

From ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahel States: Shifting Security Architectures in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

West Africa has undergone a significant reconfiguration of regional security governance following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the subsequent establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS). The study examines the growing divergence between ECOWAS and ASS in terms of mandate, legitimacy, and operational effectiveness, and analyses the political, security, geopolitical, and socio-economic forces driving the shift. Drawing on an integrative framework combining Regional Security Complex Theory, Institutionalism, Realism, and Constructivism, the study shows how competing institutional logics and legitimacy narratives are reshaping patterns of authority in West Africa's security architecture. Using documentary analysis, conflict event data, official statements, policies, and joint communiqués, the study finds that while ECOWAS retains formal legal authority and institutional capacity, ASS has cultivated domestic legitimacy and unity by prioritising sovereignty, regime security, and resistance to external influence. The dynamics highlight strains between democratic conditionality and non-interference, regional integration and state autonomy, and multilateral governance and regime survival. The study argues that the coexistence of parallel security institutions risks fragmenting collective responses to extremism, border insecurity, and humanitarian crises, while reflecting broader transformations in Africa's regional order. The study concludes with policy recommendations for reconciling divergent governance norms, strengthening institutional resilience, and fostering adaptive and inclusive security governance frameworks capable of addressing the evolving threat environment of West Africa.

Keywords: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), West Africa Security, Regional Security Architectures, Institutional Fragmentation.

INTRODUCTION

West Africa has long been a region marked by both promise and peril. On one hand, West Africa is home to vibrant cultures, abundant natural resources, and a history of pan-African solidarity. On the other, the region has been plagued by recurring political instability, insurgencies, and fragile governance structures. In response to the persistent challenges, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 to promote economic integration and collective security. Although originally conceived primarily as an economic bloc, the growing prevalence of internal conflicts and transnational security threats compelled ECOWAS to expand the mandate to include peacekeeping, mediation, conflict prevention, and the defence of constitutional order. Over the decades, ECOWAS has become a leading actor in regional peacekeeping and mediation, intervening in conflicts from Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s to Mali in the 2010s (Obinna & Okeh, 2025; Opoku-Aikins, 2019).

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic shift in the security landscape of West Africa. A wave of military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) has challenged the authority and legitimacy

of ECOWAS. Following ECOWAS imposition of sanctions and political isolation, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger established the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) in 2024 (Bassou, 2024; Osuchukwu et al., 2025). The Alliance represents not merely a political rupture but a fundamental reconfiguration of regional security architectures. Furthermore, the emergence of the Alliance raises pressing questions about the evolving architecture of regional security in West Africa.

Existing analyses focus largely on elite diplomacy and interstate relations. There remains limited systematic examination of how institutional fragmentation affects security provision on the ground or civilian perceptions of legitimacy. The study addresses the gap at the institutional level while identifying areas requiring future field-based inquiry.

The central thesis of the study is that the emergence of ASS reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of regional security architecture in West Africa. The reconfiguration exposes both the limitations and unintended consequences of ECOWAS security approach. Although ECOWAS has long promoted democracy and regional integration, growing reliance on sanctions and external backing has strained relations with states confronting acute security threats. ASS, in contrast, prioritises sovereignty and military cooperation but risks deepening fragmentation and weakening collective security. The study contributes to the literature on West African regionalism by offering a comparative analysis of ECOWAS and ASS, identifying the drivers of institutional change, and assessing possible trajectories for West African security.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past several decades, ECOWAS has experienced increasing constraints in maintaining authority and legitimacy despite repeated interventions and regional integration efforts. The succession of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, followed by the creation of ASS, signals a profound reconfiguration of regional security architecture. These developments reveal a dual crisis. First, institutional erosion has weakened ECOWAS capacity to shape political outcomes. Instruments such as sanctions, mediation, and peacekeeping deployments have neither stemmed recurrent instability nor sustained political consensus. In some cases, the measures have exacerbated tensions between the organisation and key member states. Second, the emergence of alternative security frameworks has generated a competing regional order. The ASS prioritises sovereignty and military coordination, diverging from ECOWAS multilateral norms of collective security and democratic governance. The shift risks fragmenting regional cohesion and undermining established mechanisms of collective security. The dynamics raise fundamental questions about the effectiveness, legitimacy, and long-term relevance of regional security architectures in West Africa.

In light of the developments, the aim of the study is to examine the factors that prompted the shift from ECOWAS to ASS as a regional security actor. The study provides a comparative analysis of the mandates, structures, and approaches of ECOWAS and ASS, and assesses the implications of the transition for regional stability, counterterrorism, and governance. The analysis places contemporary developments within historical and political contexts and seeks to contribute to scholarly understanding of institutional change in African regionalism.

The study focuses on West Africa, with particular attention to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, covering the period from 2010 to 2025. The study examines the historical role of ECOWAS in peacekeeping, mediation, and regional integration, alongside the wave of military coups over the past decade and the subsequent formation of ASS. The study provides a comparative analysis of ECOWAS and ASS in terms of mandate, legitimacy, effectiveness, and the impact on regional security. Additionally, the study explores potential developments for the future of regional security and cooperation in West Africa. While broader African security frameworks and other regional economic communities (RECs) are acknowledged, the paper does not offer a detailed analysis of regions outside West Africa or conflicts beyond the study period.

Overview And Historical Context

ECOWAS after being established, was primarily focused on economic integration in West Africa. However, the outbreak of civil wars in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991) forced the organisation to expand the mandate

to include peace and security (Agbo et al., 2018). The revised 1993 treaty explicitly prioritised peace, stability, and governance alongside economic cooperation (ECOWAS Commission, 1993; Edobor, 2024; Ladan, 2021). The creation of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) marked a turning point in West African security. ECOMOG's interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s were unprecedented, representing Africa's first regional peacekeeping force (Opoku-Aikins, 2019). Despite logistical challenges and accusations of bias, ECOMOG stabilised the countries and set a precedence for regional security activism. In subsequent years, ECOWAS continued to intervene in crises, including Côte d'Ivoire (2002), Guinea-Bissau (2012), Mali (2013), and The Gambia (2017). These interventions underscored the role of ECOWAS as a guarantor of constitutional order and democratic governance (Obinna & Okeh, 2025; Opoku-Aikins, 2019).

