

REALIGNMENT IN FOREIGN RELATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES' FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ECOWAS AND ITS ENGAGEMENT WITH GLOBAL POWERS

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Abstract

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) brought about a departure in the foreign policies of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger motivated by the break from Western hegemony in favour of self-determination. This shift also brought about a change in regional politics in West Africa. This article critically examines the foreign policy realignment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in the wake of shifting regional and international dynamics. It explores how recent political and security developments have influenced the Alliance of Sahel States' (AES) evolving relationship with the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS), particularly in light of tensions over democratic governance, counterterrorism, and sovereignty. Drawing on official statements, policy documents, and expert analyses, the research highlights the motivations behind the Alliance of Sahel States' (AES) foreign policy recalibration, the implications for regional integration in West Africa, and the potential consequences for the international order. The analysis shows that the AES's strategic realignment towards non-Western powers has brought about military and economic cooperation between the juntas and Russia as well as China. At the same time, the realignment has sparked regional disintegration leading to exit of the military regimes from the regional bloc of West Africa with which the alliance has severed ties. The paper thus recommends that there is the need for the military juntas to create an equilibrium in their foreign relations by balancing non-Western support with regional cooperation so as to achieve their objectives especially in the area of security.

Keywords: AES, ECOWAS, Foreign Policy, Global Powers, Realignment, West Africa.

Introduction

The resurgence of military incursion in politics within the West African subregion has raised questions about the role of ECOWAS in consolidating democracy in the region. Specifically, the coups in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso and their eventual exit from ECOWAS have generated concerns on the future of the regional cooperation in West Africa. Following the coups, ECOWAS, in line with its zero tolerance for unconstitutional change of power, imposed heavy sanctions that impacted the economy of these countries amidst insecurity, humanitarian crises, as well as the challenge caused by climate change faced by these countries. Besides, ECOWAS threatened to use force if democratic rule was not restored in Niger Republic. Motivated by ECOWAS' response to the coups and shared interests in terms of self-determination and security concerns, the military junta of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso decided to withdraw their membership in the bloc thus forming the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) in 2023 under the Liptako-Gourma Charter

(Vasudeo, 2024). This development marked a shift in the three countries' engagement both within and outside the subregion.

The formation of the AES has brought about a redirection in the foreign policies of these countries, which according to them was influenced by the desire for true independence and the need to break away from the shackles of neocolonialism (particularly of French hegemony). Following the coups, there were anti-Western sentiments in these countries in light of the incapacities of France, the United States of America, the United Nations, and the European Union to end the menace of insecurity in the three countries. Therefore, the junta of the AES cut off all relations with Western powers, including France and the US, and subsequently ended all Western-backed programmes such as Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (UN MINUSMA) (Joseph, 2022; Vasudeo, 2024). This development saw the withdrawal of French troops from the three countries. Consequently, the AES regimes realigned their foreign policies toward non-Western powers like Russia and China. This realignment was influenced by the need for military assistance in order to combat terrorism, which threatens the survival of these states. The non-Western posture in the AES' foreign policies has earned them friendly relations with Russia and China, thus leading to military cooperation and economic partnership between the AES junta and the governments of Russia and China (Kohnert, 2024; Wilen, 2025).

While the AES regimes have been on good terms with non-Western powers, their relations in the West African subregion, particularly with ECOWAS, have been marred by distrust and disintegration. Despite ECOWAS' diplomatic engagements towards these countries, it seems the junta are no longer interested in the regional bloc and what it stands for. It is against this background that this study seeks to explore the redirection of AES' foreign policy towards ECOWAS and Global powers such as Russia and China.

Conceptual Discourse

Foreign Policy

Every nation, whether old or new, must relate with the outside world. This is largely because no nation can live in isolation or survive alone. Therefore, nations are expected to have a certain outlined course of action on how they will go about their external affairs in the international system. This brings about the concept of foreign policy, which simply refers to a set of principles that guide a nation in its relations with other nations in the international system. It is the "formulation and implementation of a group of principles which shape the behaviour pattern of a state while negotiating with other states to protect or further its own interest (Rodee *et al.*, 1957). At the centre of every nation's foreign policy is national interest, which is the ultimate goal of every nation in the international arena. Foreign policy, therefore, is the "promotion and the pursuit of national interest" (Ndidigwe, 2023:312). Foreign policy sets the path for a state and the means to that path in the international arena.

