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*Unlocking Effective ECOWAS-AU Collaboration
in UN-Backed Peace Operations*

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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

Peacekeeping operations led by the United Nations (UN) are undergoing a significant reassessment amid increasing scepticism over their effectiveness and sustainability. The United States, the largest donor to UN peacekeeping, has proposed cuts to its funding for UN-led operations. It also appears reluctant to fund African-led peacekeeping missions as part of the stipulations of UN Security Council Resolution 2719. These developments signal a broader shift in the global peace and security landscape, one in which African regional organisations are increasingly expected to take the lead in managing conflicts on the continent.

Amid this changing geopolitical environment, ECOWAS stands at a critical juncture. With a long history of leading peace operations in West Africa, the regional bloc is uniquely positioned to play a more prominent role in the continental and global peace and security architecture. This paper explores how ECOWAS can respond to the growing demand for African-led peacekeeping by improving its coordination with the AU and strategically aligning itself with the evolving role of the UN, despite the drawdown of UN peace operations in West Africa. It focuses on three interconnected themes: the political and operational coordination between ECOWAS and the AU, the institutional factors shaping their relationship with the UN, and the question of accessing UN-assessed funding for ECOWAS missions.

The paper argues for a clearer division of labour, strengthened cooperation, and a more precise application of the African Union's subsidiarity principle to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of African-led peace operations.

THE EROSION OF UN-LED PEACEKEEPING AND THE PUSH FOR 'AFRICAN SOLUTIONS

In recent years, UN peacekeeping has come under increased scrutiny for its struggle to adapt to complex conflicts involving insurgencies, violent extremism, and transnational crime. Many analysts have described these evolving conflict environments as contexts

where there is, in effect, “no peace to keep” pointing to the need for more robust and adaptive mission mandates — something the UN has often struggled to implement effectively. At the same time, a

“the demand for “African solutions to African problems” has gained renewed momentum”

counterargument posits that peace enforcement, by its nature, presents a conceptual and practical paradox: a more forceful, militarised mandate may not necessarily be more effective at delivering sustainable peace in a conflict theatre. Additionally, the protracted nature of crises has hurt the UN’s legitimacy in some parts of the world, with widespread public protests and government-led calls for the termination of UN missions in countries like Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Against this backdrop, the demand for “African solutions to African problems” has gained renewed momentum. A key factor fuelling this call is the continent’s increasing demand for a greater voice in international affairs, especially within global decision-making forums like the UN Security Council (UNSC). UN Security Council Resolution 2719, which was adopted in 2023, was a landmark attempt to address one such structural imbalance, by creating a sustainable financing mechanism for AU-led peace operations. The resolution committed to covering up to 75 percent of the costs of peacekeeping missions through UN-assessed contributions, leaving a critical 25 percent funding gap that underscores the need for stronger African financing mechanisms. Nonetheless, Resolution 2719 was widely hailed as a step toward legitimising African-led missions and enabling better burden-sharing between the UN and African regional organisations.

The AU is central to this shift and must collaborate effectively with regional organisations like ECOWAS, which holds extensive peacekeeping experience in West Africa but often acts independently. Rather than assuming a rigid division of labour, the emerging challenge is to clarify roles, build complementarity and ensure that the strategic direction and operational delivery of every mission are shared responsibilities.

ECOWAS AND THE ROAD AHEAD FOR WEST AFRICAN PEACEKEEPING

Of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) recognised by the AU, ECOWAS is the most experienced in conducting peace operations. At various points between 1990 and 2017, it deployed personnel to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali and the Gambia. In 1999, ECOWAS overhauled its approach to peacebuilding with the establishment of the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. This new framework established an early warning system for conflict prevention in West Africa and defined the role ECOWAS would play on issues like preventive diplomacy, human rights, transnational crime, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. The Protocol laid the foundation for the establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), an

arrangement composed of West African military, police and civilian units designed for rapid deployment in a crisis. It also clarified the conditions that could trigger an armed intervention by ECOWAS, such as humanitarian crises, unconstitutional changes of government and threats to regional peace such as instances of large-scale human rights violations, cases of conflict in a member state and internal crises that risk triggering a humanitarian disaster or undermining regional peace and security.

Despite the considerable steps ECOWAS has taken to shore up its institutional capacity, the bloc's credibility and operational effectiveness continue to face mounting strain. In recent years, it has been increasingly tested by internal divisions, resource constraints and, most notably, the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – three founding members who were central to the design of the bloc's security architecture. While their exit was triggered by sanctions imposed on Mali and Niger after military coups in the two countries, it also reflected deeper, longstanding grievances with ECOWAS over its perceived failure to adequately support their fight against terrorism and violent extremism. This rupture has cast further doubt on the organisation's ability to act as a security guarantor in West Africa.

Nonetheless, ECOWAS' broad mandate and deep experience with a wide range of policy areas gives it a comparative advantage in coordinating a regional security architecture for West Africa. By the same token, the bloc's political leadership — particularly the Authority of Heads of State and Government commonly referred to as “the Authority” — must establish a renewed sense of purpose for its members, some of whom believe that the organisation is yet to come to grips with its role in peace operations. ECOWAS must also strengthen coordination with the AU given that the continental body is the UN's primary interlocutor on African peace and security issues.