Notwithstanding achievements, ECOWAS has faced mounting criticism. Critics argue that reliance on sanctions and ultimatums has often exacerbated tensions rather than fostering resolution (Annafa et al., 2025; Njie, 2025). For instance, sanctions on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger following the coups deepened economic hardship and fuelled anti-ECOWAS sentiment. Moreover, questions have arisen regarding the organisation's legitimacy, as many citizens perceive ECOWAS as an elite-driven institution disconnected from grassroots realities (East African Policy Observer, 2025). The dependence on external actors such as the UN, EU, USA, and France for funding and logistical support further undermines ECOWAS autonomy (Bonner, 2025; Omowon & Sholademi, 2025). Additionally, the rise of military juntas in the Sahel exposed limited capacity to enforce democratic norms; despite threats of military intervention in Niger in 2023, ECOWAS failed to reverse the coup, highlighting declining authority (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024).

The Sahel region, stretching across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and beyond, has emerged as the epicentre of insecurity in Africa. According to the Global Terrorism Index for 2025, the Sahel now accounts for the highest concentration of terrorist activity worldwide (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) exploit porous borders, weak governance, and local grievances to expand their influence (Haruna, 2024). Climate change, desertification, and resource scarcity further compound insecurity, fuelling intercommunal violence and displacement (Bonner, 2025). The inability of ECOWAS to adequately address the multidimensional crises has reinforced perceptions of the organisation's irrelevance in the Sahel.

Theoretical And Conceptual Underpinnings

Understanding the shifting security landscape in West Africa requires both empirical and theoretical perspectives. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the emergence of the ASS reflect profound changes in regional security governance. Analysing the developments through established international relations frameworks offers insight into why traditional regional institutions face limitations and how new arrangements attempt to address immediate threats. The following sections outline key theoretical and conceptual approaches that inform the study.

Regional Security Complex Theory provides a useful lens for analysing the shifting security architectures in West Africa. Regional Security Complex Theory posits that security threats are geographically clustered, creating regional security complexes where states' security concerns are interlinked (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In the Sahel, insurgencies, terrorism, and porous borders have created a tightly interwoven security environment. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are confronted with similar existential threats from jihadist groups, rendering the security of the states inseparable. Applying Regional Security Complex Theory demonstrates why the states perceive ECOWAS' broader regional agenda as insufficient. While ECOWAS encompasses coastal states like Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, whose security priorities differ, the Sahel states experience a distinct set of challenges. The decision of the Sahel states to form ASS reflects an attempt to create a sub-regional security complex tailored to the immediate threats.

Institutionalism emphasises the role of institutions in shaping cooperation, norms, and collective action (Keohane, 1984). ECOWAS, as a regional institution, has historically promoted integration and collective security. However, institutional effectiveness depends on legitimacy, compliance, and resource capacity.

ECOWAS' reliance on sanctions and external funding has undermined the organisation's credibility, particularly among states facing acute insecurity (Obinna & Okeh, 2025). In contrast, ASS represents a new institutional experiment. ASS prioritises military cooperation and sovereignty over economic integration or democratic governance. From an institutionalist perspective, the emergence of the Alliance reflects a recalibration of regionalism, moving away from broad-based integration toward narrowly focused security cooperation. The Alliance's durability will depend on whether ASS can institutionalise norms of solidarity and operationalise joint defence mechanisms.

Realist theory, with emphasis on power, sovereignty, and survival, offers another layer of analysis. Military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger prioritise regime survival over regional integration. The Sahelian states withdrawal from ECOWAS can be interpreted as a realist response to perceived external threats, both from ECOWAS sanctions and from foreign interventions. Realism also provides an explanation for the Alliance's emphasis on military cooperation. In an anarchic international system, states seek alliances to counter perceived threats (Thucydides, 431 C.E./1950). ASS thus functions as a survival mechanism, enabling the military juntas to pool resources and resist external pressure.

Constructivist theory highlights the role of identity, norms, and legitimacy in shaping international relations (Wendt, 1999). ECOWAS has long promoted norms of democracy and constitutional governance. However, the rise of military juntas challenges the norms, creating a contestation of legitimacy. ASS embodies alternative norms, including sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and resistance to external interference. Anti-French sentiment, for instance, has become a powerful identity marker in the Sahel, shaping alliances and legitimising military rule (Ahmed, 2025; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2024; Charbonneau, 2021). Constructivist theory sheds light on why citizens in the Sahel states support the Alliance despite the authoritarian character. Such support stems from the fact that ASS resonates with local narratives of dignity and resistance.

