

Dissecting the Structural Constraints on Ecowas as a Regional Security Provider, 2010-2025

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Abstract- This article examines the structural constraints that have persistently limited the effectiveness of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as a regional security provider between 2010 and 2025. The period under review culminated in an unprecedented institutional rupture: the formal withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS in January 2025, following a cascade of military coups and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Drawing on qualitative data from twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted at ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja with officials, government representatives, academics, and civil society actors, supplemented by thematic documentary analysis and current scholarship, the article maps three interrelated structural constraints and their interactive effects. These are: the resilience of state sovereignty norms that resist collective enforcement; chronic financing deficits that generate strategic dependence on external donors; and weak or inconsistent political will among member states. The article traces how these constraints operate as a mutually reinforcing cycle that produces the 'capability expectations gap' characterising ECOWAS's peace and security operations. It situates the ECOWAS experience within a comparative analysis of the African Union and the European Union, drawing on their respective experiences with internal financing and institutional design. The article concludes with a reform agenda centred on financial autonomy through innovative financing, incentive-differentiated compliance mechanisms, institutional mandate rationalisation, and pragmatic re-engagement with the AES states reforms that represent necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for ECOWAS to remain a credible and effective regional security architecture.

Keywords: *Regional Security, ECOWAS, Financing Deficit, Political Will, Institutional Reform.*

I. INTRODUCTION

On 29 January 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger formally completed their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States the

most significant rupture in West African regionalism since ECOWAS was founded in Lagos in 1975. The three states, all governed by military juntas following coups between 2020 and 2023, had established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 and formalised their departure from ECOWAS in January 2024, citing what they characterised as the organisation's 'failure to serve the interests of its peoples' and its transformation into 'a threat to its member states' (Tricontinental, 2026). The AES has since deepened security partnerships with Russia, expelled Western diplomatic missions from its member territories, and established alternative financial and security frameworks that explicitly compete with ECOWAS's normative order.

These developments represent the culmination of structural tensions that scholars have identified within ECOWAS's peace and security architecture for decades, but which the 2020–2025 security crisis exposed with exceptional and politically decisive clarity. The paradox is stark: ECOWAS has, since the late 1990s, progressively constructed one of the most institutionally elaborate regional security frameworks in sub-Saharan Africa. The 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security institutionalised a comprehensive conflict prevention toolkit. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance established democratic norms as a condition of regional membership. The 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) consolidated these instruments into a unified preventive architecture. Yet three member states have now left the organisation, and the Sahel's security environment has deteriorated significantly since these instruments were established.

This article argues that this failure is fundamentally structural rather than episodic. The central research question is: what structural factors constrain ECOWAS's effectiveness as a regional security provider, and how do these factors interact to produce the observed capability–expectations gap? Three interrelated constraints are identified: the resilience of sovereignty norms that resist collective enforcement; chronic financing deficits and donor dependency; and weak or inconsistent political will among member states. The article draws on original qualitative evidence from ECOWAS headquarters, situates it within current scholarship, and develops a reform agenda that addresses the reinforcing cycle these constraints create.

The article is structured as follows: It reviews current scholarship on ECOWAS's structural constraints and the AES withdrawal. It elaborates the theoretical framework and methodology. The article presents and analyses the empirical findings under four analytical headings. It provides comparative analysis and theoretical synthesis. Finally, it offers conclusions and recommendations.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The pursuit of regional peace and security has remained a central objective of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) since its establishment in 1975. Although originally conceived as an economic integration organization, ECOWAS has progressively assumed a prominent role in addressing political instability and violent conflicts within West Africa. In response to the recurrent civil wars and political crises that characterized the sub-region on the 1990s, ECOWAS adopted a number of institutional and legal instruments designed to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts among member states. West Africa has continued to witness persistent security challenges over the years. From 2010 to 2025 the sub-region witnessed numerous instances of political instability violent extremism, cross-border crimes, communal conflicts and military coups in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. Transnational security threats-terrorism, armed insurgences were part of the features of West Africa at this period, raising the question of the

effectiveness of ECOWAS conflict prevention frameworks.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW: STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON WEST AFRICAN REGIONAL SECURITY

The concept of the 'capability expectations gap' regional organisations mandated to deliver collective security outcomes that their political and financial resources cannot sustain has become the organising framework for contemporary scholarship on African regional security. Williams (2020) traces this gap across the AU, ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD, arguing that it reflects not primarily technical inadequacies but political economy conditions: member states have strategic incentives to establish ambitious institutional frameworks whose costs of implementation they subsequently resist bearing. The ECOWAS experience between 2010 and 2025 represents this logic in its most consequential form.

