

From the Mano River to the Sahel: A Critical Appraisal of the ECOWAS Approach to the Post-Coup Crisis in Niger (2023)

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Abstract

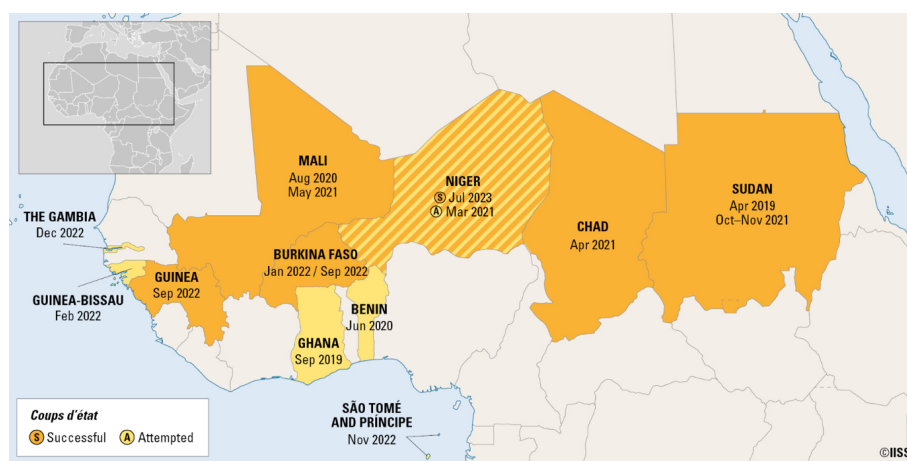
The July 2023 military coup in Niger, led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani, threatened West Africa's democratic progress. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and international partners mobilized to restore constitutional order through diplomatic pressure, dialogue, and coercive measures like sanctions and asset freezes. However, these harsh measures inadvertently harmed civilians more than coup leaders, sparking economic and political backlashes, including the "Sahel exit" of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali from ECOWAS. This revealed that initial hardline reactions, while understandable, are insufficient justification for invading a sovereign state. ECOWAS faced challenges balancing condemnation of coups with minimizing collateral damage. Mistakes like ineffective ultimatums and delayed interventions hindered the response. The unintended consequences underscored the need to consider the legal and moral implications of coercive tools before applying them. A policy recalibration is necessary to balance the interests of the Sahelian Confederacy and ECOWAS, fostering regional security and economic integration (ICG, 2023). The ECOWAS protocols on democracy and governance should be reviewed to ensure fair application of sanctions and adherence to core values. A better approach is addressing coup causes, managing existential threats, preventing power entrenchment, and avoiding tacit acceptance of unconstitutional changes. It is crucial to restore trust with the Sahelian Confederacy and encourage regional reintegration. ECOWAS must shift from counterproductive selective threats of force to a more nuanced, cooperative strategy that upholds democratic norms while mitigating domestic and regional instability.

Keywords: Coup, regional intervention, decision-making, use of force, strategy, conflict resolution.

1.0 Introduction

In July 2023, a group of military officers led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani overthrew Niger's government. The coup d'état on 26 July 2023 sent shockwaves through coup-plagued West Africa and posed a potential challenge to stability in the region. Among others, the "military grievance" coup was predicated on President Mohamed Bazoum's "sacking" of Gen Salifou Mody (AC, Vol. 64 No 16, 3 Aug 2023). Since independence in 1960, Niger has experienced six coups—1974, 1987, 1996, 1999, 2010 and 2023, aside from three attempted coups in 1996, 2010 and 2021. West Africa's third wave of new coup d'états, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger (Figure 1), threatens the third wave of democratisation (Huntington, 1991) in the sub-region, undermining the implementation of the 1999 Mechanism. The underlying cause of all these coups is anger against the governments vis-à-vis their inability to end the rebel insurrections, among others (Bøås, 2019).

Figure 1: West African/Africa's Coup Belt, 2019-Present



Source: IISS, (Aug. 2023)

In response to this crisis, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and various international organisations, including the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and the broader

global community, mobilised mediation efforts to address the situation and restore constitutional order in Niger. ECOWAS went a step further to swiftly impose and implement a range of sanctions against Niger, marking it the strictest measures ever imposed on an errant member state (Brooke-Holland, 2023; Obasi, 2023). This response reflected ECOWAS's long-standing engagement with regional security challenges, as Adebajo and Rashid (2020) detailed in their comprehensive analysis of West Africa's security landscape. Led by Nigeria, the bloc closed all borders with Niger, suspended financial transactions, and froze the country's assets in external banks. ECOWAS also issued an ultimatum to the junta: restore constitutional order and reinstate the ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, within one week or face further consequences, including military intervention (BBC, 11 Aug 2023; France 24, 7 Aug 2023).

