

Policyweekly

The Exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Republic from ECOWAS:

Analysing its Security Implications



Policy Recommendations

- 1 ECOWAS should set diplomatic conversations with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger for a deeper discussion and understanding of each other's viewpoints.
- 2 ECOWAS diplomacy with the exited states should explore options, including a return with an agreed transition period to democratic rule.
- 3 ECOWAS should make a bold statement by denying voting rights to leaders who have evidently rigged elections and violated their constitutional term limits.
- 4 ECOWAS should retain its economic and political objectives but must avoid being used by any superpower to further its ambition or as a tool for the grand strategy of external forces

Introduction

On January 28, 2024, three members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Republic, announced their [exit](#) from the regional integration body. ECOWAS, formed on [May 28, 1975](#), by fifteen member-states of West Africa, is one of Africa's most successful regional integration efforts. Beginning like a customs union in the early part of its 49-year history, ECOWAS has since added political objectives to its remit. ECOWAS' pursuit of political objectives began with the restoration of peace, stability and order in Liberia and Sierra Leone in their civil wars of the 1990s. Having successfully performed that security function, it moved further towards political objectives by adopting charters to support political

democracy. The [Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance](#) made ECOWAS an important institutional vanguard of democracy. Based on this protocol, ECOWAS has intervened in African countries in which military coups have happened in recent times, including Mali (2012, 2020,2021), Guinea (2021); Burkina Faso (January 2022 and September 2022) and recently, Niger Republic July in 2023.

In the earlier interventions of ECOWAS in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, it adopted the diplomatic pathway. However, in 2023 when a military coup took place in Niger Republic, the approach was different. ECOWAS gave the new military government an ultimatum to return the elected leader to power or risk military action from ECOWAS. Indeed, the Nigerian government had wanted to lead the invasion, but for the refusal of the country's lawmaking body. ECOWAS therefore ended up imposing sanctions on Niger, like other member countries that are under military rule. In response, three of the countries, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger Republic, called the bluff of ECOWAS and formed a compact known as the [Alliance of Sahel States](#) chiefly as a security union for joint action against any attack on any of their three members. Not long after the formation of the Sahel Alliance, the three countries also announced their exit from ECOWAS, accusing the body of (a) drifting from its founding principles, (b) being under the influence of foreign powers, (c) failure to help them tackle their significant security challenges; and (d) "illegal illegitimate and irresponsible [sanctions](#)". This action can potentially have far-reaching impacts for the entire ECOWAS, which has an annual economic output of [757.96 billion US dollars](#) and 0.75 per cent of the global economy. Therefore, in this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we explore the security implications of the exit of the Sahel Alliance from ECOWAS on security in West Africa and the continuing relevance of ECOWAS in the sub-region.

Security Implications

The exit of the Alliance of Sahel States would have implications for the region's

security. Apart from the economy, which would be hampered by the exit, the security cooperation among the ECOWAS states, which has been one of the essential strategies to rein in terrorism and other conflicts in the region, will no longer be tenable. As Akanji (2019) reports, ECOWAS did in 1999 set up the inter-governmental Group Action against Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in West Africa (GIABA) and extended its mandate to combating terror in 2006. It also conceived necessary counter-terrorism measures through the ECOWAS Political Declaration and Common Position against Terrorism in 2013. The measures include the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Coordination Bureau (ECOCTB); ECOWAS Arrest Warrant (ECOWARRANT); ECOWAS Black List of Terrorist and Criminal Networks (ECOLIST); ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Training Centre and Counter-Terrorism Technical Assistance Directory (Akanji, 2019). The countries that exited ECOWAS were part of these joint networks and efforts. Their exit would imply a significant lacuna in the fight against terror unless they work out comparable anti-terror strategies in their new security compact. Mali, which is one of the exited countries together with Nigeria, are the two hosts of "the deadliest terrorist groups in the sub-region" (Akanji, 2019, p.96). Indeed, in the [first six months of 2023](#), there were 2,725 attacks in Burkina Faso, 844 in Mali, 77 in Niger and 70 in Nigeria, altogether leading to 4,593 deaths. With the exit of the highly vulnerable countries, there is a likelihood of a more significant disconnect in the fusion of intelligence, arms and joint action in the war against terror and insecurity.

