

FRAGMENTED REGIONALISM: ECOWAS, THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES (AES) AND THE CONTEST FOR WEST AFRICAN REINTEGRATION

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Abstract

The withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in January 2024 following the formation of the Alliance for Sahel States (AES) is a significant challenge to West African regional integration. Therefore, this study examines the factors contributing to the fragmentation, prospects and challenges of reintegration. The study is anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003). Qualitative research design, through thematic/content analysis, was employed to analyze primary documents, such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), Liptako-Gourma Charter (2023), and the ECOWAS Joint Statement of Withdrawal (2024), the Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS (ECOWAS, 2024), and secondary academic literature. The analysis showed political, security, economic, institutional, and external regional fragmentation factors, such as bias on the part of ECOWAS in upholding democracy, economic dependence on the former colonial masters, inability of the ECOWAS to tackle insecurities in the Sahel, inadequacy of ECOWAS protocols in addressing crisis, and the external-partnership supports from Russia, China, and Turkey. The prospects for reintegration include ECOWAS opening doors for dialogue and certain considerations; possible disenchantment with the military regimes from the people; etc. Lastly, reintegration can be problematic because the relationship between the ECOWAS and AES states has gone sour. Secondly, the AES countries might feel emboldened by the external partnerships from Russia, China, and Turkey. The challenge for reintegration, however, includes soured bilateral relations and the possibility of being emboldened by the external partnerships. The study concludes that though immediate reintegration seems unlikely, sustained diplomatic engagement, calibrated sanctions, and selective security operations could transform the current fragmentation into an institutional renewal of ECOWAS. Therefore, it recommends that the ECOWAS should adopt a hybrid strategy of principled pragmatism that marries democratic norms with the pragmatic demand of regional stability.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, Regionalism, Regional Security, Regional Fragmentation, Regional Integration, Regional Security Complex Theory, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was founded in 1975 for the objectives of economic cooperation, security, and promotion of political stability states, has maintained a long-standing power in the West African subregion, promoting regional integration (Chukwu & George, 2026). However, internal crisis, from time to time, plagues the regional integration, with the latest one starting from 2022, owing to the cou

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pd'etat that took place in Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and Mali (Onyekachi et al., 2026), the power status of the ECOWAS has been challenged. The coups were against the ECOWAS Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy, which uphold democracy but have zero tolerance for unlawful change of government (ECOWAS, 2001). The challenges to ECOWAS were worsened, when in September 2023, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was created through the Liptako-

Gourma Charter to prioritize national sovereignty and security cooperation, and this made the Sahel to leave ECOWAS in 2024 (Chukwu & George, 2026; Arhin, 2025; Kohnert, 2024; Ansah, 2024).

Insecurity is one of the major reasons for the emergence of the AES. However, Quedraogo (2025) traced the background of the insecurity to the Libyan crisis and the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali. While the Libyan crisis spread insecurity to the Sahel states through Mali, the Tuareg rebellion increased terrorists in the country and spilled to their neighbors: Nigeria and Burkina Faso. The Sahel has remained a hub of insurgency, terrorism, and border crimes that have led to massive deaths of civilians and soldiers. For instance, from January-

July, 2023, about 7,800 civilians died from the activities of terrorists in the Sahel; in Northern Burkina Faso, clashes with Islamic militants caused the deaths of 17 soldiers and 36 volunteer fighters on September 5, 2023 (Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025); over 39 soldiers died from attacks from the Islamic State in the Great Sahel in October 2023 in West of Niger (The Center for Preventive Action, 2024). According to Chukwu and George (2026), the military alliance of the trios came on the heels of the punitive and overreach measures which they felt the ECOWAS has meted out to them. The groups also cite that the ECOWAS is biased and maintains close ties with Western powers to meddle in the sovereign status of the Sahel states (Ansah, 2024). The Sahel has for long accused the ECOWAS of always favoring the economic interests of powerful countries at the detriment of the weaker ones like them (ECOWAS Joint Statement, 2024). These reasons are exacerbated consequent upon the sanction of the states by the ECOWAS (Quedraogo, 2025).

The alliance came with effects on regionalism, regional security, regional fragmentation, regional integration, and regional reintegration. According to Chukwu and George (2024), regionalism is the favoring of cooperation and integration at the regional level as the supreme foreign policy objective; it is designed to ensure cohesive and consolidated regional block. They further define regional security as the presence of peace, safety, and the absence of insecurities in a region; it ensures that the survival and survival of the state take precedence. Joshua et al. (2025) define regional integration as the process by which states in a defined geographical location coordinate their social, political, and economic objectives to promote shared development objectives and reduce barriers to the flow of goods and services and people across borders. However, this arrangement could be disrupted by fragmentation, which denotes a process whereby the cooperation and unity in a region are challenged by competing interests, divergent governance models, and emergence of alternative alliances. Regional integration, a after-remedy, is defined as the process of restoring and deepening cooperation among states that have suffered fragmentation (Aina et al., 2025).

These concepts are interrelated, for instance, fragmentation of West Africa has brought about competing security arrangement, while reintegration requires addressing the factors that entrenched the fragmentation. In addition, the connectedness of the concepts is highlighted by previous studies which examined one or two of them in relation to the ECOWAS and the AES. For instance, scholars like Chukwu and George (2024) examined the security implications, Joshua et al. (2025) investigated the Free Movement Protocol, while Kohnert (2024) investigated co-existence prospects. However, empirical evidence has revealed a gap as regards the examination of the political, economic, security, institutional, and external partnership factors in addition to the prospects and challenges of reintegration. This study intends to fill the gap.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The objectives of the ECOWAS included democratic governance and zero tolerance for coup d'état (ECOWAS, 2001) as well as regional security. However, the Sahel states have accused the ECOWAS of entrenching misrule, bias, and repression.

sensation of Western interests that promote imperialism and neocolonialism, and inability to secure their states from ravages of terrorism, insurgencies, and coordinated crimes. These perceived weaknesses led to the formation of the AES (ECOWAS Joint Statement, 2024; Liptako-Gourma Charter, 2023).