While these sanctions sent a strong signal of disapproval regarding coups, they have had unintended consequences. The severe hardship caused in Niger has hurt civilians more than anyone else, and the measures have backfired economically and politically. A policy recalibration is necessary to serve the interests of both Niger and Nigeria, fostering security and economic benefits throughout the region (ICG, 5 Dec 2023).

It is the considered opinion that the case of Niger's coup and the whole narrative of ECOWAS' approach to the crisis is crucially essential for the cohesion of the Community. It is evident from the handling of the crisis, which was compounded by ECOWAS' rash decision to impose sanctions and conduct a military invasion of Niger, based on a template crafted after the Mano River crisis in the 1990s and onward, is creating far-reaching consequences for regional and international stability, and for deepening democratic norms and preventing coup contagion (Obi, 2009).

The paper starts with ECOWAS's decision-making on the incidence of coups in some Sahel countries. This provides the context for an analysis of the ECOWAS Niger Strategy 2023 that supposedly informed the approaches by ECOWAS and other key stakeholders. The paper ends with a discussion of the challenges of ECOWAS' strategic approach to the Niger crisis and mistakes, especially if contrasted with the

European Union (EU) model. The Author posits in the analysis of the challenges and mistakes that ECOWAS is being hamstrung by opting to use force to restore democracy in countries where constitutional order is disturbed by military coups. However, it pays scant attention to the equally destabilising syndrome of civilian unconstitutional changes of government (Zounmenou & Louaholds, 2011). This paper examines ECOWAS's approach to the Niger crisis through the lens of regional peacebuilding efforts. As Lemay-Hebert and Toupin (2011) argue in their comprehensive review of peacebuilding approaches, understanding the diverse strategies and practices in conflict resolution is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of regional interventions.

This study employed qualitative content analysis to examine relevant secondary source materials purposively selected based on their topical relevance and potential to yield rich insights into the topic's dimensions. The qualitative content analysis allowed for a nuanced examination of the manifest and latent content within the secondary source materials, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the research topic.

2.0 ECOWAS Decision-Making on the Sahel Insecurities in Niger

Decision-making and strategy development in ECOWAS were brought into sharp focus by the scepticism and criticism about the Community's approach to instability in the Sahel since 2012 and the incidence of coups since 2020, particularly the coup in Niger in 2023. As Stern and Druckman (2000) note in their post-Cold War conflict resolution analysis, regional organisations face unique challenges in addressing complex security issues. ECOWAS has been criticised for its perceived ineffectiveness in addressing the root causes of instability in the Sahel region, especially in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It has also been accused of lacking a coherent and comprehensive strategy to deal with the complex challenges of terrorism, political instability, and governance issues in a region that is packed with an assortment of supranational security actors—UN, AU, and ECOWAS, as well as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the G5 Sahel, the Accra Initiative (2017) and African and other external actors, among others (Aubyn, 2023; Bøås, 2019).

ECOWAS' response to these coups has been seen as inconsistent and weak, as it has ignored unconstitutional government changes by some civilian authorities and other military coups (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015). The handling of a "bloodless" coup in Niger in 2023 has been criticised for the coercive tools deployed, notably the hasty raft of stringent, targeted and indiscriminate sanctions even before the expiry of the high-handed questionable threat of the use of force to restore democracy under the perception of external pressure from powerful states (Sow, 9 Aug 2023; Obasi, 5 Dec 2023; Raube, 16 Aug 2023). As Buchan and Tsagourias (2023) have averred, ECOWAS should consider itself bound by the customary law prohibition of the threat or use of force as a fundamental principle of international law under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Newman (2023) has inferred that despite Bazoum's op-ed (WP, 3 Aug 2023) asking for international support to end the coup, at best, an invitation to use force in Niger to restore democratic authority, the CNSP was in "effective control" and entitled to international recognition under international law.

Although reminiscent of the Liberian intervention, ECOWAS subsequently flip-flopped on some actions in the mishandling and singling out of the Sahelian states for mistreatment (Aning, 1999). This narrative influenced the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 under a mutual defence agreement, the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The Liberian intervention, extensively analysed by Aboagye and Bah (2004, 2005, 2007), provides crucial insights into ECOWAS's early approaches to regional crises. Having announced their "Sahel exit" from ECOWAS in late January 2024, the Alliance revised its Charter in February 2024 to pave the way for a draft Treaty on the Confederation of Sahel States in May 2024, building on ideas initiated as far back as 1970 (Bassou, 2024). While ECOWAS appeared to have applied the relevant lessons and good practices from the Liberian civil war(s) with regard to Guinea-Bissau (1999) and the Gambia (2016-17), it also muddled its approach to coups, mainly in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (2023) (Obi, 2009).

