have emphasized that the Sahel Alliance is not intended to be an antagonistic force but rather a pragmatic response to the unique security challenges they face.

The establishment of the Sahel Alliance has been met with mixed reactions. Some analysts see it as a pragmatic response to the inefficacy of ECOWAS and other international actors in addressing the security challenges in the Sahel. According to Molenaar (2023), the alliance allows these countries to take control of their security destinies, free from external pressures that often do not align with the on-the-ground realities. The formation of this alliance also reflects a broader trend in West Africa, where countries are increasingly seeking alternative security partnerships, as traditional structures like ECOWAS struggle to adapt to the evolving security landscape (Molenaar, 2023).

However, the Sahel Alliance has also raised concerns about the fragmentation of regional cooperation efforts. Critics argue that the alliance could undermine ECOWAS's authority and weaken collective security mechanisms in West Africa. As noted by Tull (2023), the emergence of parallel structures like the Sahel Alliance could lead to a more fractured regional security environment, where countries pursue their own interests at the expense of broader regional



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stability. This fragmentation could also complicate international efforts to combat terrorism and extremism in the Sahel, as it may reduce the effectiveness of coordinated responses.

Furthermore, the alliance's emphasis on military solutions has drawn criticism from those who advocate for more comprehensive approaches to the region's challenges. Kone (2023) argues that while military cooperation is essential, it must be complemented by initiatives that address the underlying socio-economic issues that fuel instability in the Sahel. Without such a holistic approach, the Sahel Alliance risks perpetuating the cycle of violence and insecurity that it seeks to end, the emergence of the Sahel Alliance as a response to ECOWAS sanctions highlights the shifting dynamics of regional security in West Africa. While the alliance represents a pragmatic response to shared security challenges, it also raises questions about the future of regional cooperation and the effectiveness of traditional organizations like ECOWAS. As the Sahel Alliance continues to develop, its impact on both regional stability and the broader geopolitical landscape of West Africa will be closely watched.

The Impact of International Responses

The international community has reacted to the formation of the new alliance with a mix of concern and cautious engagement. While some international actors have condemned the coups and the subsequent alliance as a setback for democracy in West Africa, others have recognized the pragmatic need to engage with these countries to address the ongoing security crisis in the Sahel. Recent policy briefs from the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2023) and the United Nations (UN, 2023) have underscored the importance of inclusive dialogue and the need for a comprehensive approach to security that goes beyond military solutions.

Moreover, the literature suggests that the success of the new alliance will depend heavily on its ability to secure international support and legitimacy. As noted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR, 2023), the alliance's ability to stabilize the region and combat terrorism will be closely watched by both regional and global actors. The ECFR emphasizes the need for the alliance to demonstrate a commitment to human rights and good governance, even as it tackles pressing security challenges.

The literature also raises concerns about the implications of this alliance for the future of ECOWAS and regional integration. As highlighted by scholars, the success or failure of this



alliance could set a precedent for other countries in the region, potentially leading to further fragmentation of regional organizations and a weakening of collective security mechanisms.

The literature on West African security underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the region's challenges. The formation of a new alliance among Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in response to their expulsion from ECOWAS represents both an opportunity and a risk for regional security. While it offers a potential path to enhanced cooperation against shared threats, it also poses significant challenges that could undermine the broader goals of regional stability and integration. Future research should continue to monitor the developments within this alliance and assess its long-term impact on the security and political landscape of West Africa.

Methodology:

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical qualitative research design. The primary data sources are secondary materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, reports from international organizations, and credible media publications. Source selection followed three criteria: (a) relevance to the themes of ECOWAS sanctions and West African security, (b) to ensure updated perspectives from 2020 onwards, and (c) credibility, prioritizing publications from established academic presses and reputable policy think tanks. This systematic approach ensured that only materials directly addressing the evolving political crises in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as well as the subsequent regional responses, were included (Adebajo, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The analytical framework combines descriptive mapping of historical events with interpretive content analysis. The study employs the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a guiding lens, enabling the exploration of how security interdependence and regional alignments are reshaped under political upheavals. Descriptive accounts, such as timelines of coups and sanction regimes, were integrated with analytical insights into policy responses, institutional credibility, and alliance formation.

To ensure validity and reliability, cross-source triangulation was applied. Reports from ECOWAS and the African Union were compared with independent analyses from international organizations, while scholarly works were evaluated against regional news coverage for consistency. This process minimized bias and improved the robustness of findings. Overall,



the methodology provides both depth and breadth in examining the dynamics of expulsion from ECOWAS and the subsequent emergence of new security arrangements in the Sahel.

