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THE IMPACT OF THE EMERGENCE OF THE SAHEL STATES ON ECOWAS

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ABSTRACT

This analysis explores the security and economic ramifications of separatist movements in the Sahel region, while assessing the efficacy of regional coalitions in addressing these issues. Given the operational and political challenges encountered by established organisations like ECOWAS and the African Union, new coalitions have formed, such as the G5 Sahel, the Accra Initiative, and the Alliance of Sahel States, to tackle the increasing instability in the region. The study employs secondary data collection methods to analyse policy documents, conflict databases, academic literature, and institutional reports. Research shows that although these partnerships have facilitated rapid improvements in security, they face challenges due to constrained resources, political division, and reliance on external entities such as France and Russia's Wagner Group. Your comprehension and engagement are vital for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners focused on security and economic matters in the Sahel. The research indicates that a comprehensive approach, incorporating military collaboration, improvements in governance, and socio-economic development, could effectively address the root causes of separatism and foster enduring peace in the Sahel.

Keywords: **Emergence, Sahel, Countries, Impact, ECOWAS.**

Introduction

The Sahel region, a semi-arid area spanning West and Central Africa, has gained increased significance in both global and regional geopolitics owing to its security challenges, economic difficulties, and changing political landscapes. The area encompassing countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad has been facing persistent issues related to terrorism, political instability, climate change, and socio-economic underdevelopment (International Crisis Group, 2021). In recent years, the emergence of Sahelian countries as a unique entity has raised concerns about the future of regional integration, particularly in relation to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Established in 1975, ECOWAS sought to promote economic cooperation, strengthen regional stability, and enable political coordination among its fifteen member states (Adebajo, 2020). However, the region has witnessed rising tensions between ECOWAS and certain Sahelian

countries, particularly those that have undergone military coups. Since 2020, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced considerable political upheaval that has led to the end of democratic governance, prompting ECOWAS to impose sanctions and adopt a strategy of diplomatic isolation (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). The implementation of these punitive measures has not fostered stability; rather, it has deepened the political divide, leading to increasingly strained relationships between the organization and these nations.

Amid perceived external pressures and economic marginalisation, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their plan to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2024, highlighting the need for self-determination and improved regional security cooperation (Reuters, 2024). Following the events, these nations formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to create a new framework for military and economic collaboration, independent of ECOWAS (Al Jazeera, 2024). This development marks a crucial turning point in the geopolitical dynamics of West Africa, potentially undermining the institutional effectiveness and geopolitical cohesion of ECOWAS.

The emergence of the Sahelian bloc raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of ECOWAS as a regional economic and political entity. The exit of key members weakens its collective bargaining power and may hinder coordinated regional initiatives aimed at tackling terrorism, fostering economic development, and addressing governance challenges (Olonisakin, 2023). Furthermore, this shift could encourage other discontented member states to reconsider their loyalty to ECOWAS, which may lead to heightened instability.

This study aims to explore the factors contributing to the emergence of Sahelian nations as a unique entity and analyse the potential consequences for ECOWAS. This analysis will explore historical precedents, economic implications, security concerns, and diplomatic strategies to shed light on the future direction of regional cooperation in West Africa.

Statement of the Problem

The recent departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS marks a significant interruption in the efforts for regional integration in West Africa. This secession prompts important questions about the effectiveness and significance of ECOWAS's governance frameworks, while also uncovering deeper tensions related to political autonomy, security strategies, and economic disenfranchisement. The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) seeks to redefine regional cooperation outside the boundaries of ECOWAS, creating a noticeable atmosphere of uncertainty regarding the future stability, unity, and effectiveness of West African regionalism.

The core challenge lies in understanding the implications of this realignment: In what ways does the establishment of a Sahelian bloc affect the operational coherence and strategic goals of ECOWAS? How can ECOWAS adapt to the changing political landscape while upholding its fundamental principles of democracy and integration? Furthermore, how might this fragmentation influence collaborative efforts focused on addressing pressing regional challenges such as terrorism, trade, and humanitarian crises? Addressing these issues is crucial for evaluating the prospects of regional unity and progress in West Africa.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary political, economic, and security factors that led to the withdrawal of Sahel countries from ECOWAS?
2. How does the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) affect the regional integration goals of ECOWAS?
3. In what ways has ECOWAS responded to the withdrawal of its member states, and how effective have these responses been?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the emergence of the Sahelian bloc and its impact on ECOWAS. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the political, economic, and security factors that influenced the decision of Sahel countries to withdraw from ECOWAS.
2. To analyze the implications of the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) on regional integration efforts within West Africa.
3. To evaluate the responses of ECOWAS to the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Theoretical Framework on Regional Integration

The study is based on two core theories of regional integration: neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism.