Therefore, these narratives have eroded confidence in ECOWAS' ability to uphold democratic principles and ensure regional stability. It adds to

the widespread belief that despite the pronouncement of the aspirational ECOWAS Vision 2050 (2022) aiming to achieve “ECOWAS of the Peoples: Peace and Prosperity for All”, the Organisation needs to reassess its decision-making processes and strategies to address the root causes of the increasingly complex security situation and instability in the area and uphold democratic principles (Mathur, 2024). Failure to do so risks undermining ECOWAS’ credibility and effectiveness in promoting peace and stability in West Africa.

3.0 Key Considerations and Assumptions

3.1 ECOWAS faced a significant challenge with the July 2023 coup in Niger. In formulating its strategy, ECOWAS likely considered:

3.1.1 Preserving Constitutional Order and Democracy

ECOWAS prioritised restoring the democratically elected government, adhering to its 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (ECOWAS Protocol, A/SP1/12/01). The coup was seen as part of a concerning ‘putschist-populist’ trend threatening regional democratic progress (Aubyn, 2023; AJ, 1 Aug 2023).

3.1.2 Potential Resistance, Regional Stability

ECOWAS anticipated resistance from the military junta and regional powers like Burkina Faso and Mali. Given existing security challenges, the coup’s impact on Sahel stability was a key concern (Bøås, 2019). Theoretically, ECOWAS would have aimed to resolve the situation swiftly through non-violent means to prevent further insecurity.

3.1.3 Public Sentiment and Economic Considerations

Given Niger’s membership of ECOWAS, the humanitarian and economic impact of sanctions on Niger’s population was considered, along with potential disruptions to regional trade and economic cooperation (WFP/WB, 11 Oct 2023; Lavergne, 1997).

3.1.4 External Actors' Influence

The involvement of external powers like France, Russia, or China would have been factored into the strategy (Yabi, 2023), influenced by widespread claims that external forces, such as Russia, were deliberately fomenting civil unrest and geopolitical tensions in the region between external actors.

3.1.5 Pacific Measures vs. Coercive Tools

ECOWAS likely aimed to balance diplomatic efforts with potential sanctions and military intervention, weighing their feasibility and consequences (Sow, 2023; Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015). However, ECOWAS has a history of imposing sanctions and authorising military interventions to restore constitutional order in member states.

3.1.6 Sovereignty and International Support

While upholding democratic principles, ECOWAS would have considered respecting national sovereignty and seeking support from organisations like the AU and UN (van Walraven, 1999; Obasi, 2023).

3.2 Key Objectives of the Strategy

Lemay-Hebert and Toupin (2011) highlight the importance of multi-faceted strategies addressing immediate security concerns and long-term stability, which is evident in ECOWAS' focus on restoring constitutional order, regional stability, and diplomatic engagement. The actual strategy of ECOWAS would have been influenced by a range of factors: the Community's decision-making process and internal political dynamics, including leadership styles, Nigeria's hegemonic status and stance, domestic politics of member states, and the specific circumstances and developments surrounding the coup in Niger (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015, pp. 86–89). ECOWAS' strategy in Niger aimed to

3.2.1 Restore Constitutional Democratic Order

ECOWAS imposed sanctions and gave an ultimatum to reinstate President Bazoum. The junta rejected the three-year transition plan,

intent on achieving a short transition (BBC, 11 Aug 2023; AJ, 20 Aug 2023).

3.2.2 Ensure Regional Stability

Despite its public rhetoric, the Organisation would have sought to contain potential spill over effects and uphold democratic principles (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015).

3.2.3 Engage in Diplomacy

ECOWAS pursued diplomatic initiatives while considering targeted sanctions against the junta leaders (Mathur, 2024; Obasi, 2023). However, it needed to ensure its sanctions targeted only the military junta leaders and their allies. ECOWAS announced the activation of its “standby force”, warning the junta that “no option is off the table, including the use of force as a last resort” (France 24, 7 Aug 2023). However, the excessive sabre-rattling might have undermined the junta’s trust in ECOWAS (Sow, 2023) and was likely seen as undesirable because of the risks involved.