In addition, the emphasis of the AES states on national sovereignty, security, and self-preservation over supranational commitments, apart from creating tensions between them and the ECOWAS (Joshua et al., 2025), could reverse the gain made in regional integration over the years, especially with the ECOWA Protocol of Free Movement, and challenge the stability and cohesion of the region (ECOWAS, 1979; Kohnert, 2024; Chukka & George, 2024).

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The general aim of this paper is to investigate the fragmentation of West African regional integration in the wake of the AES formation and evaluate the prospects and challenges. Therefore, the specific objectives are to:

1. to identify the factors that have contributed to the fragmentation of the West African regional integration.
2. to evaluate the prospect of reintegration between the ECOWAS and the AES.
3. to analyze the challenges confronting the integration of West African regionalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Regionalism

Regionalism has been defined from two perspectives; geography and ties/linkages. The geographical school sees regionalism as a group of countries that exist in a specific geographic location (Chukwu & George, 2026). On the other, the linkage school defines regionalism as an arrangement built on cooperation and integration of political, philosophical, economic, social, and legal alliances that operate at a regional level (Igwe, 2006; Baylis & Smith, 1997). The first school identifies geographic proximity as a factor that makes a country form a region, while the second group argues that regionalism is built on socio-economic, linguistic, and political connectedness (Chukwu & George, 2026).

The linkage school paves the way for two sub-schools: security-led regionalism and economic-centric regionalism (Arhin, 2025). In the former, regional integration is for the purposes of economies of scale and to boost investment and healthy competition. This is achieved through free trade, regulations alignment, and infrastructure connectivity (Herzenberg, 2011; Balassa, 2013; Arhin, 2025). However, the security-led option is necessitated by security threats such as terrorism, civil wars, insurgencies, and cross-border crimes. This style prioritizes the security and survival of the member states (Arhin, 2025). The AES is technically classified into the security-oriented regionalism.

The goal of regionalism, according to Chukwu & George (2026), is to present a cohesive and formidable bloc for the purpose of international relations. Regional blocks in turn ensure peaceful and cooperative political cooperation. Different regional blocs are found in different continents of the world. In Africa, the journey of regional block kicked off in the wake of the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) which was renamed, the African Union (AU). Later, sub-regional blocs in Africa, which include ECOWAS, emerged (Chukwu & George, 2026).

Regional Integration

Joshua et al. (2025) discuss the objectives of this arrangement as follows: addressing common threats, reducing barrier to movement of goods and services and people, and creation of cohesion and unity. These objectives are achieved through harmonization of regulatory frameworks, employing common policy frameworks, and building of supranational institutions

In Africa, regional integration is designed to ensure that markets and political systems in the region are not fragmented. In West Africa, regional integration is vigorously pursued through the ECOWAS. ECOWAS seeks to maintain regional integration through treaties, protocols, and institutions (Joshua et al., 2025).

ECOWAS

The ECOWAS was established by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 by 15 heads of states and since then, for the past 5 decades, it has made progress in fostering cross-border cooperation through the Protocol on Free Movement, 1979 (Chukwu & George, 2026; Mudoh & Ibn-Mohammed, 2026). The mandate of ECOWAS has also expanded to incorporate regional security and conflict resolutions, demonstrated through its peace-keeping operations in the troubled spots of the regions such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc. The peace-keeping operations of the ECOWAS were carried out through the agency of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Mudoh & Ibn-Mohammed, 2026). This security consideration is based on the awareness that economic success is not possible without peace and democratic governance. To promote democracy, the ECOWAS has instituted protocols, for instance, the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (ECOWAS, 2001), to sanction unconstitutional change of government like coups (Mudoh & Ibn-Mohammed, 2026).

However, its achievements are received differently by scholars. While some recognize its economic, democratic, and security achievements, others have noted that the body is faced by noticeable political and economic challenges. For instance, interstate preferences and global influences have been identified as factors undermining the ECOWAS' effectiveness. It has been also noted that apart from a deficit in member-states' long-term political commitment, the regional body is bedeviled by a disconnect between how they treat the ECOWAS' elites and the grassroots civilians (Mudoh & Ibn-Mohammed, 2026). Emerging scholarship points to the shift in security arrangements of the ECOWAS, coup d'états, and the arrival of the AES. ECOWAS' handling of the coups, through punitive measures, sped up the emergence of the AES (Arhin, 2025; Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025).

AES

The AES countries are characterized by high level of insecurity, political instability, humanitarian crisis, violence against citizens from the military and insurgency from Jihadists (Sabit & Lawal, 2025; Aina et al., 2026). For instance, there were 2109 casualties of civilians in the Sahel from the military in 2024, accounting for an increase of 36% in the previous year, according to ACSS (2025). For Orrell (2025), the Sahel is a headquarters of global terrorism. In the Central Sahel, there were about 2.9 million displaced persons, children inclusive, as of June 2025, according to UNICEF (2025). The region is heavily reliant on agriculture, with mineral resources, such as gold accounting for 70% of their exports (Tchana et al., 2025).