Aning and Bjarnesen (2024) provide the most comprehensive recent analysis of the AES withdrawal and its structural causes. Their Nordic Africa Institute Policy Note argues that ECOWAS's failure reflects a deeper crisis of democratic legitimacy: 'years of complacency and inconsistency in championing its democratic principles' eroded both member state commitment and popular confidence in the organisation. The authors observe that ECOWAS 'lacked the support, the wherewithal and the institutional strength to follow through on its threats of deploying its standby force' against Niger, and conclude that 'pragmatic dialogue with the member states currently run by military regimes will be crucial if regional collaboration is to be revived.' Their analysis establishes that the structural constraints are now operating at an existential level for the organisation.

Aning's (2024) KAIPTC Occasional Paper elaborates the institutional dimension. ECOWAS has functioned as a 'norm entrepreneur' promoting democratic governance norms through the 2001 Supplementary Protocol and subsequent instruments but the gap between normative assertion and enforcement capacity has proven fatal to the organisation's

credibility. The military juntas in the Sahel exploited this gap strategically, framing ECOWAS's sanctions as external interference and positioning themselves as champions of national sovereignty against neo-colonial imposition. This political judo turning the regional organisation's own enforcement attempts against it was made possible precisely by the structural weaknesses this article analyses.

Olubiyo and Ayodele (2024) examine the sanctions strategy against Niger and find it counterproductive. Their ABUAD Journal analysis demonstrates that the sanctions package deepened civilian hardship without restoring constitutional order, mobilising popular sentiment against ECOWAS rather than against the junta. This finding has significant implications for the political will dimension: member states that observed the Niger sanctions' counterproductive effects were rationally discouraged from supporting further enforcement actions. The structural constraint of weak political will is thus partly endogenous to ECOWAS's own enforcement failures.

On the financing dimension, the ECOWAS Peace Fund's 2024–2028 Strategic Plan documents a structural vulnerability that scholars have long identified. The UNU-CRIS (2024) analysis finds that ECOWAS's peace operations have been financed predominantly through the EU and bilateral Western donors, with member state contributions remaining insufficient and irregular. This donor dependency is not merely a financial problem but a strategic one: donor conditionalities constrained ECOWAS's freedom of action in the Sahel, where EU policy preferences and junta political calculations diverged sharply. The ISS Africa (2025) documentation of the AU Peace Fund's private sector financing innovations—including Afreximbank's US\$210 million pledge identifies a more viable path toward financial autonomy that ECOWAS has not yet pursued at comparable scale.

The emerging literature on post-AES regional security architecture frames the structural constraints within a geopolitical transition. Megwalu and Garba (2024) argue in the *Journal of African Union Studies* that ECOWAS's counterproductive sanctions drove the three Sahelian states into deeper alignment with

Russia and the Wagner Group, creating a security fragmentation that now extends from the Sahel toward coastal West African states. The IJRISS (2026) analysis of shifting security architectures in West Africa warns that the coexistence of ECOWAS and the AES 'risks fragmenting collective responses to extremism, border insecurity, and humanitarian crises,' while reflecting broader transformations in Africa's post-Cold War regional order. The structural reform agenda this article proposes must therefore be understood against this geopolitical backdrop.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Regional Integration Theory

This study employs Regional Integration Theory as its primary analytical lens. The theory's intellectual lineage from Mitrany's (1943) Functionalism through Haas's (1958) Neofunctionalism to Deutsch's (1957) Security Community concept provides a framework for understanding ECOWAS's evolution from an economic integration body to a multidimensional security actor. The neofunctionalist 'spillover' mechanism is directly visible in this evolution: ECOWAS's encounter with recurrent intra-state conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire from the late 1980s onwards generated institutional pressure to expand the regional mandate into security governance, producing the 1999 Mechanism and the 2008 ECPF.

The theory's central prediction that regional organisations progressively acquire greater supranational authority as member states recognise the utility of collective action—captures the normative evolution of ECOWAS accurately. Each successive instrument has expanded the organisation's intervention authority: from the 1978 Non-Aggression Protocol's focus on inter-state conflict, through the 1999 Mechanism's authorisation of intervention in unconstitutional changes of government, to the 2001 Supplementary Protocol's explicit conditionality of democratic governance. However, the theory's optimism about the automaticity of integration deepening systematically underestimates the stickiness of sovereignty norms in the West African context. The AES withdrawal

represents a falsification of the linear deepening prediction that the theory must confront.