Ernst Haas (2004) articulated neofunctionalism, suggesting that regional integration is both dynamic and self-reinforcing. The process of integration typically begins in technical and economic areas, which then creates pressures that drive additional political integration, a phenomenon known as "spillover." The creation of a common market may require the establishment of joint institutions or frameworks for political decision-making.

Within the framework of ECOWAS, neo-functionalism suggests that effective economic collaboration among West African nations is likely to promote greater political cohesion and the creation of shared governance structures. Nonetheless, the theory assumes a level of shared political determination and institutional trust that might be lacking in regions troubled by coups and governance challenges. The departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger disrupts this process, underscoring a fragmentation in the spillover effect. The region is experiencing a regression rather than a move towards deeper integration, shaped by concerns over security, perceived neocolonial influences, and claims of sovereignty.

Critics of neo-functionalism argue that it places too much emphasis on the certainty of integration, neglecting to sufficiently address domestic political instability and differing national interests—factors that are particularly important in the context of the Sahel. Moreover, while neo-functionalism has demonstrated its effectiveness in clarifying European integration (e.g., the EU), its applicability to African regionalism remains a topic of debate, considering the unique historical, political, and economic contexts (Mattli, 1999).

Despite its limitations, neo-functionalism remains important for understanding the fundamental goals that support ECOWAS and the theoretical models that anticipated progress towards regional unity. The current crisis highlights shortcomings in both the

political and security sectors, presenting a conceptual challenge to the neo-functionalist theories commonly held in West Africa.

Intergovernmentalism, as described by Stanley Hoffmann and further developed by Andrew Moravcsik, suggests that states operate as rational actors seeking regional integration by focusing on national interests and engaging in intergovernmental discussions. When considered from this perspective, the actions of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger demonstrate intentional decisions to pursue alternative partnerships that align more closely with their current governance structures and security needs. Intergovernmentalism highlights the limitations of supranational authority in situations where national sovereignty is prioritised.

ECOWAS and Regional Stability

Economic sanctions alongside military operations. Since its inception, the organization has developed strategies to address security challenges, including peacekeeping operations and conflict resolution initiatives (Adebajo, 2020). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these methods has varied, showcasing both achievements and significant shortcomings.

ECOWAS Peacekeeping and Military Interventions

ECOWAS has effectively mobilised military forces to tackle regional conflicts, as demonstrated by the interventions of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s. The missions demonstrated ECOWAS's capacity to operate as a regional security provider, although they encountered challenges related to funding, logistics, and political will (Olonisakin, 2023).

Recently, ECOWAS has aimed to maintain democratic transitions by imposing sanctions and suspensions on governments led by military forces, particularly in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022). However, these initiatives have not consistently led to the restoration of civilian governance, raising questions about their long-term effectiveness (ECOWAS Commission, 2023).

Challenges to Regional Stability

The Sahel region, situated as a transitional area between the Sahara Desert and the Sudanian Savanna, has recently become a focal point of insecurity, political turmoil, and humanitarian challenges. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, located at the heart of the Sahel, have faced ongoing coups, extremist violence, and environmental degradation, presenting considerable challenges to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). As ECOWAS faces the challenge of maintaining regional stability, the emerging crises in the Sahel underscore its institutional constraints and the pressing need for unified action.

The intricate crisis in the Sahel is fundamentally influenced by a blend of security, political, and environmental elements. Extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram have taken advantage of fragile state institutions and permeable borders to establish their presence throughout the region (International Crisis Group, 2021). This has resulted in extensive violence, especially in the border regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The situation is exacerbated by a series of military coups, as Mali faced coups in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023, all of which have contributed to the destabilisation of governance structures (Fofana,

2023). Furthermore, the Sahel stands out as one of the globe's most climate-impacted areas, where desertification, unpredictable rainfall, and dwindling resources are exacerbating local conflicts and leading to displacement (UNDP, 2022).