The AES' disenchantment with ECOWAS is elaborated by scholars into political and economic considerations. On political, Ansah (2025) discussed selective justice of the ECOWAS; Chukwu and George (2026) explained sanction, econ

omicretaliation and the failure of security intervention by the ECOWA. As regards military rule and legitimacy, the AES argued that though the ECOWAS pretends to uphold democracy and condemn military junta, and by implications, sanctioned them, it allows authoritarian and despotic regimes; the body is accused of selective enforcement (Ansah, 2025). On sanction and economic retaliation, the economic restrictions, financial freezing, and border closures meted on the Sahel countries are punitive and punished the innocent citizens; these security measures adopted by the ECOWAS to address insurgency groups, such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have not addressed insecurity in the Sahel (Kohnert, 2024).

From economic and geographical perspectives, it is pointed that the dependency of the countries on the CFA franc impedes their economic sovereignty (Ansah, 2025). For instance, the currency is managed by the French Treasury and that is why it is perceived by the Sahel countries as a vestige of French colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, the countries, by leaving the ECOWAS and dissociating themselves from the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), paved the way for new economic partnerships or currency (as Mali indicated a desire to abandon the CFA franc) that is free from French imperialism (Ansah, 2025). The AES countries now seek new geopolitical alliance with countries like Russia, Turkey, and China for economic, military, and diplomatic assistance that will free them from France and ECOWAS dominance (Ansah, 2025). That is why Arhin (2025) argues that though the AES was saddled with security, self-reliance, and sovereignty responsibilities, what could be described as the three S's of the group, it has grown into politico-ideological endeavor that fights imperialism and external interference.

Those responsibilities are within the jurisdiction of the four governing bodies of the AES: the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Ministers, Chiefs of Defense Staff Committee, and the Unified Force of the AES. The first is the supreme decision-making body, the second is in charge of inter-ministerial functions, the third takes care of military coordination and operational planning, while the fourth handles recruits and train troops (Hassan, 2026).

Regional Security

The concept of security, according to Chukwu and George (2026), emerged following the development of the modern nation-

state. The concept is seen from different perspectives from different scholars. For instance, Baldwin (1977) observes that security is complex and contested notion that is emotion-laden and contains deeply-held values. Chukwu and George (2026) see security from process perspective: security contains frameworks for the protection and defense of lives and properties.

On the other hand, the United Nations Development Program notion of security is human-centered. It perceives security as protection from disruptions; safety from dangers (Chukwu & George, 2026). For Williams (2008), security is socio-political on the ground that without security, political stability and pursuit of social activities will be a mirage. By implication, regional security is built on socio-political arrangements and institutions. For instance, Chukwu and George (2026) point out that the ECOWAS is tied to regional security of the West African region.

Regional security depends on cooperation and interdependence. The cooperation aims to reduce violence within or at the borders of the region and create stability. On the other hand, interdependence demands extra-economic and security relations (Aina et al., 2025).

Regional Fragmentation

Sahel-

exit represents an unprecedented historical fragmentation of West Africa. It created multiple and overlapping regional frameworks in the region. The fragmentation has undermined coordinated responses to insurgencies and terrorism and intelligence sharing in the region (Hassan, 2026; Kohnert, 2024). The coups in the Sahel of West Africa started on September 5, 2021 by Lieutenant General Mamady Doumbouya, followed by Mali (2021) by Assimi Goita, Burkina Faso (2022) by Ibrahim Traore and Niger (2023) by Abdourahamane Tchiani. (Kohnert, 2024). It is agreed by scholars that the fragmentation of the ECOWAS region, has among other things, weakened the strength of ECOWAS as a regional power, set the stage for West African integration crisis, and might embolden other dictatorship countries like Chad and Guinea (Ansah, 2025).

The fragmentation orchestrated by the AES is described as budding, bold, but volatile (Arhin, 2025); it falls within the purview of 'crisis regionalism' which arose from threats rather than economic and institutional benefits (Fawcett, 2013). However, the fragmentation came with many challenges, which scholars have divided into: security, where the intelligence-sharing and fight against terrorism bears the brunt; political, where the power of the ECOWAS has been challenged; social, where the unity and cohesion of the region has been dismantled (Chukwu & George, 2026). The fragmentation has become more pronounced as the AES refuses to uphold democracy principles and regional cooperation which has been the guiding principles of the ECOWAS states (Joshua et al., 2025).

Regional Reintegration

Thakur and Van Langenhove (2007) view integration as voluntary coming-together and cooperation of sovereign states as they pursue economic, political, and political objectives that enable them to achieve their common goals through means, such as supranational and inter-governmental organizations. vnh

Reintegration measures have been advocated, and they include jettisoning the use of force, as the emergence of the AES has proven that regional order can no longer be sustained by only power and treaties, but by strategic dialogue (Chukwu & George, 2026). Chukwu and George (2026) posit that opening dialogue channels will not only establish agreement for a framework that will pave the way for the disengagement of the AES, but will reintegrate the region to bring back regional security. However, Kohnert (2024), advocates co-existence of the two bodies; this has the potential to improve stability, security, and strategic development in West Africa.

Previous Studies

Aina et al. (2026) explored the prospect of regional integration and disintegration of the ECOWAS in the wake of the AES formation through secondary sources data and found that though the relapse of democracy and formation of international alliances with Russia and China indicate prospects of disintegration of ECOWAS, the doors for reintegration have not totally closed as the ECOWAS still left some privileges open for the citizens of the AES countries and the citizens and international bodies are pressurizing the AES to return to democracy.

Mudoh & Ibn-

Muhammed (2026) examined the historical trajectories of ECOWAS from regional cooperative economic and security body to the recent Sahel state withdrawal. They employed neo-functional and RSCT theories and qualitative design with secondary data and found that while ECOWAS' historical integration has brought economic and social benefits, the withdrawal of the Sahel states has undermined its status.