The study supplements Regional Integration Theory with the 'new regionalism' perspective (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000), which emphasises the context-specific and contested character of regional projects, and institutional theory's concept of 'institutional overstretch' the condition in which mandates exceed organisational capacity. Together, these frameworks direct attention to the political economy conditions that determine whether integration deepens or stalls: the distribution of benefits and costs among member states, the domestic political constraints on member state governments, and the legitimacy dynamics between regional institutions and their constituent populations.

V. METHODOLOGY

The empirical foundation of this article is a qualitative doctoral study conducted at Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria (2022–2026). Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants: ECOWAS Commission officials from the Departments of Political Affairs, Peacekeeping and Regional Security, Early Warning, and Strategic Planning (n=10, 40%); Nigerian government officials with ECOWAS-related security portfolios (n=5, 20%); academic scholars with expertise in West African security and regional integration (n=5, 20%); and civil society and NGO representatives engaged in conflict prevention and mediation (n=5, 20%). The respondent sample is weighted toward institutional knowledge: 60% had more than ten years of professional experience in peace and security, and 88% held postgraduate qualifications including 40% with doctoral degrees, establishing the analytical depth of the perspectives captured.

Interviews were conducted at ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja and supplemented by video conference. Each interview lasted 40 to 60 minutes, was recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Secondary data were drawn from ECOWAS institutional publications—the ECPF, MSC communiqués, the ECOWAS Peace Fund 2024–2028 Strategic Plan,

ECOWAS Treaty texts of 1975 and 1993—alongside current peer-reviewed scholarship and policy reports. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis protocol, supported by NVivo 14, with triangulation across primary and secondary sources (Bowen, 2019).

VI. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THREE STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND THEIR INTERACTIVE EFFECTS

6.1 The Sovereignty Brake: From Normative Commitment to Political Practice

ECOWAS's treaty trajectory from 1975 to 2025 illustrates a progressive normative evolution from strict non-interference to qualified intervention authority. The 1975 treaty focused exclusively on economic integration, with security elements largely absent. As the thesis documents, the founding fathers' omission of security was driven partly by non-consciousness of the nexus between economic development and security, and partly by the desire of member states to restrain each other from interfering with sovereignty (ECOWAS, 1975). The 1993 revised treaty incorporated fundamental principles including non-aggression, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the promotion of democratic governance, reflecting the recognition—born of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts that economic development was unattainable without peace and security. The 1999 Mechanism went further still, explicitly permitting intervention in member states experiencing unconstitutional changes of government, humanitarian disasters, or threats to regional security.

Yet the distance between normative evolution and political practice has remained vast. An ECOWAS official (R6) identified the fundamental institutional problem:

The biggest challenge is not the absence of frameworks, but the unwillingness of member states to fully implement agreed decisions.

A Nigerian government official (R12) situated this unwillingness in the structural logic of state interests:

When national interests conflict with regional commitments, governments tend to prioritise sovereignty over collective security.

An academic respondent (R17) identified the decision-making architecture as the structural mechanism through which sovereignty resistance operates:

ECOWAS operates on consensus, but consensus can become a weakness when states deliberately delay or resist enforcement.

The Niger coup (July 2023) and ECOWAS's failed enforcement response represent the sovereign norm in its most consequential expression. Multiple member states—notably Mali and Burkina Faso—threatened to treat military intervention as an act of aggression against themselves, fracturing the consensus required for collective enforcement. The sovereign norm, in this configuration, was not merely a principled commitment but a strategic instrument deployed by states with direct interests in the success of the junta project. Aning and Bjarnesen (2024) observe that the three Sahelian juntas 'successfully mobilised domestic populations around anti-ECOWAS narratives,' framing the organisation's conditionality as external imperialism. This political framing was effective precisely because the sovereign norm resonates with post-colonial sensibilities across West African publics.

The historical pattern reinforces this structural diagnosis. From Liberia in 1989 to Niger in 2023, ECOWAS has repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to establish normative frameworks for intervention while simultaneously failing to sustain the political consensus required to implement them consistently. As Zondi (2020) argues, this produces an 'institutional schizophrenia': ECOWAS possesses intervention authority in principle but cannot reliably exercise it in practice. The implications for the warning–response gap are direct: when member states can veto or delay collective action, early warning intelligence is politically irrelevant regardless of its technical quality.