Realignment in Foreign Relations

Realignment in foreign relations means a change or a redirection in a nation's engagement in the international system. Realignment in this context refers to a departure in the way and manner a state conducts her external affairs. It is therefore a shift in a country's foreign policy. Stephen Martin Walt in his work titled 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power' (1985) maintained that, realignment occurs "when a state shifts its foreign policy orientation by changing its alignment or affiliation with other states in the international system, typically in response to changing threats, power distributions, or ideological considerations". Therefore, it involves an

alteration in a country's external relations in terms of military cooperation, economic partnership and diplomatic engagements in the international system. Realignment in foreign policy is usually influenced by certain factors such as global power shifts, threats, strategic interests as well as ideology.

Military Intervention

Military intervention in simple terms means the seizure of political power by the armed forces through coup d'état. It refers to the unconstitutional removal of democratically elected civilian leaders by the military personnel using the instrument of coercion or force. Military intervention according to Lahm (1993) is the "conscious act of displacing and supplanting an existing political order, a government, by soldiers with the objective either of governing or influencing the political affairs of the country in particular direction determined largely by the interventionists themselves". Military intervention in the form coup is usually carried out with the intention to seize and control the state's apparatus thereby establishing military rule.

Military Coups and Security Challenges in the Sahel

The West African sub-region in recent times has witnessed a wave of military coups which led to series of unconstitutional changes of governments. The Sahel within the span of three years has witnessed several coups. Between 2021 and 2023, there has been six coups specifically in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso (Brooke-Holland, 2023). Mali recorded one coup each in two years. The first coup in Mali took place in August, 2020, which ousted President Ibrahim Boubcer Keita after a call for his resignation by the citizenry through popular protest against Keita's governance failure security-wise (Brooke-Holland, 2023; Monari, 2025). Keita was later forced to resign on June 5, 2020 thus ushering in the Bah N'daw and Colonel Assimi Goita as president and vice-president respectively. However, this union did not last as another coup took place in 2021 led by Colonel Goita. This was followed by a cabinet reshuffle by N'daw which did not go down well with Goita and his allies (Monari, 2025). Part of the rationale for the coups is the issue of insecurity from the extremist groups.

The scenarios in Burkina Faso were not different from the political dynamics in Mali. In fact, two coups place in Burkina Faso in 2022 alone between January and September. On the 24th of January, President Kabore was ousted from office after a successful military coup that brought in Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandago Damiba as the leadership of the military-led Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR) (Brooke-Holland, 2022). The military like those of Mali faulted Kabore's failure in tackling the problem of Islamist Insurgency. The second coup led by Captain Ibrahim Traore ousted Damiba from office. Traore gave the same reason as his predecessor arguing that Damiba has failed to address the issue of terrorism (Brooke-Holland, 2022). The Sahel has been described as the "epicentre of terrorism" globally according to report by the Institute for Economics and Peace with Burkina Faso being the hotspot in the region surpassing Mali according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project report (Brooke-Holland, 2023). The worsen insecurity in the Sahel has generated series of humanitarian crises and rise in death tolls. In 2022, 16,000 people were displaced in Burkina Faso alone following one of the most deadly attack in the region by the jihadists (Brooke-Holland, 2022). In another report by the Global Terrorism Index, it was reported that 73% of terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel in 2022 were recorded in Burkina Faso and Mali (Brooke-Holland, 2023).

Furthermore, there was also coups in Niger in addition to the failed one in 2021. In 2023, president Bazoum was forcibly removed from office in a coup which later led to the emergence of a new de-facto leader - General Abdourahamane Tchiani who officially took over from the ousted president