Hassan (2026) examined the structural drivers, institutional factors, and security implications of the AES' withdrawal from ECOWAS. Through inductive analysis of existing scholarship and primary documents and found that though the

security and protection drives the formation of the AES, it emphasizes regime preservation more than economic integration. This emphasis, exacerbated by limited state capacity and incessant insecurity, comprises long-term success and regional legitimacy of AES.

Bah (2026) examined whether the transition of the Sahel states from G5 to AES replaces or reconfigures the security order of the Sahel. Through Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) of Buzan and Waever (2003) and qualitative design and analysis of official documents and charters, the study revealed that a political confederal project that rebrands the initial security arrangement instead of replacing it.

Through the agency of critical theory of international relations, which emphasizes the historical and social changes in society, Chukwu and George (2026) examined the implications of the AES's exit from the ECOWAS from a security angle. The analysis showed that the exit disrupted security cooperation in West Africa, especially counter-terrorism and intelligence-sharing, thereby exacerbating Jihadists, regional criminals, and bandits' activities. They recommended the use of strategic approaches, such as dialogue, to bring the region together.

Hasan (2026) explored the exit of the Sahel states as both institutional fragmentation and a threat to postcolonial African regionalism. Through regionalism under threat theoretical lens, supported by institutional realism and strategic hedging, and qualitative methodology based on inductive analysis of existing scholarship and relevant documents, the study found that though the AES addresses immediate security challenges, their emphasis on regime preservation over economic integration, as well as limited state capacity and ongoing insecurity, is a threat to their long-term viability and wider region's stability.

Onyekachi et al. (2026) analyzed whether the sanctions from ECOWAS are efficacious on the coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The study found that the efficacy of the sanctions are more of a normative signal than as instruments of political compulsion in countries where there are distrust of the civilian elites, acute security crisis, and availability of alternative external partnerships. The authors argue that when sanctions are applied in isolation of enforcement they look like insufficient tools for democratic restoration.

Sebego et al. (2026) investigated the economic implications of the exit of the Sahel states through impulse response function (IRF) model. The findings showed that a shock to ECOWAS's intra-community exports increases Mali's export to the rest of ECOWAS and the effects from trade diversion effects from the AES countries increase exports for the three countries.

Soume et al. (2026), through multi-regional computable general equilibrium model, examined the implications of Sahel exit from ECOWAS. The study found that re-introduction of customs duties on non-WAEMU ECOWAS countries led to increase in import costs and direct trade flow towards WAEMU members and global market; but imports from non-WAEMU ECOWAS partners declined and domestic demands rose slightly in extractive and manufacturing sectors.

Aban et al. (2026), through modernization theory and secondary data, examined the evolution of the AES. They found that war against insurgency was the reason for the emergence of the AES.

Degbee (2026) analyzed the growing divergence between the Sahel states and the ECOWAS as regards mandate, legitimacy, and operational effectiveness. RSCT theory was combined with institutionalism, realism, and constructivism. Secondary data, such as conflict event data, official statements, and joint communiques, was analyzed through document analysis to reveal that while ECOWAS retains formal legal authority and institutional capacity, the AES has built domestic legitimacy and unity by placing priority on sovereignty, regime security, and resistance to external control.

Lenshie(2025)analyzedtheeffectsofECOWASinterventiononmilitaryledcountries;theauthoremployedRSCTan documentanalysisandfoundthatthesanctionsofECOWASagainsttheSahelcountriesspeduptheformationofAES.

Joshuaetal.(2025),throughStructuralRealismtheoryandqualitativemethodology,analyzedthepolitical,legal,andinstitutionalimplicationsoftheAESontheECOWAS'FreeMovementProtocol.Thestudyshowedthatalliancedisruptedthecontinuityoftheprotocol,butregionalintegrationispossibleinthefutureifdialogueandadaptivesecuritycooperationispursuedwiththeAESleaders.

Sabitu&Lawal(2025)exploredthepersistentchallengesthatfacetheSahelstatesthroughpost-colonialtheoryandsecondarydata.ThestudyfoundthatinstabilityintheSahelwasbuiltbycoloniallegaciesshatcreategovernancedeficits,massivesystemiccorruption,andweakruleoflaw.

Ansah(2025)examinedthepoliticalreasonsfortheSahelexitthroughdependencytheoryandsecondarydataandfoundthattheexitwasorchestratedbytheinabilityoftheECOWASsolvethelingeringssecurityissuesintheregion,thebiasoftheECOWASagainsttheAES,andtheuseofsanctionsbyECOWASagainsttheAES.

Arhin(2025)examinedAESasanintegrationalliancebuiltinsecurityneedsthroughsecondarydataandRegionalSecurityComplexTheory.TheanalysisrevealedthatthealliancewasformedinresponsetoECOWASSanctions,insurgenciesfromJihadists,andporousbordersecurityissuesintheSahel.

Ahmedetal.(2025)investigatedthesecurityimplicationsoftheSahel-exitforNigeria'spositionasaregionalleaderbyfocusingonthefactorsthatorchestratedthewithdrawal.Throughhegemonictheoryastheanalyticalframeworkandsecondarydata,thestudyrevealedthatNigeriamightfaceserioussecurityrisksasregardstobordersecurityandcounter-terrorisminitiatives.Thesechallengespotentiallyresultinsecurityvoidintheregion.

Bazzaetal.(2025),throughRSCTanneo-functionaltheory,andqualitativeanalysisofECOWASprotocols,treaties,communiqués,andsecondaryacademicresourcesfrom2020-2024,examinedthelegitimacy,cohesion,andstrategiccapacityimplicationsofthewithdrawal.Thestudyshowedthatthesanctions,basedonECOWASProtocolonGoodGovernanceandDemocracy,thoughjustified,hasledtounexpectedconsequencesuchasalienationoftheSahel,strengtheningexternalpartnershipswithRussia,andtheemergenceoftheAES.