6.2 Financing Deficits and Strategic Donor Dependency

Financial inadequacy emerged as the second major structural constraint in both its absolute and relational dimensions. A senior ECOWAS official (R3) described the mandate-capacity gap directly:

We have strong policy frameworks, but implementation is constrained by limited financial resources.

A civil society respondent (R22) identified the strategic implications of donor dependency:

Many ECOWAS initiatives depend on external donors, which raises concerns about sustainability and autonomy.

A Nigerian government official (R14) highlighted the operational consequences of irregular member state contributions:

Delayed contributions from member states further weaken operational readiness, especially in emergency situations.

The ECOWAS Peace Fund's 2024–2028 Strategic Plan provides documentary corroboration of these assessments, acknowledging that since operationalisation in 2006, the fund has mobilised approximately EUR 68 million, the overwhelming majority from the European Union and multilateral partners rather than from member state contributions. An academic respondent (R18) proposed the most direct institutional remedy:

A well-funded Peace Fund would allow ECOWAS to respond quickly to crises without waiting for external support.

A government official (R14) identified the specific reform lever available within the existing institutional framework:

Strengthening the ECOWAS Community Levy and introducing innovative financing mechanisms could provide more stable funding.

The Community Levy a 0.5 percent tariff on imports from third countries is the primary instrument for generating internal revenue. However, revenue

collection is inconsistent: member states frequently delay remittances, and the levy's scope excludes informal trade, which represents a substantial share of West African commercial activity. The structural dependency on external donors that results carries a political cost beyond financial vulnerability. The UNU-CRIS (2024) analysis demonstrates that EU financing conditionalities constrained ECOWAS's freedom of action in the Sahel, creating a situation where the organisation's primary financier had policy preferences that conflicted with the pragmatic engagement the crisis required. Donor dependency thus transforms from a financial problem into a strategic one, limiting ECOWAS's capacity to act as an autonomous political actor.

The ECOWAS Peace Fund's August 2024 Strategic Consultation Meeting explicitly examined the EU Peace Funding Mechanisms as a model for reform, signalling institutional awareness of the need for structural change. The AU Peace Fund's recent innovations engaging Afreximbank for US\$210 million and private sector partners demonstrate that alternative financing models are achievable within the African institutional context (ISS Africa, 2025). ECOWAS has not yet pursued comparable private sector engagement at scale.

6.3 Institutional Fragmentation and Coordination Failures

The third structural constraint relates to ECOWAS's internal institutional architecture. Respondents consistently identified overlapping mandates, bureaucratic silos, and coordination failures as sources of operational delay that prevent even the limited political will and financial resources available from being efficiently mobilised. An ECOWAS official (R4) observed:

There are times when multiple departments are working on the same issue without clear coordination, which slows down decision-making. A respondent from the Strategic Planning Directorate (R7) articulated the operational consequence:

By the time coordination is achieved, the situation on the ground may have already deteriorated.

An academic respondent (R18) extended this diagnosis to ECOWAS's external partnerships:

The involvement of multiple actors ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations can create confusion over leadership in crisis situations.

This fragmentation is path-dependent: ECOWAS's security architecture was constructed incrementally across successive instruments the 1978 Non-Aggression Protocol, the 1981 Mutual Assistance Protocol, the 1999 Mechanism, and the 2008 ECPF without a systematic mandate rationalisation at each stage. The result is an institutional architecture in which the Early Warning Directorate, the Department of Political Affairs Peace and Security, the Office of the Special Representative, and the Council of the Wise all possess overlapping competencies in conflict monitoring and preventive diplomacy. In normal operational circumstances, this creates inefficiency. In crisis situations requiring rapid preventive deployment, it creates potentially fatal delays.

The Sahel coup wave illustrated this dynamic. As Megwalu and Garba (2024) document in the Journal of African Union Studies, ECOWAS's response to the coup wave involved multiple institutional actors working along parallel tracks without clear coordination, producing contradictory signals to junta governments and complicating the diplomatic space for de-escalation. The same respondent who identified the coordination problem (R7) was clear about its structural origin: 'ECOWAS must streamline its internal structures, clarify mandates, and reduce bureaucracy to improve responsiveness and accountability.'

6.4 The Mutually Reinforcing Cycle and Its Consequences

The three structural constraints sovereignty resistance, financing deficits, and institutional fragmentation do not operate as independent variables but as mutually reinforcing elements of a cycle. Sovereignty-protective member states resist contributing to collective financing mechanisms whose outputs they may subsequently veto a rational calculation from a national interest perspective but one that systematically underfunds the regional

institution. Financing deficits force external donor dependency that limits strategic autonomy, reinforcing the perception among sovereignty-sensitive governments that ECOWAS is a vehicle for external agendas rather than genuine regional interests. Institutional fragmentation, in turn, prevents the efficient mobilisation of whatever political will and resources do exist, consuming the preventive window in coordination failures and bureaucratic delays.