on July 28, 2023 (Monari, 2025). While these coups have been condemned by international community and regional organisations, the citizens of these countries supported the juntas. Security reasons were also part of the issues raised by the coup plotters against Bazoum. The inability of the civilian governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to provide protection for their citizens against the menace of extremist groups in the Sahel forced the public to see the military as the only possible solution to issue of terrorism in the region (Monari, 2025). It is important to mention here that these coups and the subsequent developments, such as the ECOWAS' sanctions and its military threat and the consequent formation of the AES have brought about a change in both regional and global politics.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the realist approach to the study of international relations. Realist school sees states as the primary actors in the international system. Key proponents of the school include scholars like Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Walt, and John Mearsheimer among others. Realists argued that the international system is one that is characterized by anarchy and that the pursuit of national interest is the ultimate goal of states as they relate with other states in the international arena. National interest of states is hinged on the notion of state survival. Therefore, realists prescribed that, for states to survive the anarchic international system, power acquisition (especially military power) is essential. However, the approach has been criticized on different grounds. First, the approach has been criticized on the grounds that its emphasis on power could bring about the 'naked' use of power by states in the international system. Realists argued that men are egoistic and always want to dominate others, and that the international system is anarchic. Thus, critics argued that such premises could influence leaders to act based on "suspicions, power and amorality" (Donnelly, cited in Usiemure and Gbigbidje, 2018:6). The theory has been equally criticized for its failure to recognize other non-state actors like international non-governmental organizations, international civil society organizations, transnational corporations (TNCs), terrorist groups and even individuals, whose actions and reactions could shape the unfolding of events in the international system. Besides, the theory has been regarded as too pessimistic because it sees war as an unavoidable reality in the international system. However, despite these criticisms against the theory, it continues to remain a useful tool of analysis for students and practitioners in the field of international relations.

Based on its relevance to this study, the approach provides us with the understanding of the shift in the diplomatic relations of AES amidst security threats and economic uncertainties, as well as the desire for self-determination. This could be translated as the pursuit of national interest, particularly the survival of the AES, which faces threats from the Jihadist and separatist groups whose actions have challenged the sovereignty of these countries. In addition, it provides the basis for understanding the formation of the AES as a mechanism for protection against possible attack from external forces, their break from ECOWAS (which they felt could no longer protect their interest), the end of their diplomatic relations with France, and their realignment towards strategic allies such as Russia (for military cooperation and support) and China (for economic partnership).

Methodology

The paper is anchored on qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources of data such as newspaper articles, journal articles, reports from think-tanks, official press statements and official communiques. Systematic qualitative content analysis was used in the analysis.

AES Foreign Policy and Global Powers: A Break From French Hegemony and Realignment Towards Russia, China and Turkey

The coups experienced in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2020 and 2023 and the aftermath of these coups have severed the relations of these states with France and USA. Motivated by quest for genuine independence and self-determination and the rising extremist groups' insurgency, the military junta of the AES have sought for a redirection in their foreign policies which are now tilted towards non-Western powers like Russia, China and Turkey. The AES have sought to break away from Western hegemony especially France's neo-colonial tendencies. France has continued to exercise socio-political and economic influence in her ex-colonies including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

France hegemony in the Sahel region has been weakened in the aftermath of military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The military junta of the AES seized the opportunity of the anti-Western and anti-French sentiments by the public to end their relations with France. There was public outcry to end French hegemony in the region. For instance, On the street of Ouagadougou, there were demonstrations to support Traore's regime with supporters waving the Russian flag. Besides, French Embassy and the French Cultural Center in Bobo-Dioulasso were attacked by the public (Olukayode, 2022). This shows the level of anti-French sentiments in the subregion.

Following the coups, the military governments of AES had declared the termination of all relations with France including military cooperation. The military government of Mali for instance gave an executive order on the withdrawal of all French troops "without delay" from its soil on 18 March, 2022 (France 24, 2022). French troops had been in the country following the launching of Operation Barkhane (that succeeded Operation Serval) in 2014 under a bilateral agreement between Mali and France. The operation was launched to provide assistance to the Malian government in fighting terrorism and to expand France military operations in the Sahel including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The Takuba Task Force was later incorporated into Operation Barkhane in 2020 following the EU's interest in fighting terrorism. However, the Malian military junta declared the termination of its military cooperation with the French government on May 3, 2022. The minister of foreign affairs appointed by the Malian military government, Abdoulaye Diop maintained that "So, as of 2 May, the agreement covering Barkhane and the agreement covering Takuba cease to taking an effect with regard to Mali..... Which means that as of this moment, there is no legal basis for France to operate on Mali's soil" (Joseph, 2022:2). In addition, the United Nation Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (UN MINUSMA) was also terminated by the Malian junta. The scenarios in Niger and Burkina Faso were not different from what transpired between Mali and France. The Burkinabe junta also terminated all military cooperation with France, expelled the French troops and ended the Double Taxation Treaty (RFI, 2023; Martinez, 2024). There was also the arrest of four agents of the Directorate-General of External Security (DGSE) by the Traore's government in Ouagadougou. In Niger, the French ambassador, Sylvain Itte was given 48 hours to leave the country and the Nigerien military government announced its decision to end all relations with the French government in 2023 (Balima & Aksar, 2023). In reaction to the aforementioned developments, the French government also recalled her diplomatic missions with AES and suspended its Official Development Assistance in these countries.