3.2.4 Negotiate Foreign Interests

Given the complex geopolitical situation, ECOWAS likely aimed to address and negotiate foreign interests in Niger (Yabi, 2023).

3.2.5 Facilitating Elections

The ultimate goal would have been to create conditions for new elections without the former president’s participation (Aubyn, 2023).

3.2.6 The Strategy

The strategy employed would have depended on the evolving situation and the various stakeholders’ reactions (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023), requiring determination, caution, and discretion due to potential unintended consequences.

ECOWAS adopted a multi-pronged approach combining diplomacy and the threat of force (Obasi, 2023).

3.3.1 Imposition of Sanctions

ECOWAS implemented harsh economic and financial sanctions, including:

- Border closures and airspace restrictions
- Suspension of commercial and financial transactions
- Freezing of assets in ECOWAS Central Banks
- Suspension of Niger from financial assistance (BBC, 11 Aug 2023; VOA, 24 Feb 2024; AJ, 1 Aug 2023)

3.3.2 Threat of Military Intervention

ECOWAS activated its “standby force” and warned that “no option is off the table” (AJ, 1 Aug 2023). However, this sabre-rattling might have undermined the junta’s trust in ECOWAS (Sow, 2023).

3.3.3 Diplomatic Initiatives

ECOWAS suspended Niger from the regional bloc and demanded the restoration of constitutional order and the release of the ousted president. Despite the threat of force, diplomatic efforts continued slowly (Mathur, 2024). The military junta resisted, declaring a new government in Niger and insisting the ousted president would be prosecuted for “high treason” (Reuters, 15 Aug 2023).

4.0 Approaches by ECOWAS and Other Key Stakeholders

Economic Community of West African States

Aubyn (2023) saw the emergence of ‘putschist-populist’ politics as a threat to democratic progress in West Africa. ECOWAS adopted a firm stance against the coup, imposing strict financial sanctions on Niger. The First Extraordinary Summit (30 Jul 2023) and Second Extraordinary Summit (10 Aug 2023) condemned the putsch and demanded the restoration of democracy, return to constitutional order, and release of President Bazoum. However, ECOWAS did not exhaust all diplomatic avenues before applying sanctions (ECOWAS 2023a, ECOWAS 2023b).

Buchan and Tzagourias (2023) argue that the sanctions negatively impacted civilians and border communities. Despite these measures, the Tchiani-led military junta refused to hand over power or release Bazoum. On 10 December, ECOWAS set up a committee to negotiate with the junta for a return to civilian rule (DW, 22 Aug 2023; Africa News, 10 Dec 2023; VOA, 8 Aug 2023; VOA, 24 Feb 2024).

ECOWAS engaged in dialogue with both coup leaders and the ousted President, exploring peaceful solutions (Buchan and Tzagourias, 2023). The junta proposed a three-year transition to civilian rule, which ECOWAS rejected. On 10 August 2024, as the CNSP formed a 21-member cabinet, ECOWAS directed the immediate activation of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ECOWAS-ESF) to restore constitutional order (Mathur, 2024; AJ, 1 Aug 2023; AJ, 8 Aug 2023; Xinhua, 10 Aug 2023; ECOWAS 2023b; BBC, 11 Aug 2023; AP, 24 Aug 2023; ECOWAS 23c; Africanews, 7 Dec 2023).

Regarding intervention, several countries expressed reservations:

- Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, and Algeria opposed the intervention
- Algeria warned it could “ignite the whole Sahel region” (Reuters, 15 Aug 2023).
- Togo’s leader reportedly challenged sanctions and opposed force
- Senegal, Benin, and Ivory Coast supported intervention if approved by ECOWAS (TRT World, 2023; Africanews, 5 Aug 2023; AA, 11 Aug 2023).

Nigeria’s President Bola Tinubu, holding ECOWAS’ rotating presidency, was particularly aggressive about invading Niger. He requested “military build-up and deployment of personnel for military intervention.” However, the Nigerian Senate opposed the president’s request for mobilisation (AR, 4 Aug 2023; AJ, 4 Aug 2023; BBC, 7 Aug 2023).

Throughout the saga, Abdel-Fatau Musah, ECOWAS chief of political affairs, peace and security, emphasised the military option as a last resort. Even when ECOWAS reached an impasse in late 2023, the bloc

maintained its stance against coup leaders (AR, 16 Aug 2023; AJ, 19 Aug 2023; AJ, 20 Aug 2023; Sahara, 21 Aug 2023; The Conversation, 4 Sep 2023; Africanews, 7 Nov 2023; AR, 6 Dec 2023; Africanews, 7 Dec 2023).

