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Issue Brief

The Decline of ECOWAS' Regional Influence

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S*ummary*

ECOWAS took a tough stance against coups in West African nations, imposing sanctions and threatening military action to restore the civilian governments. These steps have had unintended consequence. They have not only strengthened the position of the juntas but have inflicted significant hardships on the civilian population of these countries.

The fissures within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have widened significantly. This was evidenced on 28 January 2024 when the military-led governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger declared their departure from ECOWAS.¹ The sequence of recent coups began in Mali, where rebellious military forces seized control in 2020 and 2021. Burkina Faso experienced a parallel series of military takeovers in 2022. The unexpected coup in July 2023 within Niger, an important security ally in the West African region, caught many by surprise. ECOWAS took a tough stance against these coups, hitting the countries with sanctions and threatening military action to restore civilian governments. In retaliation, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger joined forces in a defence pact in September 2023. This agreement, called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), commits these Sahel nations to help each other militarily if any of them are attacked.²

Can AES replace ECOWAS?

The Alliance of Sahel States is now aiming to achieve economic integration among its members. These three countries have a large population base, accounting for 16 per cent of West Africa's total. However, their combined contribution to the regional economy is lower, at 7 per cent of the GDP. Interestingly, despite significant shifts in West African trade patterns over the past two decades, the level of trade between countries within the region has remained fairly constant. Currently, intraregional trade constitutes roughly 12 per cent of imports and 14 per cent of exports.³

Among West African economies, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo exhibit a higher proportion of intraregional trade compared to others. This phenomenon is partly due to transit trade activities with landlocked nations such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Niger, in particular, enjoys a substantial 51 per cent share of intraregional exports, attributed partially to transit trade with Burkina Faso and Mali, as well as agricultural exports to Nigeria. Additionally, Mali serves as a hub for transit commerce activities connecting Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.⁴

The discernible trend in intraregional trade within West Africa highlights the significant advantages associated with reducing transit trade costs. This is particularly crucial for landlocked economies such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger,

¹ Boureima Balima and Tiemoko Diallo, [“Three West African Junta-led States Quit ECOWAS Regional Block”](#), *Reuters*, 28 January 2024.

² [“Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso Establish Sahel Security Alliance”](#), Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 16 September 2023.

³ [“A Current Challenge to Regional Integration in West Africa”](#), Monthly Briefing, World Economic Situation and Prospects, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 28 February 2024.

⁴ Ibid.

where a substantial dependence on intraregional trade exists. It is important to note that the exit of these countries from the ECOWAS and the reintroduction of tariff barriers is expected to exert a more pronounced impact on Sahelian countries compared to other parts of the region.

Amidst the current challenges facing West Africa, there are significant opportunities for integration, particularly for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the region, including Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The support of both regional and international partners, including the wider international community, is crucial to ensure these countries remain within the ECOWAS rather than shifting resources to alternative organisation like the newly formed AES. Despite facing political and security challenges, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have shown resilience and maintained commendable economic growth.

According to the latest estimates from the IMF's World Economic Outlook report, the trio outperformed the average growth for sub-Saharan Africa. According to IMF projections, Burkina Faso is expected to grow by 4.1 per cent in 2024. For Mali, the IMF projects a growth rate of 4.8 per cent in 2024. In Niger, IMF projections are at 11.1 per cent for 2024.⁵

To a large extent, these three countries are dependent on regional trade, with Morocco having lately introduced new projects. In addition to being described as Morocco's gateway to Africa and the Americas, this region is also portrayed as a connection between the Sahel region of Africa and the Atlantic.⁶ The Trans-African gas pipeline between Morocco and Nigeria is one example of Morocco's efforts at improving connectivity. This project will be beneficial to West Africa. In light of the current uncertainty surrounding the Trans-Saharan pipeline, Nigeria is redirecting its attention to the Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline, which could potentially transport 3 billion cubic feet of gas each day.⁷

Morocco’s initiatives extend access to its road, port and rail infrastructure for landlocked Sahel nations. Leveraging Morocco's strategic Atlantic coast position offers long-term solutions for these countries. However, given that regional energy connectivity initiatives with Morocco are still in their infancy, re-joining ECOWAS is a better proposition for these West African nations due to the organisation’s historical role in regional integration and absence of viable alternatives.