With the end of the diplomatic relations between AES and France, the Malian, Burkinabe and Nigerien junta have now turned to Russia for military assistance and see her as a strategic ally. The defence minister of Burkina Faso and the Prime Minister of Niger Republic have both visited Moscow to discuss with Russia important issues relating to "defence, agriculture and energy"

(Faulconbridge, 2024 cited in Martinez, 2024:18). Besides, the military junta in Mali have signed an agreement with the Wagner Group, Russia's private military company to provide military training and support in the fight against Islamist terrorist (Udenka, 2025). Burkina Faso has also strengthened her ties with Russia for military cooperation. The military head of state of Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Traore have in fact paid a visit to Moscow in order to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two countries. The AES regimes have seen Russia as an important ally which has provided military support including allowing some part of her private soldiers of Wagner Group (which has been renamed as Africa Corps) to remain in the states with about 2000 in Mali, roughly 200 and 100 in Burkina Faso and Niger respectively (Czerep & Bryska, 2024; Karr, 2024 cited in Kohnert, 2024).

Beside military cooperation, the AES have engaged in economic partnership with Russian companies. Since September 2023, there have series of memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between some Russian private companies and the governments of the AES on nuclear and military cooperation, mining of natural resources as well as on the construction of gold refineries and telecommunication companies (Karr, 2024 cited in Kohnert, 2024). Putin's government is seeking to strengthen economic relations in the sub-region particularly with Niger owing to the latter's abundance of uranium. Russia sees Niger's uranium as alternative to her dependency on European markets for her nuclear energy needs. The Russian government is leveraging on the absence of foreign powers like France to deepen its relation in Africa. In 2019 and 2023, Russia held two African Summits in Sochi and St. Petersburg respectively and at the second summit, Russia announced "the cancellation of 90 million dollars debt, the donation of grains amounting to 25,000 to 50,000 tons, and arms contracts with about 40 countries" (Pandiella, 2023 cited in Martinez, 2024:18).

Furthermore, AES governments are also accepting China as an important ally. However, their foreign policies toward China unlike Russia have focused largely on economic diplomacy. China has been given the green light by the AES regimes to invest in crude oil, uranium and solar energy. According to Kohnert (2024), the military junta of Niger signed an agreement with a Chinese state-owned company to receive an advance payment of 400 million US dollars as profit on future oils sales through the New Chinese-built Niger-Benin oil pipeline. Beside China, Turkey is also becoming important partner of the AES governments. The military junta of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger relied on Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones which has a comparative cost advantage to the ones produced by USA and France. There is a possibly of long-term relations between AES governments and Turkey as the foreign policy of the former hinged on military cooperation. The Syrian mercenaries (SADAT) sponsored by the Turkish government have begun operations in Niger to protect Turkish possessions in the country such as oil fields and "military infrastructure" (Kohnert, 2024; Wilen, 2025). The Nigerien junta has signed a MoU with Turkey on mining activities in Niger. The Turkish government could extend its operations via the mercenaries in other AES countries.

AES Foreign Policy and Ecowas: A Divide in Regional Cooperation

The Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The West African subregion has witnessed several military coups between 2020 and 2023 which has led to the ousting of democratically elected leaders in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The coup plotters justified their actions as a result of corruption and the inability of the civilian leaderships to address the problem of insecurity facing the countries (Brooke-Holland, 2023, Monari, 2025). The three countries are currently under military rule with General Assimi Goita, Captain Ibrahim Traore and General Abdourahamane Tchiani serving as heads of state in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger respectively. The reaction to these coups from regional and international bodies as well as

global powers led to new development in the political landscape of the West African subregion especially the emergence of AES in 2023.

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger was borne out of the need to address common problems shared by these countries in terms insecurity, economic uncertainties, the need to break away from the perceived 67eo-colonial influence of France as well as the military threats from ECOWAS following the coup in Niger. The ECOWAS military threat was a major contributing factor to the formation of the AES. The ECOWAS, under the chairmanship of Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu had taken a stronger stance in frowning against coups in the region. Having been appointed as the ECOWAS chairman, he maintained during the 63rd Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government that the organisation should lend their voice for democracy and not act as “toothless bulldogs” when military junta are “turning their guns against civilian authorities” (TRT AFRICA, 2023). Therefore, ECOWAS decided to take the “bull by the horn” in response to the coup in Niger on 10 August, 2023 during a meeting at Abuja, Nigeria. During the meeting, a resolution was reached to deploy ECOWAS standby force for military action in Niger if the deposed president is not given back his mandate. In response to the decision, the military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso express their support for the military government in Niger in a joint statement that, “any military intervention against Niger would amount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali” (BBC, 2023 cited in Brooke-Holland, 2023:30).