ECOWAS, established to foster economic integration and political stability among its 15 member states, has been significantly affected by the unrest in the Sahel. The rise of terrorism and cross-border insurgency has posed significant threats to national borders and has also compromised regional security. Nations such as Nigeria, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire have experienced a spillover of violence from their Sahelian counterparts (OECD, 2021). Furthermore, ECOWAS has faced challenges in delivering a cohesive response to political instability. The suspension of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, along with their announcement to withdraw from the bloc in 2024, highlights significant divisions within the organization (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The recent developments have posed significant challenges for ECOWAS regarding its legitimacy, coherence, and capacity. The peacekeeping and mediation initiatives of the bloc, such as the deployment of ECOWAS standby forces, have faced challenges due to insufficient funding, logistical shortcomings, and a lack of agreement among member states (Aning & Bah, 2020). Furthermore, ECOWAS' focus on democratic principles—like its protocol on good governance and the disapproval of unconstitutional power shifts—has come into conflict with the increasing appeal of military regimes in the Sahel, which receive backing from segments of the population frustrated with democratic shortcomings (Nsaibia, 2023).

The economic implications raise significant concerns. Political instability and insecurity have interrupted trade routes, raised business expenses, and discouraged foreign investment throughout the region. The objective of regional economic integration pursued by ECOWAS faces challenges due to fragmented borders and the nationalistic policies implemented by the military-led states in the Sahel (World Bank, 2023). The exit of important Sahelian nations from ECOWAS may jeopardise regional initiatives such as the West African Monetary Zone and the ECOWAS Single Currency (ECO).

Given these challenges, ECOWAS needs to re-evaluate its approach to the Sahel. Initially, a stronger regional security framework is essential, one that entails improved coordination with the African Union, the G5 Sahel, and international partners. Secondly, ECOWAS should tackle the underlying factors of instability, such as youth unemployment, corruption, and social exclusion. Peacebuilding programs that prioritise development can contribute to community stabilisation and diminish the allure of violent extremism. Third, the bloc ought to embrace a more adaptable diplomatic strategy, fostering dialogue and the potential reintegration of suspended members. In the absence of inclusive political solutions, achieving long-term stability will continue to be out of reach.

In summary, the situation in the Sahel has emerged as a significant challenge for ECOWAS and its aspiration for a cohesive and tranquil West Africa. The increase in terrorism, the breakdown of democratic governance in certain nations, and environmental issues have resulted in a multifaceted crisis that necessitates both urgent and sustained action. Despite the considerable challenges confronting ECOWAS, the region's future hinges on its capacity to adapt, coordinate, and respond effectively to increasing instability.

Impact of Sahelian States' Withdrawal on Stability

The departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2024 has added a new dimension to the regional security and political landscape of West Africa. The three Sahelian states that have recently experienced military coups have pointed to ECOWAS' sanctions, perceived Western influence, and insufficient support in the fight against terrorism as their reasons for departure. Nevertheless, the consequences of this action extend well beyond internal political choices. The stability of the entire West African region is at risk, as it undermines collective security mechanisms, weakens economic integration, and indicates a possible realignment of regional alliances.

The withdrawal signifies a dismissal of ECOWAS' normative framework, which is focused on democracy, constitutional governance, and the peaceful transfer of power. ECOWAS has consistently adopted a firm approach towards coups, imposing suspensions or sanctions on member states that experience unconstitutional changes in governance. The choice made by the Sahelian states to withdraw from ECOWAS rather than adhere to calls for democratic transition sets a significant precedent that may encourage comparable regimes in the area. Aning and Bah (2020) contend that the authority of ECOWAS is contingent upon the compliance and political will of its member states; when significant states withdraw, it undermines the bloc's capacity to enforce its regulations and uphold its legitimacy.

The situation regarding regional security is especially concerning with the exit. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger stand at the forefront of West Africa's battle against violent extremism, facing ongoing threats from factions linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Their withdrawal excludes them from ECOWAS' collective security initiatives, including the ECOWAS Standby Force and joint counter-terrorism frameworks like the Accra Initiative (International Crisis Group, 2024). This disintegration may hinder cross-border military operations, diminish intelligence-sharing, and result in a fragmentation of efforts to curb extremist violence. There is already evidence that jihadist groups are taking advantage of the political vacuum and disunity among states to expand their territories and execute attacks (OECD, 2021).