⁵ World Economic Outlook, “[Navigating Global Divergences](#)”, IMF Report, October 2023.

⁶ “[Full Speech of King Mohammed VI on 48th Anniversary of the Green March](#)”, *Morocco World News*, 6 November 2023.

⁷ Jihane Rahhou, “[Nigeria Looks to Reroute Gas Supply to Europe Through Morocco after Niger Crisis](#)”, *Morocco World News*, 7 February 2024.

West African Geopolitics

West African nations such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have exhibited growing dissatisfaction with French influence in the region. This sentiment has manifested in measures aimed at restricting the presence of French troops, businesses and diplomats. These actions stem from perceptions that France has engaged in intrusive internal politics, exploited unequal economic partnerships, and ineffectively combatted the spread of Islamic insurgencies in the Sahel region.⁸

Further compounding these tensions, economic sanctions imposed by the ECOWAS have strained relations between the new regimes and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). Notably, some nations view decoupling from the CFA franc as an opportunity to transcend historical barriers to economic growth and development. The currency's role in French-speaking Africa has long been a source of heated debate, with its stability lauded by proponents and its colonial legacy criticised by detractors.⁹

Furthermore, these nations have demonstrated increased openness towards Russia, particularly in areas of internal security and resource extraction. This strategic shift can be interpreted as a rejection of French influence, potentially reflecting a perception that antipathy towards France equates to affinity for Russia.

The ongoing power struggle between Russia and Western nations extends to West Africa, creating a new area of tension. This region has become a secondary battleground, with each side supporting opposing powers in a scenario reminiscent of the Cold War. Following the second military coup in May 2021, Goïta and the ruling colonels in Bamako have distanced themselves from France and aligned with Russia, receiving support in the form of Wagner mercenaries and military supplies. After the death of Prigozhin, the Wagner unit has been renamed as Africa Corps by Moscow and brought under Russia's Defence Ministry.¹⁰ Mali boasts of abundant natural resources ranging from timber and gold to uranium and lithium, which hold both economic and strategic significance. Similarly, Traoré's junta in Burkina Faso and Tiani's regime in Niger appear to be on parallel political paths, both marked by coups and alignment with Russia.

Russia initiated its soft power charm offensive in early 2022, and its influence has notably expanded since the Russia–Africa summit held in Saint Petersburg in July 2023. During this summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged support to

⁸ Howard W. French, [“The End of Françafrique?”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2024.

⁹ Joe Bavier and Boureima Balima, [“For West African Juntas, CFA Franc Pits Sovereignty Against Expediency”](#), *Reuters*, 13 February 2024.

¹⁰ Joe Inwood and Jake Tacchi, [“Wagner in Africa: How the Russian Mercenary Group Has Rebranded”](#), *BBC*, 20 February 2024.

Burkina Faso, fulfilling this promise on 26 January 2024 with a donation of 25,000 tonnes of wheat. In November 2023, the first group of Russian soldiers arrived in Burkina Faso's capital, followed by around 100 Russian military advisers several months later.¹¹

With respect to the US, it has traditionally maintained close ties with West African nations. While the US generally favours cooperation with democratic governments, the looming threat posed by Islamic insurgents may necessitate engagement with less democratic regimes. With the escalation of Islamic insurgencies and the influence of groups like Wagner, the United States finds itself compelled to explore alternative strategies.¹²

To address the mounting instability in West Africa, the US has embarked on an active engagement strategy. This approach involves both empowering the African Union (AU) and providing support to Western military contractors. A significant milestone was reached in December 2023 with the passage of a UN Security Council resolution, which authorised UN funding for AU-led peace support operations, marking a crucial step forward in addressing the region's challenges.¹³

Despite acknowledging formidable obstacles such as host nation cooperation and the presence of actors like Wagner, there is a clear recognition of the urgent need for innovative approaches to peacekeeping. Moreover, there is a concerted emphasis on bolstering support for the AU, as evidenced by a recent Security Council resolution enabling AU-led peace support operations to secure 75 per cent of their funding from UN-assessed contributions.¹⁴ However, uncertainties persist regarding the remaining funding and the AU's capacity for intervention, indicating that further efforts and collaborations will be essential in navigating the complex landscape of West African instability.