Following ECOWAS’ military threat and amidst security challenges faced by the countries, the military junta deemed it necessary to have a defence pact to achieve stability in the Liptako-Gouma region and to also protect themselves against possible military attack (Osuchukwu *et al.*, 2025). On the 16th of September, 2023, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso signed a pact under the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The charter included a defence pact, regional integration and cooperation among the three countries to strengthen military capabilities in the fight against insurgency and to drive economic development in the sub-region. Article 2 of the Charter reads that, “the aim of this Charter is to establish an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance for the Contracting parties” (Liptako-Gourma Charter, 2023). The military juntas of these countries were motivated by the need to harness their strength in combating terrorism in the subregion and to also drive cooperation and development in the subregion. They also pledge to provide support to any of the members of the pact in case of an eventual military invasion.

On 28 January 2024, the three countries announced their withdrawal from the ECOWAS. The military junta of the AES have blamed ECOWAS on the grounds of its failure to adequately provide the needed support to assist them in fighting terrorism in the region; ECOWAS deviation from its Pan-African principles, thus becoming pro-Western; and the ‘illegal’ sanctions imposed on the military governments by the regional bloc. Consequently, the three countries decided to look for an alternative to ECOWAS thus forming the Confederation of the Sahel States (CES) on 6 July 2024 during a meeting at Niamey, capital of Niger Republic. The Malian junta was appointed as the head of the newly formed organisation. This development marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the West African region.

AES and ECOWAS

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso had maintained long-term relations with ECOWAS since before the resurgence of coups in the West African region. The three countries were part of the founding members of ECOWAS in 1975 alongside Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana, The Gambia, Togo among others. However, the recent developments in terms of unconstitutional change of power in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso and the resultant implications of such developments have severed ties

between ECOWAS and the three countries. In response to the coup in Niger, ECOWAS leadership imposed stringent sanctions on Niger and even promised to use force if constitutional order is restored to the country. ECOWAS's response to the coups generally was motivated by its zero-tolerance for undemocratic change of power and the commitment of its leadership, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, towards consolidating democracy in the region after his ascendancy as its chairman (Brooke-Holland, 2023).

Following ECOWAS stance on the development in Niger, the military junta of Mali and Burkina Faso declared their support for Niger including military support in case of possible attack. Consequently, the three countries decided to pull out of the bloc, thus forming the AES under a confederal outlook. The AES leaders justified their decision arguing that: ECOWAS is no longer Pan-African in its operations; it has become pro-Western (supporting France neo-colonial hold to the region); it has not provided the needed support in combating terrorism in their countries; and that ECOWAS sanctions are illegal and that forcing them to embrace democracy is a threat to their sovereignty (Kohnert, 2024; Asadu, 2024; Balima, 2024).

However, ECOWAS reacted to the exit of the AES so as to prevent regional disintegration especially when the fate of the bloc is at stake. Thus, ECOWAS lifted its earlier imposed sanctions; gave the AES a six-month grace period to reconsider their decision while adhering to proper steps of exiting the bloc; and initiated a mediation policy by the ECOWAS April Council of Minister in Accra, Ghana to reintegrate the three countries back to the bloc (Sow, 2025). Besides, the ECOWAS leadership, in a press statement dated 29 January, 2025 gave a directive to its members and relevant authorities within and outside the region on the following:

- i. To recognise National passports and identity cards bearing ECOWAS logo held by the citizens of Burkina Faso, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Niger, until further notice.
- ii. To continue to treat goods and services coming from the three countries in accordance with the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and investment policy.
- iii. To allow citizens of the three affected countries to continue to enjoy the right of visa free movement, residence and establishment in accordance with the ECOWAS protocols until further notice.
- iv. To provide full support and cooperation to ECOWAS officials from the three countries in the course of their assignment for the Community (Source: ECOWAS Final Press Statement on the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger on 29 January, 2025).