ZubairandManjor(2025)examinedtheeconomicimplicationsoftheexitofMali,Niger,andBurkinaFasofromtheECOWASonNigeria.BothRealistandRegionalIntegrationtheorieswereemployed;thedatawascollectedfromsecondarysourcesandinterviews.Theanalysisshowedthattheexithasserious economicimplicationsonNigeriaintermsof cross-bordertradedisruptions,increasingtransactioncosts,worseningfoodinsecurity,andunderminingofthelivelihoodofbordercommunities.

EdwardandWeldone(2025)throughqualitative researchdesignexaminedfactorsandimplicationsofresurgenceofmilitarygovernmentsinWestAfricanandthecircumstances thatbirthedAES.Theyfoundthatinsecurityandpovertymade thejuntacomeintheSahel.

AneleandIkegwuiro(2025)examinedtheexitoftheAESfromECOWASanditsimplicationsonWestAfrica's stabilityandintegration.Throughneo-functionalstheoryandqualitativeanalysisofsecondarydata,thestudyshowedthattheAES'exitdiminishesthepow

er of ECOWAS, undermines democracy, and leads to economic and political isolation of the AES states. These challenges in turn escalate insecurity and food security in the region.

Adefisoye and Utibe (2025) re-examined the insecurity in the Sahel states and their ability to tackle the challenges through the help of Russia. Through desk literature review and Concentric Theory, the analysis showed that though the military expenditure of the Sahel increased recently, their security efforts, even with the help of Russia are not yet sufficient.

A brief by Klyszcz & Marangio (2025) examined the change in international relations of the Sahel states away from the ECOWA, France, and the US to Russia, China, and Turkey. The brief found that the change presents challenges to the EU as a new partnership can jeopardize their position in the Sahel. The study recommends that the EU should be selective in their approach and avoid confrontation as they advance their interests.

Through a geopolitical and institutional analysis, Kohnert (2024) examined the possibility of co-existence between the ECOWAS and the AES. The study found that the AES' withdrawal undermines the legitimacy of the ECOWAS by hindering economic and security integration. However, he argued that since both of them share similar interests in promoting security, stability, and strategic cooperation, they could transform into complementary forces.

Ologe and Erameh (2025), through qualitative analysis of secondary data, examined the underlying disagreements over regionalism in West Africa. The study established that the exit of AES from ECOWAS is a manifestation of the often overlooked aspect of African regionalism. It should not be seen as a rupture, rather as a dissent with regional integration.

Quedraogo (2025) compares the exit of Brexit and the Sahel-exit through primary and secondary data and the theoretical lens of Hirschman's exit, voice, and loyalty. The study showed that though the two exits share common factors, such as concerns of sovereignty, political, economic, and geopolitical independence, they emerged differently, the former through diplomatic means, the latter, suddenly, through coups and formation of a counter group, the AES.

Asante & Bembier (2025) employed RSC and human security theories, with scholarship on Pan-Africanism, to examine the implications of the exit of the Sahel states. The findings showed that the exit exacerbates the fragile security situation in the Sahel and weakens the regional security cooperation of ECOWAS.

Azowue et al. (2025) examined the security and economic factors that necessitated the withdrawal and the efficacy of the coalition in addressing security challenges in the Sahel. Through neo-functional and inter-governmentalism theories and qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study showed that while the coalition has improved security, it faces constrained resources, external political manipulation, and political division challenges.

Almeida (2025) examined the historical antecedents that led to the withdrawal, the consequences on African reintegration, and the effects on the AU and the ECOWAS. The study showed, through analysis of official reports and secondary sources, that the rupture came as a result of political and institutional issues, had direct effects on the AU and ECOWAS, and reflect effects of fragile institutions and growing interests in external military partnerships.

Balima (2024) examined the major reasons why the AES left the ECOWAS and the implications for peace, stability, and regional security architecture. The study found that the Central Sahel countries have faced serious security threats for over a decade but the ECOWAS has failed to provide collective security. He argues that the creation of the AES bloc covers nearly 60% of ECOWAS territory and this created two potential scenarios such as short-term bilateral security cooperation and medium-term inter-regional cooperation between ECOWAS and AES.

Research Gap

Various studies have examined the AES-ECOWAS dynamics; Chukwu and George (2024); Asante and Bembir (2025) and Lenshie (2025) looked at the security implications and challenges, Joshua et al. (2025) examined the Free Movement Protocol, Kohnert (2024) focused on co-existence prospects, Aina et al. (2025) investigated democratic relapse; while Some et al. (2026), and Sebego et al. (2026) investigated the economic implications. However, no single study has examined the political, economic, security, institutional, and external-partnership factors together with prospects and challenges of reintegration within the theoretical framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as this study sets out to do.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

This theory was birthed in the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and championed by the duo scholars of Barry Burzan and Ole Wæver. The tenets of the theory were developed in their 2003 masterpiece, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. The two outstanding tenets in RSCT are security, region, states, and social actors. Burzan and Wæver (2003) posit that international security is better understood if examined through regional angles; and that the relations between states and other social actors follow regular and geographically clustered structures, which they technically termed regional security complexes (RSCs).

RSCs are distinctive and regular security relations between these actors and it is the degree of interaction that distinguishes the actors, one from the other. For instance, the interaction between actors from the same group is high, while that between actors from different groups is low. RSCs operate with barriers and insulators; neighboring actors can be separated from others by barriers such as rivers, deserts, oceans, and mountains, and at times, countries even act as insulators between RSCs (Burzan & Wæver, 2003).