Theoretical framework:

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was primarily developed by the prominent scholars Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. This theory, introduced in their seminal work "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" (2003), argues that the world's security dynamics can be best understood by focusing on regions rather than individual states or global systems. According to RSCT, security issues are more likely to be interlinked within a particular geographic region, creating what Buzan and Wæver refer to as a "security complex." This concept emphasizes that security threats and responses are closely interconnected within these regions, often driven by historical, cultural, political, and economic ties among the states involved. Buzan and Wæver's work provides a framework for analyzing how regional security interactions shape the global security environment, with regions acting as distinct subsystems within the broader international system.

In West Africa, the resurgence of military coups and the formation of the Sahel Alliance illustrate how regional security dynamics are deeply interwoven. This theory helps explain the strategic responses of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to their expulsion from ECOWAS and the subsequent shift in regional alliances. RSCT provides a framework for analyzing how these states' security concerns have led to new geopolitical configurations (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Findings and Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the suspension and subsequent withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS signaled a critical inflection point in West Africa's regional security architecture. The imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS ranging from border closures, financial restrictions, and suspension of aid, to diplomatic isolation which was intended to pressure the juntas into restoring civilian governments. However, the empirical outcome diverged significantly from ECOWAS's expectations. Rather than reversing the coups, sanctions contributed to deepening resentment, encouraged defiance, and ultimately provided



the impetus for a new political and security realignment through the establishment of the Sahel Alliance (Adebajo, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023).

From an analytical standpoint, this pattern demonstrates the limitations of coercive diplomacy in fragile state environments where rulers rely less on international legitimacy and more on nationalist narratives, control of the military, and local support networks. In these cases, sanctions failed to alter elite behavior but instead reinforced their resolve. This reflects the paradox of regional enforcement regimes: actions intended to protect democratic norms can simultaneously fracture regional solidarity.

1. Sanctions as a Catalyst for Realignment

The first key finding is that sanctions functioned less as deterrents and more as catalysts for political and security realignment. ECOWAS targeted Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger with travel bans, asset freezes, trade restrictions, and suspension of financial transactions through the West African Central Bank (BCEAO). While these measures were consistent with the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, they imposed severe economic hardship on populations already grappling with conflict and underdevelopment. The juntas exploited this hardship by framing ECOWAS as a neo-colonial instrument serving the interests of external powers such as France, rather than West Africans themselves (Zounmenou & Lamin, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Instead of creating leverage, sanctions strengthened the juntas' domestic legitimacy, as populations rallied behind leaders who projected sovereignty and resistance. By January 2024, the three states formally declared their exit from ECOWAS and accelerated plans for closer military and economic integration within the Sahel Alliance. This suggests that sanctions in fragile contexts risk generating unintended consequences, including authoritarian entrenchment and regional fragmentation.

2. RSCT and the Reshaping of West Africa's Security Interdependence

The second key finding, illuminated by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), is that the departure of these states reflects a structural shift in West Africa's patterns of security interdependence. RSCT emphasizes that states geographically proximate and facing common security threats develop interdependent security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In this



case, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso already shared deep security linkages through the fight against insurgency, terrorism, and cross-border organized crime.

The creation of the Sahel Alliance institutionalized these linkages outside ECOWAS structures. The Alliance has already announced joint military training exercises, coordinated patrols along shared borders, and a commitment to mutual defense in case of external threats. These developments indicate that the Sahel sub-region is crystallizing into a sub-security complex within West Africa one that could rival or at least complicate ECOWAS's broader security framework.

This fragmentation also highlights RSCT's proposition that regional security is not uniform but often marked by overlapping clusters of states with distinct security priorities. The Sahel Alliance, therefore, represents both a reaction to ECOWAS sanctions and a structural reconfiguration of regional security alignments.

3. Erosion of ECOWAS Legitimacy and Regional Norms

The third key finding is the erosion of ECOWAS's legitimacy as the central custodian of democratic norms and regional order. For decades, ECOWAS has projected itself as a leading African institution championing democracy, peacekeeping, and integration. However, the departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso exposes the fragility of this normative authority.

While ECOWAS justifies sanctions as necessary to deter unconstitutional changes of government, the juntas argue that ECOWAS has become detached from the security realities of the Sahel. They present the Sahel Alliance as a pragmatic alternative focused on sovereignty, mutual defense, and addressing existential threats such as jihadist violence. This competing narrative resonates strongly with domestic constituencies in the three states, where many citizens perceive ECOWAS as ineffective against insecurity but overly focused on political formalities (Adebajo, 2022).