Despite ECOWAS commitment to regional cooperation and integration, the AES junta were not swayed by its decisions. The military governments felt it was time to look for an alternative to ECOWAS. The relation between the two blocs have been marred by distrust leading to a divide in regional cooperation. To show how severed the relations are, the AES on 28 March, 2025 went ahead to impose a 0.5 custom duty levy on goods coming from outside the three states without taking recourse to the adverse effects of the decision on regional stability (Ecofin Agency, 2025). However, goods coming from other members states of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) including Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, and those of humanitarian aid and diplomatic missions were exempted from the tax (Ecofin Agency, 2025; Sow, 2025). Meanwhile, the AES have continued to benefit from ECOWAS' free trade policies despite are withdrawal from the bloc. The new imposed tariff according to Ecofin Agency (2025) was a move by the junta to secure a financial base to fund their possible projects and programmes. According to an editorial article by The Guardian (2025), the new tariff is a breach of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and could hinder the African Continental Free Trade

Agreement (AFCTA). Therefore, there could be trade barrier, disintegration, counter-tariff measures and the end to the Pan-African Vision of one market economy (The Guardian, 2025).

In another development, the Nigerien junta has further made a move to sever ties with the ECOWAS particularly Nigeria when the military government decided to pull out of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (The Guardian, 2025). The MNJTF was a joint military force from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and the Niger established in 2015 to combat the insurgency of Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Lake Chad region. Niger's exit could affect the potentials of fighting terrorists in the region. Since Nigeria could not afford to lose the fight against insurgency in the Lake Chad especially when she is also facing critical insecurity as a result of armed banditry, her Foreign Minister was deployed to Niamey in order to normalize relations with Niger on trade and security.

Furthermore, the withdrawal of the AES regimes has created a kind of division among members of the ECOWAS. Thus, ECOWAS could no longer operate as one-voice in its engagements. Members states of the organization have deployed different modalities in their relations with the AES. Senegalese government has moved to extend its hands of friendship to the governments of AES with the Senegalese foreign minister visiting Bamako. In February 2025, Senegal and Mali launched a joint-military patrols in the Kayes region. In May 2025, there was a similar trend with Togo and Chad participating in a joint military drill with the AES (Sow, 2025). The new President Ghana has also moved to re-shape Ghanaian's relation (particularly military cooperation) with the AES by appointing former military personnel with specialty in counter-terrorism as a special envoy to the AES bloc. President of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco cancelled a joint ECOWAS-UN Mission seeking political consensus ahead of the country's election by November (Sow, 2025).

The foregoing shows that individual member states of ECOWAS have resort to bilateral relations with the AES thus rendering ECOWAS almost irrelevant in driving regional cooperation in the West Africa. It further shows the level of ECOWAS divide. The AES-ECOWAS relation without doubt has been marred by distrust hence accounted for disintegration in the West African region. Beside the withdrawal of the AES from the bloc, they have also ended their relations with France (a perceived ally of the ECOWAS). This indicates that AES is not willing to cross path with ECOWAS as a regional organization. It also seems some members of the ECOWAS have lost fate in the organisation as a driver of regional integration.

A Comparative Analysis of AES' Engagement with Regional and Global Powers

The formation of the Alliance of the Sahel States by the military junta of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have brought about change in the geo-political landscape of West African region. Motivated by Pan-Africanism, security challenges posed by Islamist and extremist insurgencies, economic uncertainties, self-determination and genuine independence, as well as anti-Western control, the military governments of the AES have sought for a redirection in their foreign policies (Brooke-Holland, 2023; Monari, 2025). This change represents a realignment in regional diplomacy and in global engagement especially with powerful nations. Indeed, there is a departure on how the AES junta relate with ECOWAS and non-Western powers like Russia, China and even Turkey. The foreign policy of the AES has taken different shapes with respect to security, economy, and diplomacy.