The US is grappling with a complex geopolitical landscape as it navigates not only tensions with Russia but also a rapidly evolving situation in West Africa, where China's presence is on the rise. China's growing presence in the region has emerged as a significant challenge, highlighted by the overlapping diplomatic visits in January by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.¹⁵

¹¹ Justin Yarga, [“Russia’s African Lab’: How Putin Won Over Burkina Faso After French Adieu”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 15 March 2024.

¹² Rachel Chason and Michael Birnbaum, [“U.S. Struggles for Influence in West Africa as Military Juntas Rise”](#), *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2024.

¹³ Julian Pecquet, [“US Touts Alternatives to Russia’s Wagner for Security”](#), *The Africa Report*, 1 February 2024.

¹⁴ [“The Security Council Agrees to Consider Funding AU Peace Operations”](#), International Crisis Group, 15 February 2024.

¹⁵ Xu Yelu, [“Blinken Kicks Off Africa Trip, But US 'May Be Too Overwhelmed With Crises' to Stabilize West Africa”](#), *Global Times*, 22 January 2024.

While China's significant economic investments in West Africa are undeniable, a closer look reveals a more concerning trend. Their strategic investments in coastal ports like Kribi (Cameroon), Lekki (Nigeria) and Lome (Togo) raise suspicions about potential military ambitions. A foothold in the Gulf of Guinea would grant the Chinese military access to the Atlantic Ocean, allowing them to project power globally and conduct longer-range missions.¹⁶ Failing to address China's growing influence in West Africa could lead to a significant strategic disadvantage to the US in the future.

China's economic engagement in West Africa extends far beyond the coastal nations. They have actively invested in landlocked Sahel countries like Mali (lithium), Burkina Faso (military ties) and Niger (oil and uranium). While these investments contribute to the region's economic development, they also serve a deeper purpose. China's extensive economic ties create leverage and potentially pave the way for future military activities.¹⁷

Burkina Faso's decision to shift its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China serves as a clear illustration of this strategy, likely driven by economic incentives and regional pressure. Additionally, China's offer of military training to Burkina Faso suggests a burgeoning security partnership. The United States needs to be wary of China's dominance in West Africa's economic landscape. While economic development is crucial for the region, China's motives may extend beyond simple trade. To counter China's influence, the US must offer compelling economic and security partnerships that cater to the specific needs of West African nations. Despite China's significant economic resources, concerns persist regarding debt and resource extraction. In contrast, the US approach emphasises governance and targeted sectors but has a smaller economic footprint in the region.

Way Forward

The ECOWAS has encountered significant challenges in its efforts to address the recent spate of military coups that have destabilised the region. Their initial strategy of imposing harsh economic sanctions on the juntas that seized power has proven to be ineffective, and may have even had the opposite result. Instead of pressuring the military leaders to relinquish control and return to civilian rule, the sanctions have inflicted significant hardship on the civilian population of these countries. This unintended consequence has, in some cases, even served to strengthen the position

¹⁶ Lea Thome, “[China Continues Its Search for a Maritime Military Presence in West Africa](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 20 February 2024.

¹⁷ Olayinka Ajala, “[Scramble for the Sahel – Why France, Russia, China and the United States are Interested in the Region](#)”, *The Conversation*, 8 January 2024.

of the juntas, as public frustration has been directed towards ECOWAS rather than the military rulers.