The terrorist groups Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslumin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are operational in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger Republic and have both demonstrated intentions of [expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea](#). In addition to the states mentioned above, they are in Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria's neighbouring states of Togo and Benin. Their strategy makes Nigeria highly vulnerable. One such strategy is to capitalise on local rivalries and grievances against the state to gain the local population's support. The other is to form alliances and merge with other

terrorist groups. If they form such a merger with the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), which operates in the Lake Chad Basin, the terrorist challenge would become quite enormous because there are several local discontents that they could tap into in Nigeria and some other West African states.

Two factors would push the expansionist ambition of the terror groups. First is Russia's successful assistance to the Alliance of Sahel States to fight and rid their countries of terrorism decisively. In that case, the terrorists are likely to move Southwards. The second factor is the persistence of the security loopholes which the terror groups could latch on to continue their violent extremism and expansion.

Another security implication of the split in ECOWAS is the increased vulnerability of brittle democracies in the sub-region. The success and assertiveness of the three cases of military coup under reference appear to be important sources of impetus to potential putschists in the region, mainly as Russia's body language indicates receptiveness for African countries that are angry with Western politics of interest. Former French colonies tend to revolt against France and her long, unfruitful assistance in the war against terror. [Russia](#) tends to be eager to harness these countries' grievances as it offers them much-required alternative superpower support. It has since started cooperating with them on military matters. In January 2024, Russian troops deployed in Burkina Faso. Also, the Russian military mercenary company Wagner is actively operating in Mali. [Russia and Niger](#) have also agreed to develop military ties. Indeed, the development in the Sahel has implications not only for the widespread terror and banditry in the region but also for the survival of elective systems. Besides, it offers a context for Russian and Euro-American grand strategy. They are engaged in a zero-sum game where the gain of one is the loss of the other. Perhaps, it is Russian tit for tat for the Euro-American role in the Ukrainian war.

Towards Handling a Complex Situation

To navigate the entire complex situation, ECOWAS should consider the following strategies:

1. Diplomacy remains inevitable in approaching the states. ECOWAS should set diplomatic conversations with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger for a deeper discussion and understanding of each other's viewpoints. While union membership is not compulsory, their geography and contiguity with countries of shared concerns and opportunities make it a viable option.
2. ECOWAS diplomacy with the exited states should explore options, including a return with an agreed transition period to democratic rule. An early concession that ECOWAS should seek is an extended period to retain the ECOWAS principles and agreements, such as in the free movement of persons and goods, transhumance, trade, joint actions against terrorism, and other forms of insecurity. Such an extended period would allow ECOWAS to plan how to close the gaps the leaving members would create in their joint security operations if such exited members insist on not returning to the organisation.
3. Leaders who are known to have rigged elections with demonstrable compelling evidence or have violated their constitutional term limits should be denied voting rights in ECOWAS regarding measures against member countries that are under military rule. ECOWAS should make a bold statement on Senegal following the suspension of this month's general election by President Macky Sall. This will project objectivity and neutrality, especially as they try to engage the junta governments in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.
4. ECOWAS should retain its economic and political objectives but must avoid being used by any superpower to further its ambition or as a tool for the grand strategy of external forces.

Conclusion

The exit of the three Sahel countries from ECOWAS has created a significant fault line in the union. The capacity of ECOWAS to coordinate effectively against common security threats is weakened since some of the states that have exited lie between some member countries. As the former members will no longer be committed to ECOWAS strategies, plans against terrorism, and other sources of insecurity, further recession in the stability and security of the region is highly likely.

Reference

Akanji, Olajide. (2019). Sub-regional security challenge: ECOWAS and the war on terrorism in West Africa. *Insight on Africa*, 11(1) 94–112, 2019. DOI: 10.1177/0975087818805842

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