African Union Response

The AU condemned the coup and called for the restoration of constitutional order. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) held an emergency meeting to explore mediation options. The PSC demanded that military personnel return to their barracks and restore constitutional authority (AU, 2023a), suspending Niger with immediate effect (AJ, 22 Aug 2023).

In its Communiqué after the 1168th meeting (AU, 2023b), the AU PSC endorsed sanctions but did not support ECOWAS' strategy of using force. It urged General Tchiani to respect the rule of law and democratic principles. The AU suspended Niger pending the return to civilian rule and threatened further sanctions if coup leaders refused to comply. The AU Commission was asked to assess the deployment's economic, social, and security implications.

United Nations Response

The UN Secretary-General condemned the coup and called for a peaceful resolution through dialogue and mediation (UN, 2023a). The UN Security Council strongly condemned the unconstitutional change of government and called for the immediate release of the elected president (UN, 2023b). Ambassador Leonardo Santos Simão was appointed as a special envoy to Niger to assess the situation and engage with all parties.

International Community Responses

The EU suspended activities with Niger, including financial assistance and cooperation, but stated there was still room for mediation. Algeria announced that Niger's military leaders had accepted Algerian mediation and a six-month transition plan (Euronews, 8 Aug 2023; France 24, 2 Oct 2023).

The coup had significant international implications, particularly involving Russia, the United States, and France (Yabi, 2023).

Russia's Involvement:

- Increased pro-Russian sentiment in Niger after the coup
- Russian flags appeared at anti-Western protests
- Russia runs disinformation campaigns in Africa, including Niger
- Niger's military rulers sought help from the Wagner Group
- Russia delivered anti-aircraft defence systems and military instructors to Niger in April 2024 (BBC, 31 Jul 2023; DW, 8 Oct 2023; AJ, 5 Aug 2023; CNN, 12 Apr 2024).

US Response (Yabi, 2023; The Conversation, 8 Jan 2024):

- Closely monitored the crisis due to US military bases in Niger
- Delayed labelling the takeover a coup to maintain strategic cooperation
- Acting Deputy US Secretary of State Victoria Nuland visited Niamey to express concern
- In March 2024, Niger revoked its military accord with the US
- Joint Disengagement Commission formed to coordinate US forces' withdrawal (CNN, 16 Mar 2024; US DOD, 19 Mar 2024)
- Negotiations on the withdrawal of US forces are ongoing before a mid-September 2024 deadline (AP News, 25 Apr 2024; VOA, 14 Jun 2024)

France's Situation:

- Had 1,500 troops in Niger
- Accused by the junta of trying to destabilise the country
- Given 30 days to vacate Niger after ECOWAS deadline expired
- Military cooperation agreements with France revoked amid anti-French sentiment (DW, 8 Oct 2023; BBC, 31 Jul 2023).

The coup and international responses have significantly impacted regional geopolitical dynamics, with the potential for further international involvement.

Challenges and Fundamental Mistakes

Niger's 2023 coup d'état presented significant challenges for ECOWAS in resolving the crisis. Some of the critical challenges were as follows.

Challenges

The strategy faced hurdles:

- Resistance from the military junta, which declared a new government and threatened to prosecute the ousted president (Reuters, 15 Aug 2023).
- Unintended consequences of sanctions on the Nigerien population
- Limited time for mediation to gain traction
- Negative perception of the threat to use forceThe ECOWAS approach was criticised for its short mediation window and the hasty threat of force, which undermined the credibility of a negotiated solution (Sow, 2023). The strategy required a delicate balance of determination, caution, and discretion due to potential unintended consequences (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023).

ECOWAS' response reflects broader trends in peacebuilding approaches that Lemay-Hebert and Toupin (2011) note must address both immediate security concerns and long-term stability. This was evident in ECOWAS' focus on restoring constitutional order, ensuring regional stability, and engaging in diplomatic efforts while maintaining the threat of more forceful measures.

The Organisation's strategy highlights the complexities of regional intervention in political crises, including:

- Tension between upholding democratic principles and respecting national sovereignty
- Challenges of imposing effective sanctions without causing undue harm to civilians
- Navigating complex international interests

However, it is difficult to agree with the Community that finding a negotiated solution through mediation was its preferred strategic path (Sow, 2023).

Internal Divisions and Lack of Consensus on a Coordinated Regional Response

ECOWAS's response revealed internal divisions, with an unusual north-south dynamic between wealthier coastal economies and landlocked, military-led counterparts. Member states had differing views on how to respond, with some favouring potential military intervention while others preferred dialogue and diplomacy (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015).

