



APRI
AFRICA POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

PUBLICATION | OCT 2025

ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series

*Fragmentation & Foreign Influence:
Emerging Challenges to ECOWAS Integration*

By Dr. Amandine Gnanguênon, Daouda Thiam, Emmanuel Baba Aduku



Implemented by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution license 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

DISCLAIMER

This publication was produced with the support of the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project, commissioned by the BMZ and implemented by GIZ. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of GIZ or the German government. GIZ assumes no responsibility for the content of external websites referenced in this publication.

This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

The founding of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was etched within the broader geopolitical landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, President Tubman of Liberia pushed for talks on regional economic cooperation, though there were no specific proposals to create ECOWAS. One notable outcome was the agreement on Interim Organization for West African Economic Cooperation signed in 1965 by Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'ivoire, and Guinea. In 1973, President Eyadema of Togo was instrumental in working with General Gowon of Nigeria to host a meeting of West African leaders where concrete proposals for the creation of ECOWAS were agreed upon. Amid the geopolitics of decolonisation and the Cold War, the effort by West African leaders to establish a regional economic community found a new window of opportunity in the early to mid-1970s. The end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 enabled the country's leaders to focus on post-conflict reconstruction at home and integration of the West African region. In addition, a high global demand for Nigeria's petroleum in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis provided a financial windfall that enabled it to vigorously pursue its geopolitical objectives.

Nigeria viewed ECOWAS as a way to diminish French influence over its former colonies in West Africa. Togo played a key role in the bloc's emergence by leveraging its geographic proximity to Ghana and Nigeria, and reconciling competing interests in the region to build a shared vision for cooperation in West Africa. More broadly, West African leaders conceived ECOWAS as a means of asserting a post-independence regional identity and withstanding the pressures of globalisation, which exacerbated West Africa's marginalisation within the international order. ECOWAS was inspired by values of Pan-Africanism and the Non-Aligned Movement, and was premised on the aspiration of independent West African States for regional self-determination and autonomy from the influence of global powers. The Pan-Africanist legacy of Ghana's foundational leader, Kwame Nkrumah, and his effort to form the short-lived Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union, helped strengthen ECOWAS's ideological foundations at its founding.

In a shifting geopolitical context in which multilateralism is being weakened, West Africa has experienced growing militarisation and an evolving foreign presence. As France's security footprint in West Africa is increasingly diminished,

“West Africa has experienced growing militarisation and an evolving foreign presence.”

rival powers like China and Russia are re-igniting and expanding their economic and security ties in the region. Meanwhile, Turkey and the Arab Gulf countries have stepped up their presence through infrastructure investments, arms sales and bilateral agreements related to natural resources. Powerful external actors have regularly exploited local grievances in conflict zones, in a bid to undermine ECOWAS's credibility as a promoter of peace and stability in the region.

This paper explores the ways in which external geopolitical forces shape ECOWAS' regional integration efforts. External partnerships can bolster regional integration in sectors such as infrastructure, energy and security, especially when they are aligned with strategies that reflect long-term objectives and solidarity among the bloc's Member States. Conversely, conflicting interests and dependence on external partners for development assistance contribute to fragmentation within ECOWAS thereby hindering its collective decision-making and weakens its capacity.

THE GEOPOLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECOWAS

During its early years, ECOWAS focused primarily on economic integration. However, its formation during the peak of the Cold War meant that the bloc's leaders could not avoid thinking about security considerations. In 1978, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Non-Aggression (PNA) to prevent inter-state conflict among its Member States and promote regional stability. It was strengthened with the adoption in 1981 of the Protocol on Mutual Defence, which created a mutual defence clause and established the Allied Armed Forces of the Community (FAAC), the precursor to the present-day ECOWAS Standby Force. Over time, the emergence of violent conflicts in the Mano River region caused ECOWAS' responsibility to expand from its sole focus on economic issues to include political and security functions.