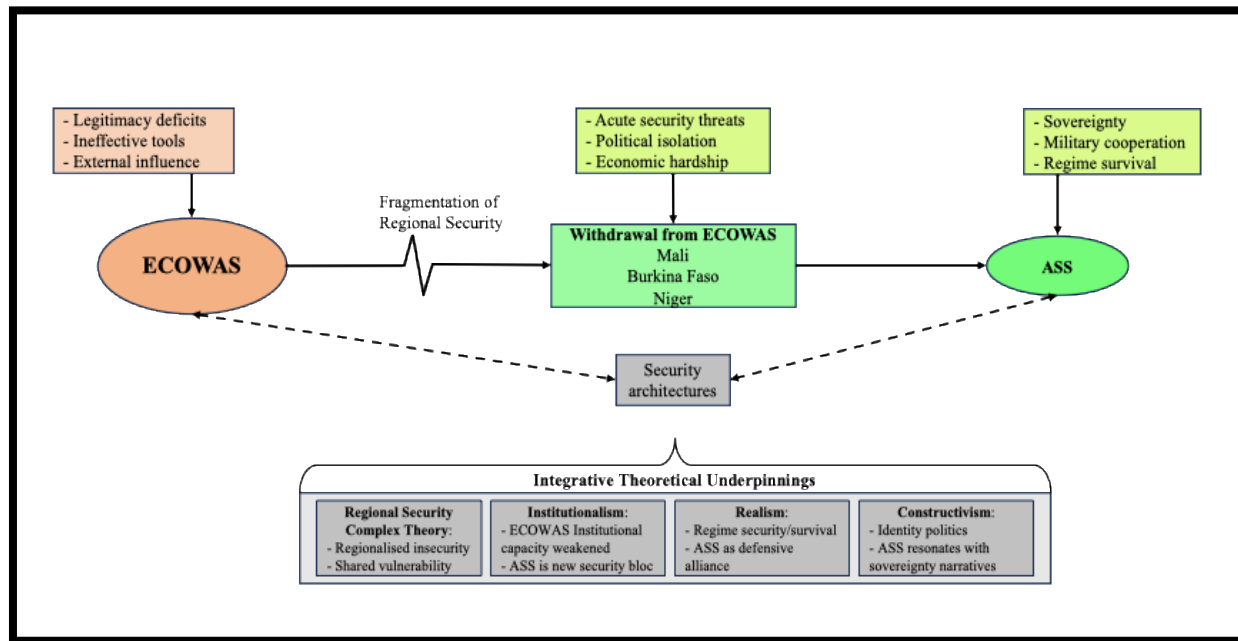
Integrative Theoretical Approach

No single theory fully captures the complexity of West Africa's shifting security architectures. The study therefore adopts an integrative conceptual approach. Regional Security Complex Theory offers insight into the geographic clustering of security threats in the Sahel, whilst Institutionalism analyses the evolution of ECOWAS and the Alliance as competing regional institutions. In addition, Realism highlights the survival strategies of military juntas, and Constructivist theory provides an explanation for the normative contestation between democracy and sovereignty. Collectively, the frameworks provide a multidimensional lens for understanding the emergence of ASS, how ASS differs from ECOWAS, and what implications the emergence has for regional security. Among the frameworks, Regional Security Complex Theory and Institutionalism serve as the primary explanatory lenses for threat clustering and organisational change, while Realism and Constructivism are employed as complementary perspectives to interpret regime behaviour and legitimacy narratives. To avoid conceptual dilution, each theoretical lens is applied to a distinct analytical dimension: Regional Security Complex Theory to threat clustering, Institutionalism to organisational design, Realism to regime survival, and Constructivism to legitimacy narratives. The structured application ensures analytical clarity.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 guides the study by showing how legitimacy deficits, ineffective tools, and contested external influence interact, leading to regional security fragmentation in West Africa. The framework situates ECOWAS and ASS as competing security architectures, highlighting how acute security threats, political isolation, and economic hardship mediate the shift from collective regional integration to sub-regional, sovereignty-centred security cooperation.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating Regional Security Fragmentation in West Africa



Source: Author’s Construct, 2026

Operationalisation of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is operationalised by translating theoretical variables into observable indicators and empirical measures. The independent variables, constraints on ECOWAS security role, are measured through sanctions impositions, compliance with regional protocols, and official legitimacy claims. The mediating variables, and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, are traced through exit announcements, treaty notifications, and joint communiqués. Moderating variables, including sovereignty narratives, regime-survival imperatives, security partnerships, domestic mobilisation, and public legitimacy, are captured through elite speech analysis, defence agreements, and media reporting. The dependent variables, namely the creation of ASS and a new regional security architecture, are assessed through new institutional arrangements, joint operations, defence treaties, and changing patterns of regional cooperation. Process tracing and comparative analysis are used to evaluate causal mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative and comparative research design to analyse shifts in regional security architecture in West Africa, focusing on ECOWAS and ASS between 2010 and 2025. Data were drawn primarily from documentary sources, including ECOWAS treaties and protocols, sanction decisions, summit communiqués, joint declarations, and official speeches by Sahelian authorities. These materials were supplemented with academic literature, policy reports, think-tank analyses, reputable media sources, and regional conflict-event datasets. Analysis combined process tracing with structured comparison. Process tracing was used to reconstruct the sequence linking coups, ECOWAS responses, diplomatic breakdowns, and the establishment of ASS. Structured comparison assessed both organisations across common dimensions, that is mandate, legitimacy, effectiveness, norms, and external partnerships. An integrative theoretical framework guided interpretation. Regional Security Complex Theory informed assessment of cross-border threat patterns; institutionalist perspectives structured analysis of organisational design and enforcement tools; realist theory shaped evaluation of regime-survival strategies; and constructivist theory supported discourse analysis of legitimacy narratives and identity claims. Triangulation across documents, datasets, and secondary analyses enhanced reliability. The study is limited by reliance on documentary and secondary sources rather than field interviews, which constrains insight into civilian experiences and operational effects at local levels. However, the approach is appropriate for analysing institutional evolution and interstate diplomacy during an ongoing conflict environment where access remains restricted. Future research should incorporate community-level fieldwork and practitioner interviews to complement institutional analysis.

The Rise Of The Alliance Of Sahel States

The decision by the Sahelian states to withdraw from ECOWAS and establish a new security bloc was both unprecedented and highly symbolic. The withdrawal marked the first time in West Africa's postcolonial history that states openly challenged the authority of ECOWAS to create an alternative regional institution (Haruna, 2024). Initially framed as a defensive pact, ASS committed members to mutual assistance in the event of external aggression or internal insurgency. In 2024, the three states further institutionalised the arrangement by signing a charter that transformed the cooperation into a confederation, signalling a long-term institutional project rather than a temporary alliance (Bassou, 2024).

The political context of the Alliance's formation is inseparable from the wave of coups that occurred in the Sahel. Mali experienced two coups in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023. ECOWAS responded with sanctions, suspension of membership, and threats of military intervention. From the perspective of the juntas, these measures represented external interference and delegitimisation of the juntas' rule (Njie, 2025).

Realist theory explains this dynamic, as the juntas prioritised regime survival over regional integration and pooled sovereignty to resist ECOWAS pressure through the Alliance. Constructivist perspectives further clarify the resulting normative contestation, as the juntas portrayed ECOWAS as aligned with Western, particularly French, interests while presenting the Alliance as a vehicle for sovereignty and dignity (Charbonneau, 2021).