The theory has advantages; it provides a framework for understanding regional security dynamics; it goes beyond the state-

centric analysis to include both human security and societal dimensions of regionalism (Souza, 2021). However, criticisms have been leveled against the RSCs. The theory is criticized for presenting superficial definitions of regional powers (Souza, 2021). It has been pointed out that in the modern times, some social actors have global security interests and projection of force capabilities. Arhin (2025) argues that the theory is limited when it comes to understanding how regional security matters can transition to broader politico-economic organizations. Arhin (2025) describes RSCs as simply countries with intertwined security issues.

Despite the criticisms, RSCT has been a popular theory for examining topics related to regionalism, integration, and disintegration. The RSCT is apt for this study as it helps to explain how the common issues of security threats motivate the three Sahel countries to form a regional arrangement, AES.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative research design; the data was collected from secondary sources, such as policy documents, reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, etc. The data analysis was document analysis of primary materials, such as the official documents of the Liptako-Gourma Charter (2023), ECOWAS Joint Statement of Withdrawal, some appropriate protocols and Communiqué of ECOWAS, statements from Tinubu (2023, 2026), Al Jazeera report of ECOWAS lifting sanction Nigeria, and secondary academic sources. According to Arhin (2025), these materials are apt for the analysis because they contain the guiding goals, principles, and contexts of the AES. Data were obtained from reputable academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, etc using the relevant keywords that formed the study. Purposive sampling was employed to select only recent and thematically relevant sources.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Political, Economic, Security, Institutional, and External-Partnership Factors of Fragmentation

by

Political

The Sahel military leaders voiced their historical grievances and contemporary leadership contexts. They reject the former colonial master, France, and all vestiges of imperialism. The founders of the AES showed their displeasure with the ECOWAS and the democracies in the Sahel states. The countries face vicious circles of instabilities in governance, accompanied by corruption, weak institutions, poverty, and fiscal fragility (Hassan, 2026). While the ECOWAS' protocol on Good Governance and Democracy upholds democracy ideals and forbids military rule, Olaoye E. O (2025) found that the democracies in the region is bedeviled with lack of free and fair elections and liberal democratic principles.

The formation of the AES, among other things, recognizes the struggles of the African nationalists against colonialism and imperialism, the sovereignty rights of the countries, and the age-old socio-cultural ties that hold the Sahel countries together (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, 2023). In particular, the Charter states in Articles 5-7 that the three parties will protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of one another through armed forces. In addition, the parties agreed not to attack, threaten, and blockade one another, as seen in Article 8 (Traore, Goita & Tiani, Charter of Liptako-Gourma, 2023). The military leaders accuse ECOWAS of bias, failure to secure their states from insurgencies and terrorism, and representing colonial interests (ECOWAS Joint Statement, 2024).

The core of the fragmentation is the ECOWAS mandates and protocols, among others, prohibition of unlawful change of government through military junta and the upholding democratic principles in the member states (ECOWAS, 2001). These foundational ideals have already set the Sahel countries against confrontation before the birth of the AES. Therefore, in the wake of the coups, the three countries were punished with ECOWAS-constitutionally justified sanctions (Quedraogo, 2025). President Tinubu of Nigeria called the alliance a phantom push-back attempt seeking to destroy the democratic legacies of ECOWAS and subvert the will of the people (Tinubu, 2023).

Insecurity

Insecurity has been escalating in the Sahel; it is described as home of terrorism, insurgency, and armed groups. For instance, Jama'at Nusratal-Islam and al-Muslimin (JNIM), and different affiliates of Boko Haram operate in the Sahel (Hassan, 2026). As there have been lingering insecurities in the Sahel, the three military leaders, through the *Charter of Liptako-Gourma*, reiterate their commitment to self-

defense, protection of the civilian population, and fight against external aggression. For instance, Article 1 of the Charter contains collective defense and mutual assistance to the Sahel trio. These defense objectives, further captured in Articles 4 and 5, address terrorism, organized crimes, and armed rebellions (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, 2023). These security challenges are compounded by coup d'état resurgence in the Sahel (Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025).

However, the trio argue that ECOWAS has been incapable of solving the lingering insecurities in the Sahel. For instance, the ECOWAS Standby Force was accused of not having well-adapted security structure and enough logistics during the Malian tension (Balima, 2024). Worse still, the withdrawal will worsen these security situations in the region. Asante and Bembir (2025) argue that the exit will weaken ECOWAS regional security cooperation and disrupted coordinated regional strategies.

Institutional

The institutional instruments of ECOWAS are perceived as inadequate in addressing crisis. For instance, the ECOWAS Protocol Free Movement, though considered a landmark protocol, faces implementation challenges, such as administrative and socio-political resistance issues (Joshua et al., 2025).

The existence of the ECOWAS Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy has made military coups a problem in the region. So, the coups from the trio have already set them against this ECOWAS protocol. The three leaders, apart from accusing the ECOWAS of selective justice and neglect, woke up to face suspension, travel ban, sanctions, border closures, and asset freezes. The couple leaders, in reaction to the punitive measures and to ensure unity and strength, formed the AES (Quedraogo, 2025). Kohnert (2024) describes the resentment of AES countries against the ECOWAS as simmering because of its connection with the postcolonial networks that disadvantage the Sahel states. These sanctions have been seen as counter-productive. For example, while the sanctions caused significant humanitarian and economic challenges, it afforded the military leaders the opportunity to reinforce legitimacy through sovereignty-based narratives; the sanctions did not achieve their objectives because the military regimes have already installed themselves in power (Hassan, 2026; Edward & Weldone, 2025).