Domestic political pressures, including opposition groups and public opinion, influenced member states' positions. External actors like France, the UK, and the US also played roles in the crisis. A unified stance proved difficult to achieve, potentially contributing to problematic decisions and challenges in responding to the coup (Mathur, 2024).

Lack of Mediation Traction and Complexities of a Transition

ECOWAS' sabre-rattling appears to have prompted non-cooperation from the CNSP, leading to failed mediation attempts. These included:

- Chad's President Mahamat Déby's visits to Niamey on 31 July 2023
- An ECOWAS delegation unable to meet junta leaders on 4 August
- A joint ECOWAS, AU, and UN mission rebuffed on 8 August
- Tchiani meeting Nigerian Muslim clerics on 12 August

Despite ECOWAS' warnings, the coup leaders rebuffed diplomatic overtures from various international actors. Navigating the balance between restoring constitutional order and ensuring stability proved challenging, with the junta's reluctance complicating transition efforts. ECOWAS should have anticipated this eventuality and prepared more effective alternative strategies (Aubyn, 2023; Mathur, Feb 2024; Sow, 9 Aug 2023; Obasi, 5 Dec 2023).

Lack of Swift Military Intervention and Capacity Limitations

Although ECOWAS warned of possible military intervention, no decisive action was taken. The absence of a clear timeline or concrete

steps, including AU PSC and UNSC concurrence, raised questions about ECOWAS's resolve and ability to enforce its demands (BBC, 11 Aug 2023). By February 2024, when some sanctions were lifted, military intervention seemed unlikely (VOA, 24 Feb 2024). ECOWAS' limited resources and logistical capabilities could have constrained its ability to effectively implement and sustain military or economic interventions (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015).

Military Junta's Resilient Reluctance

The military junta's reluctance to cede power prolonged the transition process and created uncertainties about Niger's political future and ECOWAS mediation efforts. On 19/20 August 2023, the CNSP proposed a three-year transition of power, warning that any attack would "not be a walk in the park" (AJ, 20 Aug 2023). ECOWAS rejected this offer but struggled to break the stalemate.

The coup leaders successfully portrayed their actions as a response to insecurity, potentially undermining ECOWAS's position (Bøås, 2019). ECOWAS failed to counter legitimacy concerns among Niger's population and other ECOWAS member states. Although **West Africa's top court ruled the junta unconstitutional and rejected its request to lift the coup-related sanctions imposed by ECOWAS, the CNSP remained defiant** (Africa News, 7 Dec 2023). Coincidentally, this played out to be a hypothetical resilience scenario.

Risk and Threat of Violent Regional Conflict

The threat of military intervention raised concerns about potential clashes with military governments in Mali and Burkina Faso, who threatened to consider any armed intervention as an attack against them (DW, 22 Aug 2023). This risked further destabilization in an already fragile region grappling with terrorism and insecurity (Sow, 2023).

External Influence

The involvement of external powers, such as Russia and Western nations, complicated ECOWAS's efforts as these actors pursued their

own interests and agendas (Yabi, 2023). Their involvement added a layer of geopolitical complexity to the situation.

Effectiveness of Sanctions and Unintended Economic and Political Consequences

The effectiveness of ECOWAS sanctions in influencing coup leaders' behaviour remained uncertain (Obasi, 2023). While sending a strong signal against coups, the sanctions had unintended consequences:

- Severe hardship in Niger, affecting civilians and disrupting livelihoods
- Disruption of the cross-border economy along the Nigeria-Niger border
- Jeopardising regional trade initiatives like rail and gas projects
- Backfiring on Nigeria, threatening bilateral security cooperation (WFP/WB, 11 Oct 2023; VOA, 24 Feb 2024)

Balancing the impact on civilians while pressuring the junta proved challenging due to the hasty imposition of sanctions without considering their repercussions (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023).