The erosion of ECOWAS's legitimacy is not merely symbolic. It has material consequences for regional integration projects such as the ECOWAS single currency (ECO), the free movement of persons, and joint military operations. The withdrawal of three landlocked states situated at the heart of the Sahel corridor disrupts both the geographic and strategic coherence of West Africa's regional project.



4. Emerging Multipolarity in Regional Security

The results also suggest that the West African security landscape is becoming increasingly multipolar. Beyond ECOWAS and the Sahel Alliance, external actors such as Russia, Turkey, and China are deepening bilateral and security engagements with individual states. For instance, Mali and Burkina Faso have expanded cooperation with Russian security contractors, while Niger has sought closer ties with Algeria. These developments suggest that regional security cooperation is no longer monopolized by ECOWAS but is being diversified through a range of bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

From the RSCT lens, this trend illustrates a transition from a dominant security complex centered on ECOWAS to a pluralistic regional order characterized by competing security frameworks. This may enhance resilience through diversification but also risks fragmentation and incoherence in collective responses to transnational threats.

In summary, the results demonstrate that the suspension and expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS generated outcomes that were both unintended and transformative. Sanctions, rather than restoring democracy, catalyzed the formation of the Sahel Alliance. RSCT helps explain this by showing how existing patterns of security interdependence in the Sahel provided fertile ground for realignment outside ECOWAS. The consequences include an erosion of ECOWAS legitimacy, the crystallization of a Sahel sub-security complex, and the emergence of a multipolar regional security environment.

Collectively, these findings underscore the paradox of regional enforcement: while designed to strengthen democratic norms, sanctions may inadvertently accelerate fragmentation and weaken the very institutions they seek to uphold.

Discussion

The expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and their subsequent alliance formation marks a significant turning point in West African regional security dynamics. While ECOWAS has historically functioned as the primary regional bloc for advancing political stability, democratic governance, and collective security, the departure of these states has generated debates on both the resilience and fragility of regional integration. The analysis reveals that the Sahel Alliance, although still



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in its formative stage, illustrates how states excluded from dominant regional structures attempt to reconfigure their security and political trajectories.

Theoretically, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a useful lens for understanding this shift. RSCT posits that security challenges tend to cluster within specific regions, creating interdependent security dynamics shaped by geography, historical ties, and political relations. The breakaway of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso demonstrates how dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's governance principles and sanctions can foster the development of an alternative security complex. By repositioning themselves within a new framework, these states aim to secure autonomy from external interference and prioritize their immediate security concerns particularly the fight against terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel.

The discussion also highlights a structural tension between ECOWAS's normative commitments and member states' domestic political realities. ECOWAS has consistently emphasized constitutional governance, imposing sanctions on military regimes to deter unconstitutional power grabs. However, the regimes in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso argue that ECOWAS sanctions undermine their capacity to govern and combat existential threats such as jihadist insurgencies. This friction exposes a gap between regional norms and the lived realities of member states, thereby weakening the legitimacy of ECOWAS interventions in the eyes of affected populations.

From a security perspective, the newly formed alliance could contribute to short-term cooperation among the three states in combating transnational threats. Joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and border management have been identified as central objectives. However, the alliance also risks deepening fragmentation in West Africa by creating parallel blocs with competing visions of governance and security. The existence of rival security frameworks could complicate coordination with ECOWAS, the African Union, and international partners, potentially leading to policy incoherence in addressing terrorism, illicit trafficking, and migration flows.

Another dimension of the discussion relates to external actors. The withdrawal of these states from ECOWAS coincides with the increasing presence of non-traditional partners such as Russia, alongside waning influence from France and other Western powers. The Sahel Alliance may therefore serve not only as a security arrangement but also as a geopolitical realignment,



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signaling a shift in West Africa's external relations. This reflects RSCT's assertion that regional security complexes are not isolated but interact with global powers, which often exploit or reinforce regional fault lines to advance their interests.

Nonetheless, the sustainability of this new alliance remains uncertain. While shared grievances against ECOWAS provide a unifying factor, differences in national interests, resource constraints, and leadership ambitions could limit cohesion over time. Historically, regional breakaway initiatives in Africa have struggled to endure without strong economic foundations and institutional structures. The Sahel Alliance will therefore need to demonstrate effectiveness in delivering tangible security outcomes if it is to remain viable beyond symbolic resistance to ECOWAS.