Historically, ECOWAS has benefitted from the strong leadership of Nigeria. Nigeria's sheer size and economic clout have traditionally positioned it as a dominant force within the organisation. However, recent times have witnessed a decline in Nigeria's influence in the regional sphere. This waning leadership has cast a shadow over ECOWAS's ability to function effectively. The ongoing political turmoil in Senegal under President Macky Sall serves as a stark illustration of this challenge.¹⁸

Despite mounting evidence of democratic regression and potential human rights violations, ECOWAS has remained soft on this issue. This lack of action has ignited criticism from those who believe ECOWAS is prioritising the interests of powerful figures within the region over its core principles of promoting democracy and upholding human rights. It reflects ECOWAS's selective approach which undermines its credibility and weakens its ability to foster regional stability.

Despite the lifting of sanctions by ECOWAS in February 2024, the situation in the affected countries is unlikely to change dramatically.¹⁹ The primary motivation behind this move appears to be the preservation of ECOWAS's internal unity and the facilitation of free movement within the bloc for its citizens. Notably, ECOWAS was unable to secure the release of Niger's deposed president as a precondition for lifting sanctions, further highlighting the organisation's weakened position on the regional stage. Although negotiations are ongoing, significant disagreements persist.

This episode raises several red flags. ECOWAS's initial strategy of imposing harsh sanctions backfired spectacularly, and their current actions seem primarily driven by self-preservation rather than upholding democratic principles. While maintaining a commitment to democracy remains paramount for ECOWAS, it is imperative for the organisation to address the accusations of applying double standards when dealing with its own member states.

The decision by the Niger junta to terminate military cooperation with the US²⁰ underscores a broader trend among African junta governments prioritising power retention over genuine security concerns. By citing grievances such as perceived disrespect and protocol breaches, the junta seeks to assert its independence in security partnerships. However, this move raises questions about the junta's

¹⁸ [“ECOWAS Holds Emergency Session Over Senegal Crisis and Member Exits”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 8 February 2024.

¹⁹ Chinedu Asadu, [“West Africa Bloc Lifts Coup Sanctions on Niger in a New Push for Dialogue to Resolve Tensions”](#), Associated Press, 24 February 2024.

²⁰ [“Niger Junta Repudiates Deal Allowing US Military Bases On Its Soil”](#), *The Guardian*, 17 March 2024.

sincerity in combatting terrorism, particularly given the historical reliance on external forces, such as US, French and ECOWAS troops, to address such threats effectively.

The junta's emphasis on choosing partners who will "truly fight" terrorism is ironic, considering the region's continued struggle against extremist groups despite military interventions. The deteriorating security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso, despite increased military presence, highlights the limitations of purely military approaches to counterterrorism. Ultimately, the junta's decision reflects a broader challenge in navigating the complex dynamics of security cooperation while addressing the root causes of extremism in the region.

There is a pressing need for the US and European nations to ensure unwavering consistency in their commitment to upholding democratic principles in their interactions with African countries. The legacy of a double standard approach has had a negative impact during the Cold War. A more sustainable path forward for US engagement in Africa would be to forge strategic partnerships with nations demonstrably committed to democratic ideals. This strategy would better serve both American interests and values. US policymakers must prioritise achieving long-term stability and nurturing democratic governance in Africa, even when these goals appear to contradict short-term strategic objectives.

Although the future effectiveness of the ECOWAS and its ability to influence events in West Africa remain uncertain, the organisation continues to be a significant player in the region's political and economic landscape.

Conclusion

The ECOWAS stands out as a surprising example of democratic progress in Africa. While the region faces its share of political and security challenges, it has made significant strides compared to other parts of the continent. One of the key strengths of ECOWAS is its commitment to presidential term limits. Unlike many other African nations where leaders can hold onto power for decades, ECOWAS member states like Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone have generally respected these limits. Additionally, the region boasts a history of successful democratic transitions of power, with elections considered more transparent than in many other parts of Africa. However, ECOWAS is not without its challenges. The debate surrounding third terms for political leaders highlights the need for continued progress towards a more robust democratic system.

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