The Alliance's security priorities are driven by the serious threats members face. Jihadist insurgencies have disrupted large areas, weakened state authority, and displaced millions of people. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger account for the highest number of terrorist incidents in Africa (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). In response, the Alliance focuses on four main areas: conducting joint military operations against insurgent groups, sharing intelligence to combat cross-border terrorism, cooperating on defence to discourage external interference, and securing borders to control the movement of militants.

Regional Security Complex Theory is particularly relevant to understanding the security priorities. The Sahel constitutes a tightly interlinked security complex, where threats in one state spill over into others. The Alliance represents an attempt to institutionalise interdependence through collective defence. The emergence of the Alliance can further be understood by analysing the external actors. France, historically the dominant power in the Sahel, faced growing hostility due to perceptions of neo-colonialism and ineffective military interventions. By 2023, French troops had been expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Russia, in contrast, has cultivated ties with the juntas, offering military assistance through state channels and private contractors such as the Wagner Group (Najimdeen, 2025).

Institutionalism offers insight into how external support shapes the viability of regional institutions. Dependence on Western funding undermined ECOWAS autonomy, while openness to alternative partnerships strengthened the legitimacy of the Alliance among citizens. Constructivism further explains the symbolic dimension, as aligning with Russia reinforced narratives of sovereignty and anti-imperialism. Although primarily a security pact, the Alliance also reflects socio-economic grievances. ECOWAS sanctions exacerbated hardship in the Sahel, restricting trade and financial flows. Citizens increasingly viewed ECOWAS as punitive rather than protective (Najimdeen, 2025). The Alliance, in contrast, projected solidarity and resilience, despite the limited economic capacity.

The dimension highlights the close interplay between security and development. Failure to address poverty, marginalisation, and climate stress may lead the Alliance to replicate shortcomings previously associated with ECOWAS. At the same time, an emphasis on sovereignty resonates with populations who perceive themselves as excluded from ECOWAS-driven, elite-centred integration agendas. Beyond material factors, the Alliance carries symbolic weight. ASS represents a rejection of ECOWAS democracy and governance norms, and an assertion of Sahelian identity. Constructivist theory contributes to understanding the shift, as the Alliance embodies alternative governance norms rooted in sovereignty, resistance, and military solidarity.

Public demonstrations in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey celebrated the Alliance as a triumph of dignity over external domination. Such popular support, though not universal, underscores the legitimacy of the Alliance in the eyes of many citizens.

Despite ambitious objectives, the Alliance faces substantial challenges. Membership is limited to only three states, all under military rule, which constrains political reach and collective capacity. The states are also confronted with significant resource limitations, weak economies and overstretched militaries that could hamper effective operations. The Alliance is further isolated internationally, having been suspended from ECOWAS, reducing opportunities for regional cooperation and legitimacy. Internal fragility adds another layer of risk, as recurring coups and governance crises undermine stability within member states.

Institutionalist perspectives suggest that without broader membership and stronger institutionalisation, the Alliance may struggle to endure over the long term. Realist theory, however, highlights that as long as regime survival remains the overriding priority, the Alliance is likely to persist as a defensive mechanism for member states.

Comparative Security Architectures (Ecowas Vs. Ass)

The emergence of ASS alongside ECOWAS presents a unique moment in West African regionalism. For the first time, two competing security architectures coexist within the same geographic space, each claiming legitimacy and authority. A comparative analysis of mandates, legitimacy, and effectiveness reveals both the strengths and limitations of each institution, while highlighting the broader implications for regional stability.

Mandate

ECOWAS Mandate: ECOWAS was originally conceived as a vehicle for regional economic integration. The adoption of the revised treaty in 1993 significantly broadened this remit to include responsibilities for peace, security, and governance (Gideon et al., 2025). Since then, ECOWAS has developed a comprehensive security architecture encompassing conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations, mediation initiatives, and the enforcement of democratic norms. The 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance formally codified these commitments by prohibiting unconstitutional changes of government. ECOWAS therefore operates under an expansive mandate that integrates economic, political, and security objectives. In practice, interventions have frequently combined diplomatic engagement, economic sanctions, and, where necessary, military force. This multidimensional approach reflects the organisation's ambition to function not merely as an economic bloc but as a central pillar of regional order and governance in West Africa.

ASS Mandate: Unlike ECOWAS, the Alliance was established primarily in response to acute security pressures, and its founding charter prioritises mutual defence, the preservation of sovereignty, and resistance to external interference (Adjei Arhin, 2025; Vaz, 2025; Bassou, 2024). The institutional logic underpinning ASS is therefore rooted in strategic autonomy and regime survival rather than broad-based regional integration. The Alliance's mandate is tightly focused on military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to insurgent violence and external threats. Economic integration and democratic governance do not feature prominently within this framework. Instead, the security-first orientation of ASS reflects the existential challenges confronting member states and underscores a deliberate narrowing of institutional objectives when compared with the more expansive remit traditionally associated with ECOWAS.

Mandates Analysis: Institutionalist perspectives explain the divergence in mandates. ECOWAS operates as a comprehensive regional organisation oriented toward economic integration and governance, whereas ASS constitutes a security-centred alliance focused primarily on regime survival and sovereignty. The contrast reflects fundamentally different institutional priorities and strategic logics underpinning regional cooperation in West Africa.

Legitimacy

ECOWAS Legitimacy: ECOWAS has traditionally derived legitimacy from a stated commitment to democracy, constitutional order, and regional integration. Interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia were widely interpreted as efforts to uphold collective regional norms and preserve political stability (Opoku-Aikins, 2019). Through such actions, the organisation cultivated an image as both a guarantor of democratic governance and a central pillar of West African security. In recent years, however, this legitimacy has come under increasing strain. Sanctions imposed on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger were widely perceived

among Sahelian populations as punitive measures that exacerbated socioeconomic hardship, thereby fuelling public resentment toward ECOWAS (Njie, 2025). Dependence on external partners, particularly France and the EU, has further weakened perceptions of institutional autonomy and reinforced narratives of external influence over regional decision-making (Charbonneau, 2021). As a result, citizens in several Sahelian states increasingly portray ECOWAS as an elite-driven organisation disconnected from grassroots realities and local security concerns.