The withdrawal presents considerable economic risks as well. ECOWAS implements a free movement protocol that enhances trade, labour mobility, and market integration among its member states. By exiting, the Sahelian states forfeit access to preferential trade terms, regional infrastructure projects, and the freedom of movement for goods and citizens. For landlocked states such as Mali and Niger, which depend significantly on access to seaports in nations like Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo, this decision may lead to logistical bottlenecks, elevated transport costs, and increased prices for imported goods (World Bank, 2023). The consequences are expected to exacerbate living conditions and increase economic vulnerability in economies that are already fragile.

The geopolitical implications of this withdrawal are significant. Following their exit from ECOWAS, the Sahelian states established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a political and military agreement that indicates a transition to a new regional framework. Simultaneously, these nations have moved away from conventional Western allies like France and the EU, while enhancing collaboration with alternative partners such as Russia via the Wagner Group and various bilateral agreements (Al Jazeera, 2024). This change could result in a "bloc-

ification" of West Africa, where conflicting spheres of influence and security doctrines obstruct coordination and collaboration throughout the region.

Furthermore, there is an increasing awareness of humanitarian issues. The Sahel is currently facing challenges such as displacement, food insecurity, and disasters linked to climate change. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2023) reports that more than 5 million individuals are presently displaced throughout the central Sahel as a result of conflict and instability. The disruption in regional collaboration may hinder aid delivery and coordination, given that ECOWAS has frequently acted as a channel for humanitarian responses and disaster risk management.

In summary, the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS signifies a significant challenge to regional stability in West Africa. The action undermines political unity, hampers counter-terrorism initiatives, puts pressure on economic structures, and could trigger more profound geopolitical divides. The region is confronted with intricate and interrelated challenges, including terrorism, climate change, migration, and poverty. The lack of a cohesive entity such as ECOWAS to orchestrate responses may greatly jeopardise the prospects for peace and development. Moving ahead, open dialogue and diplomatic efforts will be essential to avert additional fragmentation and promote lasting solutions.

Alternative Regional Alliances and Their Effectiveness in Addressing Sahelian Separatism

In light of growing political isolation and military pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the military-led governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have established an alternative regional coalition called the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel - AES). This alliance signifies a notable geopolitical change, serving both as a statement of independence and as a challenge to the regional integration framework advocated by ECOWAS. The AES was created to foster mutual defence and solidarity among the Sahelian states; however, its overall effectiveness in tackling issues of separatism, insecurity, and governance crises is still a matter of debate.

The Alliance of Sahel States was formally announced in September 2023 after ongoing tensions with ECOWAS. The alliance formed in response to the sanctions, suspensions, and calls for political transitions placed on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger after their military coups (Al Jazeera, 2024). The AES presents ECOWAS as an entity aligned with Western interests, advocating for a sovereignist perspective that emphasises national self-determination, non-interference, and mutual defence. The alliance has committed to a united response to any threats faced by its members, particularly concerning external military interventions or forces imposed by ECOWAS (BBC News, 2023).

The AES has shown notable potential in the realm of military cooperation. The three countries encounter comparable challenges posed by jihadist insurgencies, cross-border armed groups, and separatist militias, especially in northern Mali and eastern Burkina Faso. The AES structure enables them to coordinate military strategies with greater freedom, unencumbered by external conditionalities or diplomatic constraints. Joint border patrols and information-sharing have reportedly increased since the formation of the alliance (International Crisis Group, 2024). This solidarity has allowed these states to openly engage in military partnerships with non-traditional actors like Russia and Turkey, differing from ECOWAS'

inclination towards collaboration with France, the EU, and the African Union (Boeke & Schmauder, 2023).

Nonetheless, the alliance's ability to tackle separatism—particularly movements such as the Tuareg-led independence initiative in northern Mali or ethnic militias in Burkina Faso—is constrained by various structural shortcomings. The AES is deficient in a strong institutional framework. In contrast to ECOWAS, which boasts decades of established protocols, legal instruments, and peacekeeping experience, the AES remains in its early stages, lacking a formal secretariat or mechanisms for dispute resolution. The response strategies are characterised by a lack of systematic planning and depend significantly on the military capabilities of national forces that are already under strain.