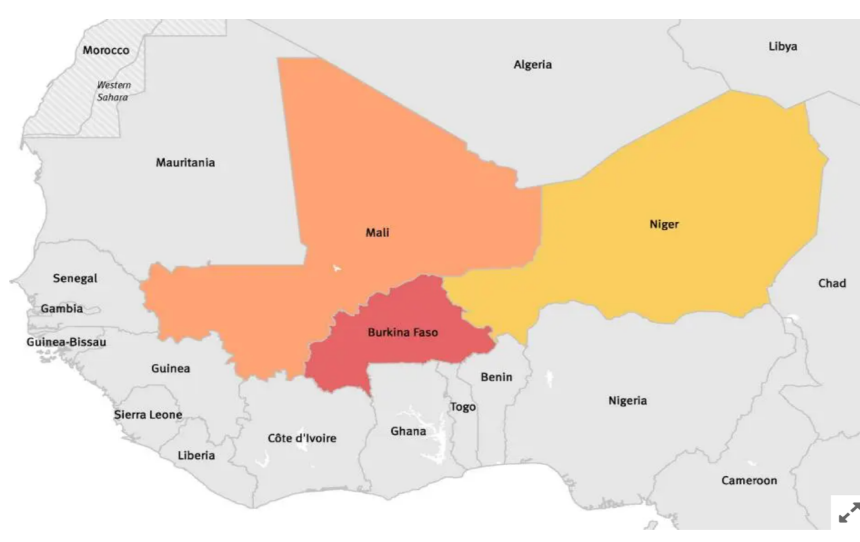
The Exit and Rupture of Member States

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced plans to establish the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) in January 2024 after announcing their exit from ECOWAS in September 2023 (see Figure 2) (Bassou, 2024; Westcott, 2024; BBC, 28 Jan 2024). This decision has significant implications:

- a. Risk of contagion:** ECOWAS coastal states fear the "Sahelexit" could lead to the spread of jihadism and political disorder from the Sahel, potentially leading to hostility towards Malian and Burkinabe migrants (Bøås, 2019).
- b. Economic consequences:** Stopping free movement between the three Sahelian countries and the rest of West Africa would have serious economic repercussions, affecting trade, labour mobility, and regional integration (Lavergne, 1997).

- c. **Threat to democracy:** The schism within ECOWAS poses a risk to democratic processes (Huntington, 1991).
- d. **International relations:** The crisis impacts Africa's European and US partners, with Western countries risking association with neo-colonialism (Yabi, 2023).
- e. **Underlying crisis:** West African countries face multi-layered crises due to sluggish growth, climate change, population growth, and unemployment, echoing the 1970s when similar factors led to coups (Bøås, 2019).

Figure 2: Alliance of Sahel States



Source: *Qirrat Africa*, (Jan 2024).

The possibility of Guinea joining CASS would provide maritime access but worsen ECOWAS's disintegration (Alexander, 2024).

The possibility of Guinea joining the Confederation or giving it tacit support would provide CASS with maritime access but worsen ECOWAS' disintegration (Alexander, 2024).

Fundamental Mistakes in the ECOWAS Approach to the Niger Crisis

Aside from the several challenges it faced in its response to the post-coup crisis in Niger, ECOWAS arguably also made at least three fundamental mistakes, including the following.

Misapplication of Lessons from Past Interventions

ECOWAS likely considered lessons from past interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia. However, these cases differed significantly in geography, political situations, and security dynamics. ECOWAS should have conducted a more nuanced country-specific analysis, including intelligence gathering. The lack of in-depth study could explain why the ECOWAS strategy fizzled out when the deadline expired on 6 August 2023 (Sow, 2023; Mathur, Feb 2024; Obi, 2009, pp. 122-128; Akale et al., 2018: 140, 141; AJ, 1 Aug 2023). The cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone, extensively documented by Adebajo (2002), Aboagye and Bah (2004, 2005, 2007) and Aboagye (2018), demonstrate the complexities of regional interventions and the long-term implications of ECOWAS's decision-making processes.

Ineffective Ultimatum and Intervention

ECOWAS appears constrained by the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, compelling military interventions without differentiating between national scenarios (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015). The mandate to restore constitutional order in Niger was ambiguous, and even as a Scenario 5 operation under the African Standby Force Policy Framework, it could only have been launched between 30-90 days from the 10 August 2023 decision, requiring AU PSC and UNSC authorisation (ECOWAS, 2023b).

This lack of nuanced appreciation for deployment technicalities led to indecisive action, weakening ECOWAS's position and credibility (Aubyn, 2023; OHCHR, 2023). Using force to restore democracy is fraught with political challenges and requires careful review (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023).

Imposition of Sanctions and Suspension of Development Assistance

ECOWAS and WAEMU underestimated the negative socio-economic impacts of sanctions and border closures. Most development partners also paused or suspended assistance, potentially hindering necessary aid during a critical period and exacerbating insecurity (WFP/WB, 11 Oct 2023; VOA, 24 Feb 2024).