ASS Legitimacy: ASS derives legitimacy primarily from appeals to sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and resistance to external interference. Rejection of ECOWAS sanctions and French deployments resonated with popular anti-imperialist sentiment, portraying the Alliance as a symbol of sovereignty and national dignity (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). At the same time, the Alliance confronts substantial constraints on legitimacy. Membership is limited to three military-led regimes that lack internationally recognised democratic credentials, and the grouping has attracted sustained criticism particularly from the AU and Western partners. These factors complicate efforts to secure broader continental or global acceptance, even as domestic approval remains comparatively strong. Public demonstrations in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey have celebrated the Alliance as a symbol of self-determination, highlighting the growing role of sovereignty and resistance in political legitimacy.

Legitimacy Analysis: Legitimacy within West African regionalism has become deeply contested. ECOWAS continues to benefit from formal-legal authority grounded in treaties and long-standing international recognition, yet faces eroding popular support within the Sahel. In contrast, ASS enjoys significant grassroots resonance in member countries but lacks comparable formal or international legitimacy. The divergence illustrates a broader clash between democracy-centred integration and sovereignty-driven security cooperation as competing principles of regional order.

Effectiveness

ECOWAS Effectiveness: ECOWAS has historically demonstrated a capacity for decisive intervention, most notably in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, where military deployments and mediation efforts contributed to conflict de-escalation and political stabilisation. Such episodes underpinned the organisation's reputation as an effective regional security provider and reinforced expectations that the Organisation could enforce collective norms in moments of crisis. More recently, however, ECOWAS has encountered mounting difficulties in translating formal authority into political outcomes. The inability to reverse military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has underscored a decline in enforcement capacity and raised questions about institutional credibility (Adams et al., 2025; Diallo, 2025). Economic sanctions have frequently exacerbated civilian hardship while failing to produce meaningful political concessions, thereby weakening both leverage and domestic support for ECOWAS-led initiatives. Systemic factors have compounded these challenges. Reliance on external funding and logistical assistance weaken autonomy and slow responses to local crises. The limitations have reduced organisational agility at a time when security conditions in the Sahel have become increasingly volatile.

ASS Effectiveness: The Alliance has exhibited a degree of political cohesion, particularly in collective resistance to external diplomatic pressure and in symbolic demonstrations of solidarity among member regimes. Limited joint military initiatives have signalled a willingness to coordinate against insurgent groups and transnational threats, reinforcing the Alliance's image as a security-oriented bloc. Preliminary conflict-event data from ACLED (2026) and Security Council Report (2025) indicate that despite the efforts, the frequency of attacks in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso has remained persistently high since the Alliance's formation. Similarly, Global Terrorism Index (GTI) metrics show that jihadist-related incidents continue to pose severe threats to local populations, with only modest reductions in operational success rates of insurgent groups (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Patterns of civilian displacement, as reported by UNHCR (2025) and IOM (2026), further underscore persistent humanitarian pressures. Displacement figures across the Sahel have remained elevated, suggesting that coordinated military efforts have yet to significantly improve local security conditions. Nevertheless, material constraints, including weak national economies, overstretched armed forces, and limited access to advanced military capabilities, continue to restrict sustained joint action. Without broader membership or substantial external backing, the Alliance risks functioning more as a political statement than as a

robust operational security mechanism. A narrowly defined mandate enables concentrated attention on immediate security threats but simultaneously curtails institutional breadth and resource mobilisation. Exclusion from wider regional frameworks also generates diplomatic and economic isolation, reducing opportunities for coordination with neighbouring states and multilateral partners.

Effectiveness Analysis: Effectiveness across the two institutions must be understood in relative terms. ECOWAS retains significant institutional infrastructure and experience but faces declining political authority and reduced coercive leverage. In contrast, ASS displays strong political alignment among member regimes but operates under severe resource constraints. Realists conceptualise the Alliance’s persistence as driven by regime survival, with effectiveness defined by endurance and autonomy rather than conflict resolution.

Table 1 summarises the contrasting institutional characteristics of ECOWAS and ASS, illustrating how differences in mandate, legitimacy, effectiveness, normative orientation, and external partnerships shape respective roles in West African security governance.

Table 1. Comparative Institutional Profiles of ECOWAS and ASS

Dimension	ECOWAS	ASS
Mandate	Broad remit covering economic integration, governance, and security	Narrow focus on military cooperation, sovereignty, and collective defence
Legitimacy	Formal authority through treaties and AU recognition; declining popular support in parts of the Sahel	Strong grassroots resonance in member states; limited international recognition
Effectiveness	Extensive intervention experience; weakening enforcement credibility in recent crises	Political cohesion in resisting external pressure; limited operational capacity
Norms	Democracy, constitutional order, and regional integration	Sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and regime survival
External Role	Reliance on Western funding and logistical support	Diversification of external partnerships; rejection of former security patrons

Source: Author’s Compilation, 2026

The comparison between ECOWAS and ASS reveals an increasingly fragmented regional security landscape. ECOWAS retains formal legitimacy and institutional capacity but is confronted with declining political authority. The Alliance, in contrast, commands grassroots support and political cohesion yet remains constrained by limited resources and international recognition. These dynamics underscore enduring tensions between integration and sovereignty, democracy and regime survival, and external dependence and resistance.

Factors Influencing The Shift Of Security Architectures In West Africa

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the subsequent formation of ASS did not occur in isolation. The realignment reflects a convergence of political, security, geopolitical, and socio-economic pressures that progressively undermined confidence in ECOWAS while elevating the appeal of an alternative security framework. Additionally, these forces interacted in mutually reinforcing ways: governance crises intensified insecurity, external alignments reshaped institutional preferences, and economic hardship translated into shifting popular attitudes. Examining these drivers in turn provides insight into why Sahelian regimes recalibrated regional cooperation and embraced a new security architecture.