The formation of the AES, which presents security and protection of their citizens and region, comes with reasonable arguments. The three military leaders see themselves as the defenders of their countries' existence (De Carvalho, 2023; Aning & Sow, 2022). According to them, ECOWAS has not been effective in addressing the challenges confronting the Sahel (Hassan, 2026). Most importantly, ECOWAS' activation of its Standby Force and military intervention, especially in Niger, when the August 2023 deadline for the reinstatement of the ousted President failed, was seen by the three couple leaders as an existential threat to their regimes; this perceived threat made them form the AES through the Liptako-Gourma Charter (Hassan, 2026). In addition, the refusal of the AES to comply with the decisions of ECOWAS has created a legal vacuum where member states can operate outside the regional legal system (Joshua et al., 2025).

Economic Factors

The AES countries accuse ECOWAS of economic under-achievements. For instance, the ECOWAS' 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Art 2, permits ECOWAS citizens to enter, live, and do business in the member state (ECOWAS, 1979), but the borders of the member countries are closed-

blocked against the citizens. Therefore, the proponents of the AES argue that unlike the ECOWAS, the new body will grant unrestricted free movement to member states to boost greater economic development in the Sahel (Quedraogo, 2025).

In addition, the negative effects of the sanctions from ECOWAS strengthened the AES countries to leave. For instance, Mali's GDP shrank following border closures and termination of financial assistance; Niger's trade dependence on Nigeria was affected; and Burkina Faso's foreign direct investment was affected through the diplomatic sanctions that discouraged investors (Ansah, 2025). The sanctions paradoxically strengthened anti-ECOWAS sentiment rather than facilitating democracy restoration (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Lastly, the economic dependence on former colonial master, France, is another factor. The CFA franc is controlled by French Treasury. This arrangement undermines the three countries' sovereignty. That is why Mali, for example, was considering switching to a new currency (Ansah, 2025). The military leaders see the interference as economic marginalization (Anele & Ikegwuro, 2025).

External Partnerships

The AES countries formed strategic relations with Russia, China, and Turkey. Though these partners are not democratic, the Sahel countries embraced them because they are ready to offer them security help without conditionality (Aina et al., 2026). In September 2024, for instance, the Sahel trio announced that they were acquiring Russia-powered telecommunications and satellite to improve their security (Hassan, 2026; Aina et al., 2026).

Each of the foreign partners, according to Klyszcz and Marangio (2025), has special interest; Russia wants to restore the irreplaceable global power; China seeks to gain economic advantage as they counter the US's influence, while Turkey seeks economic-soft power balance. In return, they give different forms of assistance: Russia contributes military and training missions; China heavily invests in their extractive sectors and Belt and Road Initiative; while Turkey has been contributing to the security of the Sahel through donation of drones for counter-insurgency, border protection, and intelligence operations (Hassan, 2026).

However, critics have noted that interests of the new foreign powers might not be genuine. For instance, Russia is accused of pursuing strategic interests instead of addressing the roots of insecurity (Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025).

Prospects of Reintegration

The ECOWAS's measures have been spiced with dialogue and considerations not entirely force and sanctions. For instance, in extraordinary summit 2024, the ECOWAS reiterated its commitment to dialogue with the military government of Niger on the release of President Bazoum (ECOWAS, 2024). In addition, Kohnert (2024) observes that the citizens of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are still allowed to move freely with ECOWAS passport. This consideration indicates that the ECOWAS has left some doors open. Also, Presidents of Senegal (Bassirou Diomaye Faye) and Togo Faure Gnassingbe have made mediation efforts to reintegrate the AES into the ECOWAS. Open dialogues and diplomatic efforts, according to Azouwe et al. (2025) and Anele and Ikegwuro (2025), will lessen further fragmentation of the region. The lifting of sanctions on Nigeria on humanitarian ground is another diplomatic consideration (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Disenchantment with the military regimes could pave the way for reintegration. From different corners, the military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have been accused of execution of civilians and ill-trained volunteered forces. This sets them up for accusation of war crimes (Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025). In March 2022, Malian forces were accused of killing about 500 civilians and the government forces in Burkina Faso led to the deaths of 136 persons (The Center for Preventive Action, 2024). The junta in Mali is been accused of violation of human rights by ban

ning peaceful protests, restricting media freedom, and cracking down on civil society and journalists (Hassan, 2026). In addition, Edward and Weldon (2025) note that though the citizens' acceptance of the junta in Burkina Faso was 60% in 2024, there is a limited time frame for the legitimacy. Moreover, they are faced with institutional vulnerabilities such as regime survival, lack of institutional depth and citizen engagement, funding issues and economic isolation, succession issues, and overstretched militaries (Hassan, 2026; Deegbe, 2026).

The Sahel states might opt for reintegration to address these security challenges in the region as critics indicate that insecurity in the region requires a nuanced approach that addresses the underlying causes instead of military solutions; these states face limited institutional capacity and human rights concerns that might make them reconsider reintegration with the ECOWAS (Adefisoye & Utibe, 2025). In what Hassan (2026, p. 19) calls 'the ineffectiveness of AES unilateralism', he argues that these security strategies and achievements are just like those of ECOWAS or even less effective, with terrorists, as of August 2024, capturing 60% of Burkina Faso's territory; Niger experiencing similar losses; and Mali's military government faced with different Jihadist groups. He argues that military solutions cannot address the myriad of existential challenges that face the Sahel such as marginalization, institutional failures, and poverty (Hassan, 2026).