Consistency in Enforcing Rules

ECOWAS struggles with consistently enforcing its rulebook, especially regarding civilian unconstitutionality. This inconsistency undermines the bloc's credibility and effectiveness. ECOWAS could have managed the crisis better by drawing on experiences from Mali (2012), Burkina Faso (2015), and The Gambia (2017) (AJ, 27 Sep 2023).

A Brief Comparison with the AU PSC, RECs/RMs and the EU Model

It will be helpful to briefly compare the ECOWAS, AU, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), and EU models of regional integration to ensure democracy and good governance.

Comparison with the AU and RECs/RMs

While African RECs/RMs governance protocols vary, they generally do not allow military intervention for coups. ECOWAS is the exception. The AU has a non-interference principle (AU, 2000) but can impose sanctions, suspend membership, and deploy peacekeeping missions under its non-indifference principle (AU, 2002).

Comparison with the EU Model

The EU's approach contrasts sharply with ECOWAS. Military intervention within an EU member state would violate EU principles. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy focuses on external crisis management (European Council, n.d.). Unlike ECOWAS, the EU lacks a unified military force or protocol for intervening in member-

state coups. Each EU member is responsible for its internal security and constitutional order. In a coup scenario, the EU would likely:

- Condemn the action
- Advocate for peaceful resolution through dialogue.
- Use diplomatic, conflict prevention, and crisis management mechanisms via the CSDP and European External Action Service (EEAS) (Koenig, 2022).

The EU's response would be guided by Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) principles, established by the Treaty on European Union and updated by the Lisbon Treaty (EU, 2007). While the EU has mechanisms for security cooperation, its legal framework does not provide for internal military intervention. Any intervention would require:

- Unanimous agreement among all EU member states
- Adherence to international law and EU principles of sovereignty and democratic governance
- Consideration of its highly contentious and controversial nature (Centre for European Reform, 5 Aug 2022).

This approach reflects the EU's commitment to respecting member states' internal affairs and focusing on external crisis management rather than internal military intervention.

6.0 Conclusion

The Niger coup and subsequent ECOWAS response highlight the complexities of addressing political crises in West Africa. ECOWAS faced significant challenges in balancing its commitment to democratic principles with the need for effective, nuanced intervention strategies. The Organisation's approach, combining diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and the threat of force, had unintended consequences that underscored the delicate balance required in such situations.

ECOWAS' response revealed several critical issues:

- The misapplication of lessons from past interventions evidences the ineffectiveness of a one-size-fits-all approach to coups

- The challenges of enforcing sanctions and ensuring timely intervention without causing undue harm to civilians
- The risks of over-relying on the threat of military intervention can undermine diplomatic efforts and regional stability
- There is a need for consistent enforcement of democratic principles, addressing military coups and civilian unconstitutionality
- The importance of considering the geopolitical implications of intervention, as seen in forming the Alliance of Sahel States

Moving forward, ECOWAS must reassess its approach to unconstitutional changes of government. This reassessment should include:

- Developing context-specific strategies that balance swift action with sustainable, locally-supported solutions
- Addressing root causes of political instability, including poverty, corruption, and security challenges
- Strengthening mechanisms to prevent and address civilian unconstitutionality, not just military coups
- Enhancing diplomatic capabilities and prioritising mediation over military threats
- Improving the assessment of potential consequences before imposing sanctions or threatening force
- Considering the role of international justice mechanisms, such as the ICC, in deterring severe international crimes

To address the “Sahel exit” and foster regional reintegration, ECOWAS should:

- Initiate high-level dialogue with the Sahelian Confederacy members
- Address grievances related to sanctions and perceived mistreatment
- Promote good governance and demonstrate the benefits of economic cooperation
- Reinvigorate joint security efforts to combat regional challenges

- Adopt more inclusive decision-making processes within ECOWAS
- Encourage cultural exchanges and youth engagement to build regional solidarity
- Utilise neutral third-party mediators like the AU and UN to facilitate dialogue.

ECOWAS must recognise, as Collier (2008, 2009) suggests, that there are advantages to limiting and pooling sovereignty with neighbours. Rather than relying solely on threats of force, ECOWAS should focus on making coups unattractive through good governance. This involves managing security threats, preventing power entrenchment, checking fraudulent elections, addressing political repression, and avoiding tacit acquiescence to undemocratic practices.

By adopting these approaches, ECOWAS can work towards a more stable and democratic West Africa. The Organisation must strike a balance between upholding democratic norms and respecting the sovereignty of member states while also addressing the underlying causes of political instability. Only through such a comprehensive and nuanced approach can ECOWAS hope to effectively prevent and respond to future regional crises.

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