Secondly, although the AES supports sovereignty, it fails to sufficiently tackle the internal factors contributing to separatism, such as marginalisation, human rights violations, and underdevelopment in peripheral areas. In Mali, the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement, which was facilitated by international actors and backed by ECOWAS, has effectively come to a standstill under the junta, resulting in a resurgence of hostilities between the state and Tuareg rebel factions (MINUSMA, 2023). In the absence of inclusive governance, investment in underserved regions, and meaningful dialogue with ethnic groups, relying solely on military strategies may exacerbate alienation and violence.

Third, the alliance's shift away from multilateralism and dependence on external non-African actors presents risks of dependency and geopolitical manipulation. The presence of foreign mercenaries, including the Wagner Group in Mali, has been associated with reported human rights abuses and has created tension with neighbouring nations and international donors (Amnesty International, 2023). These partnerships may offer immediate security benefits, yet they could jeopardise long-term stability, reconciliation, and international legitimacy.

Moreover, the economic fragility of AES states significantly restricts their ability to maintain a security-focused alliance. The World Bank (2023) reports that all three countries are experiencing low GDP growth, elevated inflation, and humanitarian crises worsened by climate change and displacement. In the absence of economic recovery or policies focused on development, the alliance might find it challenging to finance counter-separatism efforts or to invest in sustainable peacebuilding initiatives.

In contrast, ECOWAS, despite its shortcomings, provides a more thorough framework that integrates political dialogue, sanctions, mediation, and development assistance. The role it played in facilitating the 2015 Gambia transition, along with prior peacebuilding efforts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, highlights a broader capacity that the AES currently does not possess.

In summary, the Alliance of Sahel States stands as a significant political endeavour by three militarised regimes aiming for independence from both regional and international influences. Although it has demonstrated some ability to coordinate on security issues, its effectiveness in tackling separatism is still constrained by structural weaknesses, insufficient political inclusivity, and economic limitations. Should the AES not progress from a military alliance to

a platform for regional development, reconciliation, and governance reform, it may exacerbate instability instead of addressing it.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing mainly on secondary methods of data collection. The selection of secondary data was influenced by the geopolitical volatility and limited access to fieldwork in the Sahel region, especially in areas impacted by separatist movements and insurgencies. The data used in this study were collected from a range of credible and authoritative sources, including academic literature, government and institutional reports, think tank and policy briefs, publications from organisations like the International Crisis Group, conflict databases, news media, and press releases. The gathered data underwent content analysis and thematic coding, facilitating the identification of patterns, recurring themes, and trends across various regional alliances. The emphasis was placed on evaluating their strategic goals, the methods of implementation, and the overall success in addressing or alleviating separatist threats.

Conclusion

The ongoing presence of separatist movements in the Sahel highlights the intricate relationship among political instability, economic marginalisation, and security challenges. Traditional regional organisations like ECOWAS and the African Union have faced challenges in delivering effective solutions, leading to the rise of alternative alliances such as the G5 Sahel, the Accra Initiative, and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Although these initiatives have played a role in enhancing security coordination and counterterrorism efforts, they encounter considerable challenges, such as financial limitations, political fragmentation, and an excessive dependence on external actors like France and Russia's Wagner Group.

The analysis indicates that a solely military response is inadequate for tackling the underlying causes of separatism in the Sahel. Effective solutions necessitate a comprehensive strategy that combines security, governance reforms, and economic development. The success of regional alliances will hinge on their capacity to cultivate authentic collaboration, diminish reliance on external forces, and encourage governance frameworks that are inclusive and responsive to local concerns.

Recommendations

1. To improve cooperation across groups like the G5 Sahel, AES, and the Accra Initiative so that they don't do the same work twice.
2. To support African-led solutions by making the African Standby Force (ASF) more effective so that Africa doesn't have to rely on foreign military operations as much.
3. To encourage inclusive governance by making sure that ethnic groups who are often left out of politics have a say in making decisions.
4. To make it easier for people to settle their differences in their own communities so that ethnic and community problems don't turn into separatist movements.

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