Moreover, lack of economic vibrancy could make the AES opt for reintegration. The three countries are landlocked, dependent on exportation, and have limited industrial capacity. They also lack institutional depth and civilian engagement, funding constraints, and economic isolation (Hassan, 2026). In addition, they are facing humanitarian crises, such as displacement, food insecurity, and climate-change-caused disasters. Given that the ECOWAS has been acting as a channel for humanitarian and disaster management, the AES states may reconsider regional reintegration (Azowue et al., 2025).

Lastly, the two bodies share common grounds in promoting security and stability. Strategic cooperation could transform them into complementary forces. Provided that the ECOWAS redefines itself and limits external influences from the former colonial powers, ECOWAS' experience in peace-keeping and conflict resolution could complement the AES' focus on counterinsurgency and localized security efforts (Kohnert, 2024).

Challenges of Reintegration

First, the relationship between the ECOWAS and AES members has gone sour; they now nurse grievances against one another. The bitterness has been cemented by the initial tension caused by the Malian coup and followed by the suspension and sanctions from the ECOWAS. In addition, the AES has formed different political views and alliances and now perceives the ECOWAS as inadequate (Chukwu & George, 2024; Kohnert, 2024). In addition, the repeated coups and the formation of the AES have significantly affected the power-base of the ECOWAS as the regional power (Oneykachiet al., 2026).

The external partnership with Russia, Mali, and Niger may embolden the junta states into long disconnection with the ECOWAS. Kohnert (2024) has pointed to external foreign military and trade cooperation where Russia has not only acted as the sole security guarantor of the AES, but extended cooperation in other areas. Russia's private and public companies have signed memorandum of understanding and agreement with the AES in civil nuclear cooperation, telecommunications, mining of natural resources, etc. China's state companies have been investing in crude oil, uranium, and solar projects in the Sahel; Turkey, through its Bayraktar TB2 drones, is a defense partner for the AES countries (Kohnert, 2024). Bazza et al. (2025) also argue that this security alliance has not only encouraged the AES to resist ECOWAS' pressure, but consolidated mutual defense pact among them.

Summary of Findings

1. Political, economic, security, institutional, and external-partnership factors led to the fragmentation. The political include historical grievances, bias on the part of ECOWAS in upholding democracy, and anti-colonial sentiment. The economic comprises economic under-achievements, economic dependence on the former colonial masters, and counterproductive effects of sanctions. These security factors include the inability of the ECOWAS to tackle insecurities in the Sahel; institutional factors revolve around inadequate of ECOWAS in addressing crisis, the existence of the ECOWAS protocol that forbids unconstitutional change of government, and sanctions; the external-partnership factors comprise the military, economic, and strategic supports from Russia, China, and Turkey.
2. There are prospects for reintegration; ECOWAS open door for dialogue and certain considerations; possible disenchantment with the military regimes from the people; insecurities in the region require nuanced approach that address the underlying causes instead of military solutions; lack of economic vibrancy could make the AES opt for reintegration; and the two bodies share common grounds in promoting security and stability.
3. Lastly, reintegration can be problematic because the relationship between the ECOWAS and AES state has gone sour. Secondly, the AES countries might feel emboldened by the external partnerships from Russia, China, and Turkey.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The formation of the AES and its withdrawal from the ECOWAS in the wake of the coups in the three countries marked as significant turning point in regional politics of West Africa. The fragmentation and disintegration caused by these events raises serious concerns about the stability, cohesion, and security of the region (Chukwu & George, 2024).

While the ECOWAS protocol on Good Governance and Democracy, and by extension its regional power-base is threatened, the Sahel exit is a watershed in African regionalism and marks a shift in how countries perceive sovereignty, coercive security, and regional cooperation (Hassan, 2026).

The exit is a sign of regionalism dilemma, not just a departure from regional grouping. The ECOWAS is at a crossroads because of combination of factors such as political mistrust, insecurities, economic hardships, and changing of international partnerships (Ansah, 2025). While the Sahel's quest for stability reflects broader struggles associated with postcolonial governance, the region's transition represents the necessity to address internal challenges and external dependencies (Sabit & Lawal, 2025). Therefore, the ECOWAS needs to adopt pragmatic pathways that not only address structural drivers of democratic failures, but ensure balanced partnerships that respect sovereignty while promoting democratic principles and regional stability (Lenshie, 2025).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Reassess ECOWAS's strategic approach to political crisis. ECOWAS should adopt more nuanced approaches that combine principled opposition to unconstitutional change of governments with understanding of the security and governance failure that causes them.

Maintain sustained dialogue with the AES. ECOWAS should seek an agreement upon a framework for calibrated dialogue that will protect cooperation and peaceful co-existence to maintain diplomatic leverage that will pressure the AES into providing a timeline for return to democracy.

RevisetheECOWAS’approachtosanctions. Thebodyshouldadoptmoreflexibleandcontext-dependentmeasuresthatcombinesanctionswithincentives. Thesewillreduceciviliansufferingwhileputtingpressur eonnon-compliantregimes.

ReformtheFreeMovementProtocolandinstitutionalframeworks. ECOWASshouldadoptflexibleandsecurity -sensitiveprovisionsthatallowcontext-specificimplementationsuchascoordinatedbordermanagement,intelligencesharing,etc.

Strengthenedemocraticinstitutionsandaddressstructuralissues. ECOWASshouldensurepopularrepresentatio ningovernanceandaddressstructuralissueshatcausepoliticalinstabilitysuchaspover ty,corruption,andethnicroval ries.

Developtransitioncooperationframeworks. TheECOWASshoulddevelopframeworksthatenabletheAEScount riesparticipateincriticalareasofmobilityandtradeevenoutsideformalstructuressuchinvestinginsharedborderinfra structure,surveillancetechnologies,etc.

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