Governance and Regime Dynamics

The political rupture between ECOWAS and the Sahelian states is rooted primarily in governance crises and the rise of military juntas. Between 2020 and 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger experienced successive coups that displaced civilian governments and installed military regimes. ECOWAS responded through suspensions, sanctions, and threats of military intervention. From the perspective of the juntas, however, the measures constituted external interference and the delegitimisation of new ruling authorities (Njie, 2025).

From a realist position, regime survival rapidly became the overriding priority. The insistence by ECOWAS on constitutional restoration was therefore interpreted as a direct threat to political authority. Consequently, the formation of the Alliance served as a mechanism through which sovereignty could be pooled and collective resistance to external pressure institutionalised. At the same time, constructivist analysis highlights how ASS leaders framed ECOWAS as aligned with Western interests, particularly France, while portraying the Alliance as a symbol of sovereignty and dignity (Avoulete, 2025).

Security Pressures and Threat Environment

Alongside political tensions, deteriorating security conditions exerted pressure on existing regional arrangements. The Sahel has emerged as the epicentre of armed violence in Africa, marked by jihadist insurgencies, cross-border terrorism, and escalating intercommunal conflict. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger collectively account for the majority of terrorist incidents recorded on the continent (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). The broad scope of ECOWAS mandate hindered rapid, context-specific responses to evolving regional crises. Sanctions, in particular, aggravated civilian hardship without stemming insurgent activity, thereby reinforcing perceptions of institutional ineffectiveness. The Alliance, in contrast, prioritised military coordination, intelligence sharing, and collective defence.

Regional Security Complex Theory explains the recalibration, the Sahel constitutes a tightly interlinked security environment in which threats readily spill across borders. The Alliance thus formalises the interdependence by embedding defence cooperation at the core of regional strategy.

Geopolitical Influences

External actors further shaped the evolving regional order. France, a central security partner in the Sahel, encountered growing hostility as local populations increasingly associated French deployments with neo-colonial influence and limited operational success. By 2023, French forces had been expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Russia, meanwhile, expanded engagement with Sahelian regimes by providing military assistance through state channels and private contractors such as the Wagner Group (African Security Analysis, 2025; Faulkner & Parens, 2025). Beyond Russia and France, emerging actors such as Turkey, China, and Gulf states are increasingly present through arms sales, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic engagement (Tietze, 2026). These actors complicate the regional security landscape by offering alternative partnerships that further weaken ECOWAS' monopoly on external mediation.

Institutionalists highlight how such external alignments affect institutional viability. Dependence on Western funding weakened ECOWAS autonomy in the eyes of Sahelian publics, whereas openness to alternative partnerships enhanced the domestic appeal of the Alliance. Constructivism further demonstrates the symbolic significance of these choices: closer ties with Russia reinforced narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and anti-imperialism, thereby strengthening the ideological foundations of the new bloc.

Economic Pressures and Social Resilience

Economic pressures also played a decisive role. Sanctions imposed by ECOWAS deepened hardship across the Sahel through trade restrictions, financial isolation, and border closures, thereby exacerbating poverty and fuelling popular resentment. Increasingly, ECOWAS came to be viewed as punitive rather than protective (Najimdeen, 2025).

Although limited in economic capacity, the Alliance projected an image of solidarity and resilience. The emphasis on sovereignty resonated with communities long excluded from ECOWAS-led, elite-driven integration agendas. The socio-economic dimension underscores that security and development are inseparable, and addressing poverty, marginalisation, and climate stress is essential for lasting stability in both ECOWAS and the Alliance.

Collectively, the factors explain why Sahelian regimes abandoned ECOWAS in favour of a new security architecture. Theoretical frameworks shed further light on the process: Realism emphasises survival strategies; Regional Security Complex Theory accounts for the clustering of transnational threats; Institutionalism elucidates organisational divergence; and Constructivism captures the normative shifts shaping legitimacy and regional alignment.

Implications Of Ecowas - Ass Split For Regional Security

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the concurrent emergence of ASS have significant ramifications for regional security. The developments not only challenge the cohesion of collective security in West Africa but also have profound humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical consequences. Analysing the shifts through institutionalist, realist, and constructivist lenses provides a nuanced understanding of both the risks and potential opportunities inherent in the evolving security landscape.

Fragmentation of Collective Security

The coexistence of ECOWAS and ASS represents a clear fragmentation of collective security in the region. ECOWAS authority has historically depended on the ability to act as a unified bloc, however, the withdrawal of three member states undermines this cohesion. Simultaneously, the formation of ASS creates a parallel security structure, which increases the risk of duplication, competition, and conflicting mandates.

From an institutionalist perspective, such fragmentation weakens the capacity for coordinated responses to crises. Instead of pooling resources and expertise, states may align with competing institutions, thereby reducing overall efficiency. Additionally, Realist theory, holds that the fragmentation reflects divergent survival strategies, as Sahelian states prioritise regime security while coastal states continue to emphasise democratic governance.

Humanitarian Consequences

The humanitarian implications of the fragmentation are equally profound. ECOWAS-imposed sanctions have exacerbated poverty and food insecurity in the Sahel, while the Alliance, although offering solidarity, lacks the economic capacity to meaningfully alleviate hardship. Consequently, citizens find themselves caught between punitive measures and limited alternatives.

Furthermore, ongoing insecurity has displaced millions across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Fragmented security architectures complicate coordinated humanitarian responses, as international actors face uncertainty over which institution to engage. Constructivist theory highlights the normative dimension of the dynamic; citizens increasingly perceive ECOWAS as punitive and the Alliance as protective, thereby shaping legitimacy, trust, and local support.

Impact on Regional Integration

ECOWAS has long promoted economic integration as a pathway to regional stability. The withdrawal of the Sahelian states disrupts trade flows, undermines regional projects, and diminishes the bloc's collective bargaining power. In contrast, the Alliance, with a narrow focus on security, does not provide comparable mechanisms for economic integration.