The AES withdrawal is the most dramatic consequence of this reinforcing cycle in ECOWAS's history. Three member states concluded rationally, given their specific calculations of costs and benefits that the sovereignty constraints, financial impositions, and institutional inefficiencies of ECOWAS membership outweighed its security benefits, and chose exit over voice. This outcome is neither inevitable nor irreversible, but addressing it requires simultaneous reform across all three dimensions of the cycle rather than incremental adjustments within any single dimension.

VII. DISCUSSION: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

The comparative analysis situates ECOWAS within a spectrum of regional security governance experiences that illuminate both the causes of its current predicament and the pathways toward reform. The AU's experience with the same Sahel states is directly comparable: the AU also imposed sanctions and suspended the three junta governments, confronting identical sovereignty resistance. Yet the AU's Peace Fund has achieved a more advanced degree of financial autonomy, with US\$398 million secured by mid-2024, 98% from member state contributions, through a decade of determined institutional effort and innovative engagement of private sector partners (ISS Africa, 2025). The AU's trajectory demonstrates that financial autonomy is achievable within African regional institutions even under conditions of political contestation.

Breslawski, Cunningham, and Fleishman's (2023) empirical finding that ECOWAS's rhetorical and

diplomatic tools are statistically associated with reductions in violent events when deployed—provides crucial analytical context. ECOWAS's problem is not that its instruments are ineffective; the evidence shows they work when they are applied. The structural problem is that the conditions for their consistent, timely application are absent. The capability–expectations gap is thus primarily a problem of institutional conditions rather than institutional design.

The EU comparison is instructive as a directional reference rather than a replicable model. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, supported by the European Peace Facility and deeply integrated early warning–foreign policy linkages within the EEAS, achieves superior warning–response linkage because political integration is far deeper, legal frameworks are binding, and financing instruments are pre-allocated rather than donor-mobilised. These conditions are unlikely to be replicated in West Africa in the foreseeable future. The more relevant lesson from the EU comparison is that institutional proximity between warning analysts and decision-makers which ECOWAS currently lacks and pre-arranged response financing are achievable design goals that do not require the EU's level of political integration.

Theoretically, the empirical findings require qualification of Regional Integration Theory's spillover logic. The AES withdrawal is a partial falsification of the prediction that regional integration deepens progressively as member states recognise collective action benefits. The ECOWAS evidence demonstrates that integration can stall and reverse when: (i) the costs of membership accepting sovereignty conditionalities and contributing to collective financing exceed perceived benefits; (ii) member state governments face domestic legitimacy pressures that point away from regional compliance; and (iii) the regional organisation's enforcement failures erode the reputational costs of non-compliance and exit. These conditions characterise ECOWAS's Sahel crisis precisely. The theory must be supplemented by attention to the political economy of integration sustainability the conditions under which member states choose to remain and

invest in, rather than defect from, regional institutions.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

This article has demonstrated that ECOWAS's effectiveness as a regional security provider is constrained by three mutually reinforcing structural factors: sovereignty norms, financing deficits, and institutional fragmentation whose interaction produced the AES withdrawal. Addressing the reinforcing cycle requires simultaneous reforms across all three dimensions alongside political re-engagement with the AES states.

The future of ECOWAS conflict prevention depends on its ability to address these challenges through institutional reform, financial innovation, and renewed political commitment. Without such efforts, the organization risks losing its relevance in an increasingly complex security environment.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To secure the future of ECOWAS conflict prevention, several reforms are necessary. There is an urgent need to institutionalize stronger compliance mechanisms to ensure adherence to regional protocols on democracy and governance. This should be accompanied by transparent and consistent enforcement to restore credibility.
2. ECOWAS should also reform its funding structure by enhancing the efficiency of the Community Levy and ensuring timely contributions from member states. Exploring innovative financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, could provide additional resources.
3. Furthermore, the organization must strengthen its early warning and response systems by improving coordination between data collection and decision-making processes. This will enable more timely and effective interventions.
4. Capacity building is equally important. ECOWAS should invest in strengthening its institutional capabilities, particularly in mediation, peacekeeping, and conflict analysis.
5. Finally, fostering stronger partnerships with the African Union and the United Nations will enhance resource mobilization and strategic coordination, thereby improving overall effectiveness.

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