The discussion also underscores an important policy implication: ECOWAS must balance its enforcement of democratic norms with pragmatic engagement of member states facing extraordinary security challenges. Overly rigid sanctions risk pushing more states toward alternative alliances, thereby undermining regional cohesion. At the same time, accommodating unconstitutional regimes without consequences could erode the organization's credibility as a promoter of democratic governance. This dilemma suggests the need for ECOWAS to adopt a more nuanced approach that integrates dialogue, targeted sanctions, and security cooperation.

In conclusion, the formation of the Sahel Alliance following the expulsion of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso represents both a challenge and an opportunity for regional security in West Africa. It challenges ECOWAS by exposing the limits of normative enforcement, yet it also opens opportunities for localized cooperation against common threats. The application of RSCT reveals that the evolution of regional security is shaped by complex interactions among domestic politics, regional norms, and external influences. For ECOWAS and the broader international community, the way forward lies in rethinking engagement strategies to avoid deepening fragmentation while still safeguarding principles of democratic governance.

Concluding Remarks/Recommendation

The study underscores the urgent need for ECOWAS to recalibrate its strategies in addressing political instability, unconstitutional changes of government, and regional insecurity. The



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persistence of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger demonstrates the limitations of current approaches, particularly blanket sanctions and reactive diplomacy. To strengthen its legitimacy and effectiveness, ECOWAS should adopt a more balanced, context-sensitive, and people-centered policy framework.

1. Adopt a Balanced Sanction Regime

ECOWAS's heavy reliance on blanket sanctions has proven counterproductive, as it deepens humanitarian suffering without significantly deterring coup leaders. A more balanced sanction framework should prioritize targeted measures including asset freezes, travel bans, and restrictions on military elites while safeguarding access to food, medicine, and humanitarian assistance for civilians. Such a calibrated approach would maintain pressure on juntas while avoiding alienation of ordinary populations, whose support is critical to sustaining regional legitimacy.

2. Strengthen Preventive Diplomacy and Early Warning Systems

A central weakness of ECOWAS has been its reactive posture. Most interventions occur only after coups have taken place, when restoring constitutional order is already difficult. Strengthening the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) is vital. Beyond monitoring threats, ECOWARN should be empowered with clear mechanisms for preventive diplomacy, enabling the organization to mediate political tensions, address governance lapses, and engage with local stakeholders before crises escalate into regime breakdowns.

3. Deepen Regional Security Cooperation

The departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS has exposed the fragility of collective security in West Africa. To remain relevant, ECOWAS should deepen cooperation with the African Union (AU), United Nations, and even sub-regional coalitions like the G5 Sahel, creating hybrid frameworks for counterterrorism and peacekeeping. This would prevent fragmentation of security efforts and ensure continuity in tackling transnational threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and trafficking, which remain beyond the capacity of individual states.

4. Promote Inclusive Dialogue and Mediation



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Military takeovers often thrive in contexts where governance deficits and citizen grievances are ignored. Mediation strategies should therefore extend beyond elite negotiations to include civil society, youth movements, traditional leaders, and women's groups. Broader participation would foster legitimacy and increase the likelihood of negotiated settlements being accepted by wider segments of society. Such inclusivity could also reduce the perception that ECOWAS interventions are externally imposed or elite-driven.

5. Reframe Regional Integration Beyond Security

ECOWAS risks being perceived as primarily a political and security organization, detached from the everyday needs of citizens. To reverse this, the bloc should reframe integration by investing in infrastructure, regional trade, job creation, and digital innovation. A stronger emphasis on socio-economic development would demonstrate tangible benefits of regionalism, reduce the appeal of populist military regimes, and rebuild citizen trust in regional governance institutions.

6. Institutional Reforms for Credibility and Consistency

ECOWAS's credibility has been undermined by perceived inconsistencies in responding to political crises. For example, harsher measures have been imposed on smaller states, while larger or strategically important members have faced softer reactions. To address these criticisms, ECOWAS must establish clear, transparent, and enforceable intervention protocols. This would minimize accusations of double standards and reinforce its legitimacy. In addition, improving bureaucratic efficiency, funding mechanisms, and coordination with member states would enhance institutional resilience.

Conclusion

For ECOWAS to remain relevant as a guardian of peace and democracy, it must adapt to the realities of today's West Africa. Sanctions should be carefully targeted to avoid worsening citizens' suffering, while diplomacy must become more proactive and inclusive. Equally, regional integration should prioritize the welfare of people, not just governments. By linking security efforts with socio-economic development and accountable governance, ECOWAS can rebuild trust, manage crises more effectively, and reinforce its credibility as a stabilizing force in the region.



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