The divergence risks reversing decades of progress in West African regionalism. Institutionalist theory underscores the importance of sustained cooperation for effective integration. Without reintegration, West Africa could face a divided future, with coastal states pursuing integration under ECOWAS while Sahel states prioritise sovereignty and security within the framework of ASS.

External Actors and Geopolitical Competition

The fragmentation also creates space for external actors to exert influence. Russia has cultivated ties with the Alliance, while Western actors largely remain aligned with ECOWAS. Such alignment generates a multipolar competition in West Africa, with states navigating competing partnerships.

Constructivism contributes to understanding the symbolic dimension of the alignments. Partnerships with Russia reinforce narratives of sovereignty, whereas engagement with the West underscores adherence to democratic norms. The result is a contested geopolitical landscape with significant implications for aid, investment, and military support.

Opportunities for Localised Cooperation

Despite the risks, the Alliance does offer opportunities for targeted, localised cooperation. Through a sharper focus on shared security threats, Sahel states can coordinate military operations, intelligence, and border management more effectively than under ECOWAS. Regional Security Complex Theory frames such an arrangement as the institutionalisation of a sub-regional security complex.

Such localised cooperation could yield short-term gains in counterterrorism. However, without broader regional integration, the gains risk being unsustainable. Realist theory cautions that alliances formed primarily for survival may lack durability once immediate threats subside.

Future Of Regional Security Architecture Amid Institutional Fragmentation

The evolving security landscape in West Africa presents multiple possible trajectories for the relationship between ECOWAS and ASS. Each scenario carries distinct consequences for regional cohesion, governance, and external engagement. Analysing the trajectories through institutionalist, realist, and constructivist perspectives allows for a nuanced understanding of potential outcomes and the broader significance.

Reintegration into ECOWAS

One possible trajectory is the reintegration of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger into ECOWAS. Such a development would restore cohesion, strengthen regionalism, and revitalise the bloc's capacity for collective action. Successful reintegration would necessitate concessions on both sides. In this regard, ECOWAS would need to soften the sanctions-based approach, while the Sahelian states would be expected to commit to a roadmap for constitutional governance.

From an institutionalist perspective, reintegration would enhance efficiency and collective bargaining power, while also reaffirming ECOWAS legitimacy as the primary regional institution. Realism, however, cautions that unless the ruling juntas perceive reintegration as compatible with regime survival, the juntas are likely to resist. Constructivism highlights the normative dimension; reintegration would require reconciling competing narratives of sovereignty with the democratic norms promoted by ECOWAS.

Consolidation of the Alliance of Sahel States

A second situation is the consolidation of ASS as a permanent sub-regional bloc. This would institutionalise sovereignty and military cooperation, creating a distinct security architecture in West Africa. Consolidation could strengthen localised responses to insurgencies and reinforce anti-imperialist narratives.

The Regional Security Complex Theory frames such a consolidation as the formalisation of a sub-regional security complex. Realist perspectives interpret consolidation as a strategy for regime survival in a volatile security environment. However, institutionalism warns that without broader membership and mechanisms for economic integration, consolidation risks entrenching isolation. Constructivism draws attention to the normative challenge. While sovereignty may resonate locally, the appeal of sovereignty at the local level could further fragment regional cohesion.

Hybrid Cooperation Frameworks

A third development involves hybrid cooperation, whereby ECOWAS and the Alliance coordinate selectively while maintaining separate institutional identities. Such cooperation could take the form of joint military operations, intelligence sharing, or coordinated humanitarian responses. Hybrid cooperation would aim to balance the imperatives of integration and sovereignty, offering a pragmatic compromise.

Institutionalism suggests that hybrid frameworks could mitigate fragmentation by fostering functional cooperation. Regional Security Complex Theory supports the hybrid frameworks by recognising the potential for overlapping security complexes. Realism, however, warns that divergent survival strategies among states may limit the depth and consistency of such cooperation. Constructivism emphasises the normative challenge, hybrid arrangements would need to reconcile democratic principles with assertions of sovereignty.

Escalation of Geopolitical Competition

A fourth situation is an escalation of geopolitical competition, spurred by the fragmentation of regional security institutions. Russia may deepen ties with the Alliance, while Western actors remain closely aligned with ECOWAS, creating a multipolar environment in West Africa. States would thus navigate competing partnerships, potentially exacerbating tensions and complicating regional coordination.

From a realist perspective, escalation of geopolitical competition represents strategic balancing against external threats. Constructivism highlights the symbolic dimension. Alliances with Russia reinforce sovereignty narratives, whereas partnerships with Western actors, signal alignment with democratic norms. Institutionalism warns that heightened external competition could undermine regional autonomy and weaken collective security mechanisms.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study examined the shift from ECOWAS to ASS, situating the transformation within the broader trajectory of West African security architecture. The analysis identifies several interrelated findings that explain both the drivers and consequences of the institutional realignment.

First, the research highlights a clear pattern of institutional divergence. Whereas ECOWAS embodies a comprehensive mandate encompassing economic integration, democratic governance, and collective security, ASS reflects a security-centred alliance focused primarily on regime protection.

Second, the findings highlight a growing contestation of legitimacy. ECOWAS retains formal legal authority through treaties and international recognition. However, the standing of ECOWAS among segments of the Sahelian public has eroded, particularly following sanctions and political confrontations. In contrast, the ASS lacks comparable legal or diplomatic legitimacy but resonates with grassroots narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and autonomy from external pressure.

Third, the study identifies a pronounced effectiveness gap between the two institutions. ECOWAS possesses established bureaucratic structures and economic instruments, yet the enforcement capacity has weakened in the face of the political defiance. Equally, the ASS benefits from political cohesion among member regimes, but remains constrained by limited financial resources, logistical capacity, and international backing.

Fourth, the analysis establishes that the shift from ECOWAS to ASS is driven by a convergence of factors, including recurring political crises, the expansion of jihadist insurgencies, contested external involvement, and deepening socio-economic hardship. The pressures have reshaped threat perceptions and recalibrated strategic preferences among Sahelian governments.

Fifth, the study underscores the wider regional implications of the realignment. Institutional fragmentation undermines collective security mechanisms, complicates humanitarian coordination, and weakens long-standing integration projects. At the same time, the fragmentation opens space for external actors to expand influence.