In addition to regional developments in West Africa, the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of regional economic blocs across the globe and the third wave of democratisation across the globe injected ECOWAS with a new sense of purpose. Notwithstanding the number of military regimes in the region, ECOWAS gradually aligned with the global transition to democratic governance, culminating in the bloc's adoption of the Political Declaration in 1991, which affirmed ECOWAS' commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Meanwhile, Western powers like France, the United Kingdom and the United States have significantly influenced the security dynamics in West Africa (Ojewale, 2024). Some prominent examples were France's military intervention in Côte d'Ivoire during the two civil wars in that country and the deployment of British forces in

Sierra Leone and U.S. troops in Liberia during their own civil wars, in addition to the roles played by their extensive diplomatic networks in the region. However, regional peace operations such as the interventions led by the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia (1990-1997) and Sierra Leone (1997-2000) demonstrated the importance of regional ownership in addressing security challenges. The 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace Keeping and Security further strengthened ECOWAS' agency, including by granting more authority to the President of the ECOWAS Commission to intervene in times of crisis without prior approval from the Commission's Heads of State. However, the exercise of this power is constrained by a complex process involving the adoption of a legal mandate and diplomatic manoeuvrings that practically retain decision-making authority in the hands of the bloc's leaders.

ECOWAS IN A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE

ECOWAS operates within a complex institutional framework shaped by the linguistic, cultural, political, and economic diversity of the West African region. This multiplicity has led to the creation of informal subgroups that influence the outcome of decisions made by the regional bloc's leaders. The linguistic divide between the so-called Anglophone and Francophone members, in addition to the strong institutional linkages between many West African states and their former colonial rulers, like bilateral defence and economic accords, have adversely affected ECOWAS' cohesion. For instance, the eight Francophone ECOWAS Member States which make up the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) typically adopt common positions, like retaining the use of the CFA Franc, which often clash with those of their mostly Anglophone, non-WAEMU counterparts.

The fragmentation within ECOWAS became more pronounced after the regional body suspended Mali's membership in response to a May 2021 coup, the second military takeover in nine months there. The decision sparked mixed reactions among the bloc's Member States, even while the ECOWAS Commission insisted that it was upholding its position against military coups. These divisions further deepened in 2023, when Burkina Faso and Mali opposed a proposal by ECOWAS leaders for a military intervention in Niger following the overthrow of then-President Mohamed Bazoum by the country's armed forces. These incidents underscored the difficulty in maintaining regional unity amid internal disagreements and competing national interests.

The influence of external actors also complicates ECOWAS' cohesion. The European Union (EU) and the U.S. prioritise democracy, counterterrorism, and liberal market economic reforms. China typically focuses on infrastructure, trade and what it calls "non-interference". Russia offers military assistance as a counterweight to the West. Turkey employs a hybrid strategy that combines a toolkit of aid, diplomacy, investment and security cooperation.

While some of these powers express nominal support for ECOWAS' goals, their footprint in the region exacerbates internal divisions and hinders regional integration. Amid several waves of political instability in West Africa, ECOWAS has assumed a greater responsibility to address regional conflicts and promote stability as a prerequisite for development in the region through key internal reforms it implemented in the 1990s and 2000s. The regional bloc's efforts to link security, development, and governance have received the support of multilateral institutions like the EU and the United Nations for more than three decades. While external partnerships can and often do support regional objectives, they can also reinforce a culture of dependency on external donors and the fragmentation that hinders ECOWAS' effectiveness.

SAFEGUARDING REGIONAL INTEGRATION AMID GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS

The exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS in January 2025, several months after they formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), was a major blow to ECOWAS' internal cohesion. The exit of the three founding Member States of ECOWAS, in addition to the rise of powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey, is likely to complicate ECOWAS' objectives and weaken its unity.

The formation of the AES illustrated how shared ideologies can catalyse the creation of new regional blocs today, much like they did in the 1960s. It also presents ECOWAS with a dilemma: should it insist on upholding democratic principles by excluding Member States ruled by unconstitutional regimes until they return to civilian order? Or should it prioritize unity by accommodating governments that were formed via an unconstitutional seizure of power? Despite ECOWAS' record of political and security integration, it nonetheless grapples with the perceived credibility gap and created double standards, in which the bloc allegedly condemns military coups and penalises governments led by juntas but turns looks the other way to 'institutional coups' executed by civilian leaders in countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.

The tensions between ECOWAS and the AES — as well as those between their individual Member States, like Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, and Nigeria and Niger — are driven by years of mutual distrust, national security and by ECOWAS's historical pro-Western orientation. Nigeria's sluggish response to the 2023 Niger coup and Togo's flirtation with an alignment with the AES highlight the growing ideological divisions in the West Africa region that limit ECOWAS' ability to fulfil its mandate as an orchestrator of regional integration.