While AES' relations with ECOWAS have been marred by hostility and distrust, their relations with Russia and China have reflected friendship and mutual cooperation. The reaction of ECOWAS to the coup in Niger which resulted to imposition of stringent sanctions, mounting of political pressure and even the threat of military confrontation forced the juntas of Mali, Niger and Burkina

Faso to take an unprecedented decision which dealt a blow to the regional organization. The AES' governments felt ECOWAS has lost its credibility as a frontrunner of regional integration by allowing Western domination and influence in the region (Kohnert, 2024). Therefore, they decided to pull out from the regional bloc thus forming the AES in 2023. Following their withdrawal from ECOWAS and their declaration of the end of all relations with France, the AES junta realigned their foreign policy toward anti-Western countries like Russia and China. This move was influenced by the dire need of military assistance to combat insurgency. The three countries of the AES have suffered series of casualties from terrorism including loss of thousands of lives both military and civilian. The same menace has displaced thousands resulting to critical humanitarian crises. To remedy such menace, the AES governments decided to extend hands of friendship to Russia and China. The junta see Russia as a strategic ally which the Malian Foreign Minister has described as "sincere ally" (Wilén, 2025). The friendship ties have brought about arms deal, military cooperation, economic partnership between the AES governments and those of Russia and China.

Following from the above, their hostility towards ECOWAS have motivated the junta to end their cooperation with ECOWAS including military cooperation. For instance, the Nigerien military government announced its withdrawal from MNJTF and LCBC. On the other hand, the AES have signed a number of agreements in the form of military cooperation with the Russian government. The Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov visited Mali and Burkina Faso in reciprocation to the visit made by military governments to Moscow. The outcome of the visits was the approval of Russia's assistance in fighting terrorism in the region and the Russia's pledge to provide military equipment and military training in counter-terrorism (Vasudeo, 2024). Consequently, Russia's private military company - Wagner Group have continue to expand its operations in the three countries. Russia has also become a major supplier of arms to the AES regimes. In addition, Russian government publicly declared support for the new AES 5,000 troops and reports have shown that there is a Russian military outpost in Burkina Faso (Vasudeo, 2024; Wilén, 2025). The growing ties between the AES regimes and Russia is becoming a concern for Western power like United States whose strategic interest in the region could be foiled by the presence of Russia. The large uranium deposit in Niger is a source of nuclear energy to both USA, Russia and even the ousted France.

Furthermore, in terms of economic diplomacy, AES engagement with ECOWAS is quite different with its engagement with Russian and China. One of the major reasons behind the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 was to promote regional economic cooperation among member states of West Africa. But the recent developments between ECOWAS and the AES have shown the reverse. Following the coups in the AES, ECOWAS had imposed economic sanctions including border closures and freezing of financial assets. This among other factors was responsible for the exit of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from the bloc. Although, the AES regimes have continued to enjoy ETLS but it does not stop the AES junta from imposing a 0.5 per cent import levy on goods coming ECOWAS member states. A move which could be translated as retaliation to ECOWAS sanctions on these countries and a mechanism for survival.

Unlike the strained economic relations between ECOWAS and the AES, China and Russia have engaged in several economic partnership with the AES' junta. The AES' engagement with China have focused largely on economic diplomacy unlike their relations with Russia that is driven by security. China has made huge investment in oil and mining. In 2024, a Chinese company, Ganfeng signed an agreement with the Malian government on the extraction of Lithium at the Goulamina mine (Wilén, 2025). Another Chinese company signed a multimillion oil project with the Nigerien

junta. Similarly, Russia also signed an agreement with the military government of Mali to establish gold refinery in Bamako, capital of Mali in November, 2022 (Vasudeo, 2024). On the part of Russia, she has embarked upon a free grain policy by providing wheat to African countries including Mali and Burkina Faso unconditionally.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is clear that there is a divergence between the AES' engagement with ECOWAS and its relations with Russia and China. While its engagement with the former is confrontational and hostile, driven by economic sanctions, political pressure and the perceived western interference, its relations with the latter is cordial motivated by Russia's unconditional military support. This foreign policy shift depicts a realignment from regional multilateral cooperation to multipolar bilateral engagements with premium placed on sovereignty and state survival over regionalism. The shift also showcases the junta's commitment towards addressing the problem of insecurity.

However, while the policy shift comes with benefits it equally comes along with certain issues. First, the realignment could have huge impact on regional cooperation especially in the fight against terrorism. The Islamist Insurgents could leverage on the perceived ECOWAS's institutional weakness to gain more grounds thus exacerbating insecurity in the West African region. In addition, AES' growing relations with Russia, China and Turkey could create room for another dimension of external interference with the presence of Russia's Wagner Group and Turkey's SADAT. Arguing from another front, this realignment towards Russia could lead to dependency in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the AES regimes to create a balance in their foreign policy vis-à-vis their engagements in the region and outside it. While they rely on non-Western support, there is also the need for a pragmatic regional cooperation otherwise the AES' capacity to sustain the alliance could be threatened.

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