Finally, the research outlines several plausible future trajectories, namely, reintegration into ECOWAS, consolidation of the Alliance, hybrid cooperation frameworks, or an escalation of geopolitical competition. Each pathway carries distinct risks and opportunities for regional stability, governance norms, and external engagement.

The findings reveal the fragility of West Africa's regional security architectures. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for adaptive and resilient institutions that can manage security threats while supporting effective governance in a contested geopolitical context.

CONCLUSION

The shift from ECOWAS to ASS reflects both the limitations and unintended consequences of contemporary regional security governance in West Africa. The transition highlights enduring tensions between integration

and sovereignty, democratic conditionality and regime survival, as well as external dependence and strategic autonomy. The competing imperatives have reshaped institutional alignments and recalibrated threat perceptions, producing a more fragmented and contested security environment. As such, the future trajectory of West African security will depend on whether regional organisations can adapt to the realities, reconcile competing norms, and build resilience in the face of complex, transnational threats.

No single theoretical framework fully captures the complexity of the evolving landscape. Accordingly, the study adopts an integrative conceptual approach. Regional Security Complex Theory expounds the geographic clustering of security threats in the Sahel, while Institutionalism provides insight into the evolution of ECOWAS and the Alliance as competing regional institutions. Realism highlights the survival strategies of military juntas navigating political crises, and Constructivism explains the normative contestation between democratic ideals and sovereignty claims. The frameworks offer a multidimensional lens for understanding the emergence of ASS, the difference between ECOWAS and ASS, and the broader implications for regional security.

The findings underscore that sustainable security in West Africa requires more than military alliances or sanctions. Although such instruments may provide short-term leverage, the measures risk entrenching political polarisation and societal grievances. Without inclusive governance, institutional responsiveness, and integrated strategies addressing both immediate threats and structural vulnerabilities, negative effects are likely to persist. Effective regional governance must therefore combine adaptive institutions, credible pathways to constitutional rule, and coordinated approaches that link security, development, and political legitimacy.

The primary challenge for policymakers is to move beyond fragmentation towards a collective vision of security that reflects the diverse political, social, and strategic realities of West Africa. Dialogue between ECOWAS and ASS, meaningful engagement with affected populations, and carefully regulated external partnerships that prioritise regional autonomy are essential. Through such comprehensive and inclusive approaches, the region can cultivate a legitimate and resilient security architecture capable of responding to both present challenges and future uncertainties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of shifting security architectures in West Africa underscores the need for a comprehensive response that integrates strategic, institutional, and normative measures. The following recommendations aim to enhance both the effectiveness and legitimacy of regional security governance while balancing the imperatives of integration, sovereignty, and development.

Revise ECOWAS Approach to Sanctions: Sanctions imposed by ECOWAS have often exacerbated hardship without achieving the desired political outcomes, particularly in reversing coups. Consequently, the bloc should adopt more flexible and context-sensitive measures that combine pressure with incentives. Targeted sanctions, coupled with humanitarian exemptions, would serve to mitigate civilian suffering while maintaining leverage over non-compliant regimes. Such an approach would preserve the authority of ECOWAS without further alienating the Sahelian populace.

Engage the Alliance of Sahel States Constructively: Rather than isolating the ASS, ECOWAS and the AU should explore avenues for dialogue and selective cooperation. Joint initiatives in counterterrorism, border security, and humanitarian assistance could build mutual trust and reduce fragmentation. Constructive engagement would also provide opportunities to harmonise operational practices while respecting the political realities underpinning the Alliance.

Strengthen Localised Security Responses: Considering the Sahel's status as a distinct security complex, regional institutions should actively support localised cooperation. Measures should include strengthening intelligence sharing, conducting joint patrols, and developing community-based resilience programmes tailored to Sahelian contexts. Such measures would improve operational effectiveness while addressing the underlying conditions that fuel insecurity.

Diversify External Partnerships: West African states should pursue balanced external engagement to avoid overdependence on any single actor. Engaging both traditional partners, such as the EU and the UN, and

emerging actors, including Russia, China, and Turkey, can broaden access to resources and technical support while safeguarding regional autonomy and strategic decision-making.

Integrate Socio-Economic Dimensions into Security Strategies: Sustainable security cannot be achieved without simultaneously addressing poverty, marginalisation, and climate-related stresses. Regional institutions should integrate development initiatives into security frameworks, ensuring that counterterrorism efforts are complemented by programmes in livelihoods, education, infrastructure, and social protection. The integrated approach would tackle both immediate threats and structural vulnerabilities.

Promote Normative Dialogue on Governance: The contestation between democratic norms and claims to sovereignty necessitates sustained dialogue. ECOWAS, the ASS, and civil society actors should engage in normative debates aimed at reconciling governance standards with local realities. Such engagements could involve transitional arrangements, inclusive consultations, and gradual pathways to constitutional order, fostering legitimacy while reducing political tension.

Future Research

Future studies should incorporate field interviews with civilians, local security officials, traders, displaced persons, and community leaders in Sahelian border regions to assess perceptions of legitimacy and security provision. Comparative analyses of counterterrorism outcomes, using casualty trends, territorial control, and displacement data, would strengthen evaluation of institutional effectiveness. Research should also examine the sustainability of the Alliance amid fiscal constraints and possible political transitions.

Ethical Approval

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College (GAFSC), National Defence University (NDU), Ghana. The study did not involve direct human subjects; the study relied exclusively on publicly available documents, datasets, and secondary sources. All procedures complied with institutional ethical guidelines and standards for academic research.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The views, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the study are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of any government, organisation, or institution mentioned.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived exclusively from publicly available sources, including ECOWAS treaties and protocols, sanction decisions, communiqués, joint declarations, official speeches, academic literature, policy reports, think-tank analyses, reputable media publications, and regional conflict-event datasets. All materials are accessible through open-source platforms, institutional repositories, or published outlets. No proprietary or confidential data were used. Due to the reliance on secondary sources, no new datasets were generated by the author.

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