Political divisions inhibit ECOWAS' integration goals. Heavy reliance on foreign investment, particularly in the mining and infrastructure sectors, has restricted intra-regional trade and hindered the development of regional value chains. Speaking at the official launch of the ECOWAS at 50 celebrations at the Accra International Conference Centre on 22 April 2025, the President of the ECOWAS Commission, Omar Alieu Touray, stated that intra-regional trade among ECOWAS Member States stood at just

12%, underscoring the West Africa region's dependence on commerce with external markets. The continued fragmentation of regional economies will hinder efforts to create a common market for capital, labour and services in West Africa.

Despite considerable gains made since ECOWAS was founded, its integration agenda remains a work in progress. ECOWAS needs to strengthen the enforcement of regional norms as well as its institutional mechanisms to address threats to human security and forestall a clash with the interests of national governments of Member States. For instance, although the ECOWAS Commission has reaffirmed conflict prevention as a priority, political leaders often view its dissemination of early warning reports or attempts to resolve local conflicts as political interference. This contradiction, in addition to ECOWAS' reliance on external donors and the weakening of political and security stability in West Africa, has the capacity to undermine the bloc's regional integration agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to resolve the complex challenges ECOWAS faces, the Commission, and its institutions and specialised agencies must strengthen their institutional capacity and increase their visibility among partners and citizens across the region. In this regard, this paper makes the following recommendations:

- **ECOWAS should establish the position of a High Representative for Foreign Affairs.** This role would not replace national-level foreign ministers or the president of the Commission, but would provide institutional leadership and strategic direction for ECOWAS external engagement. The Commission President could set up a dedicated unit for strategic policy formulation and coordination among specialised agencies, while the High Representative would serve as an external spokesperson and oversee the bloc's stakeholder engagement and partnership building.
- **ECOWAS should revamp its communications strategy to counter misinformation and enhance local legitimacy.** A dedicated "ECOWAS Voice" unit, supported by the ECOWAS Youth and Sport Development Centre, should be established for proactive, integrated communication and rapid fact-checking across all official channels.
- **The Commission should also create a user-friendly website** with active, multilingual social media engagement, alongside producing accessible video and podcast content. ECOWAS should collaborate with community radio networks and civil society organizations, and develop educational materials for audiences in the region and beyond.

- **ECOWAS should pay attention to independent public opinion surveys**, like those provided by Afrobarometer, and continuous analysis of the media landscape are necessary to inform and adapt ECOWAS communication strategies.
- Finally, the **Commission organization should establish clear metrics** to measure the impact of its communication efforts. This new approach to public communications will build public trust and strengthen regional solidarity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Amandine Gnanguênon is a senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Program at the APRI. She is also an associate research fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and a nonresident fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF). She has more than 15 years of experience working on West African regional security and integration, and has published several policy briefs focusing on ECOWAS.

Daouda Thiam is a former Research Fellow in the Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Program at APRI, focusing on West Africa, development and climate change. He holds a Master of Science in International Development Studies (sp. Knowledge, Technology and Innovation) from Wageningen University and Research.

Emmanuel Baba Aduku is a former Research Fellow in the Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Program at APRI focusing on geopolitics, Africa-EU relations, and international development. He holds a Master of Public Policy from the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt and a Master of Science in Sociology (sp. Development) from the University of Ibadan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Nwangwu, C. et al. (2019). Regionalism in World Politics: Interrogating the Relevance of the ECOWAS in Global Political Economy. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13(2): 111-132
- Ojewale, O. (2024). Geopolitics and Terrorism in West Africa. In Z. Cope (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics*. Palgrave Macmillan.



Africa Policy Research Institute is an independent and nonpartisan African think tank. It researches key policy issues affecting African countries and the African continent. APRI provides insights to the German and European Union policy-making processes on Africa. In addition, APRI provides policy options to African policymakers and civil society actors.

Imprint
APRI - Africa Policy Research
Institute gGmbH
Prinzenstrasse 85D
10969 Berlin
Germany

License:

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Executive Director:
Dr. Olumide Abimbola
Contact: Dr. Amandine Gnanouénon
Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics
& Geoeconomics Program
Email: agnanguenon@afripoli.org