A key institutional challenge shaping ECOWAS's broader engagement in peace operations is the lack of a formal framework that fully integrates the regional bloc's missions within the UN structure. Unlike AU-led operations, which typically receive formal mandates from the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC), thus enabling them to access logistical and financial support from the UN, most ECOWAS missions proceeded without the formal endorsement of the AU. This gap complicates the West African bloc's collaboration with UN bodies, as it limits ECOWAS' eligibility for UN-assessed funding under resolutions like 2719. Although ECOWAS holds observer status at the UN, its inconstant invitation to and participation in the body's deliberations restricts its ability to influence critical areas such as mandate-setting, resource allocation, and operational planning for West African peace endeavours. This disconnect not only hampers ECOWAS' engagement with the UN but also reflects deeper challenges in the regional bloc's relationship with the AU, where questions of authority, mandate, and coordination shape their collaboration.

MAKING SENSE OF ECOWAS-AU DIVIDES

The relationship between the AU and ECOWAS has been marked by considerable tension, despite their shared commitment to regional integration and peacebuilding in Africa. At the core of this tension is the AU's subsidiarity principle, which defines the relationship between the AU and RECs like ECOWAS. As outlined in the AU's Constitutive Act and the 2011 revised Protocol on Relations between the AU and RECs, subsidiarity is grounded in the idea that regional organisations and other actors closest to crises should take the lead in managing them, with the AU expected to step in as a last resort. Ideally, this framework could allow the AU to provide strategic guidance and oversight on issues such as diplomacy, norms and funding, while regional organisations like ECOWAS make operational decisions on the ground. In practice, however, the relationship has often played out less as a coordinated division of labour and more in siloes, with the AU and RECs often acting independently.

Subsidiarity has often led to friction between the two bodies because of its inconsistent application, leading to confusion and policy gridlock. For instance, there is some ambiguity over how to determine when a regional institution has the mandate to act and when the lead response to a security issue should revert to the AU. The divergent reactions of ECOWAS and the AU to the 2023 coup in Niger illustrated this puzzle. Citing its 1999 mechanism for conflict prevention, which explicitly identifies unconstitutional changes of government as grounds for an intervention, ECOWAS imposed sanctions on the junta that deposed then-President Mohamed Bazoum and threatened to use military force to restore him to power. For its part, the AU took a more lenient approach by calling for dialogue between the two sides.

This example demonstrates how institutional disconnects, regardless of their root causes, can undermine effective responses to regional security challenges. While subsidiarity is not solely responsible for these coordination failures, the Niger example shows how its ambiguous application can enable or worsen such fragmentation between the AU and Africa's RECs, which will make collective action more difficult.

Against the background of institutional friction, ECOWAS' preference for autonomy should not tempt it to bypass the AU in search of the UN's support for a potential deployment. As a matter of fact, previous ECOWAS peacekeeping operations have demonstrated that a direct UN-ECOWAS collaboration without the involvement of the AU is not as straightforward as it may seem. For instance, the deployment of UN missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s was preceded by intense debates, revealing the UN's initial reluctance to deploy troops alongside forces from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which operated outside the remit of a formal UNSC mandate.

In both instances, the UNSC hesitated to approve ECOMOG's requests for financial and logistical support. Although the UN later sent military observer missions UNOMIL to Liberia in 1993 and UNOMSIL to Sierra Leone in 1998 to support ECOMOG in the

implementation of and compliance with peace agreements brokered among the relevant parties, resource shortages forced a partial withdrawal of ECOMOG troops from Sierra Leone in 2000. The UN later transformed UNOMSIL into a full peacekeeping mission, while UNOMIL was followed by the establishment of a post-conflict UN peacebuilding office in Liberia that was tasked with supporting the country's reconstruction.

These experiences highlighted a major institutional dilemma in the ECOWAS-AU-UN nexus. Although ECOWAS' proximity to local actors and willingness to act swiftly confers certain advantages in crisis management, the bloc's relative independence from coordination between the AU and the UN illustrates the weaknesses of acting outside structured continental and global frameworks. While the OAU — the AU's predecessor organisation — was less ambitious than the AU is today, it is reasonable to expect that a more robust continental organisation could have helped bridge the strategic and political gap between ECOWAS and the UN by providing a unified African voice and facilitating alignment on mandate, support and oversight for peace operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the shifting dynamics in global peacekeeping, this paper makes two recommendations aimed at raising the capacity of ECOWAS to coordinate regional peace operations:

- 1. Formalise the ECOWAS-AU division of labour.** ECOWAS and the AU must jointly articulate a formal division of labour in peace operations that is guided by the principles of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage. Subsidiarity should be regarded not as a constraint on AU engagement, but as a flexible framework that enables joint action depending on the context.

While the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) provides a broad framework for collaboration, its current application leaves room for greater specificity. Most ECOWAS missions are not formally mandated by the AU's PSC, restricting their access to predictable UN funding as established under Resolution 2719. As such, refining the ECOWAS-AU division of labour would involve formalising the mechanisms for the AU to endorse regional deployments and strengthening ECOWAS' capacity to align its missions with the AU's strategic priorities. In practical terms, regular, structured consultations between the two organisations should replace ad hoc coordination. The AU should participate consistently in ECOWAS security summits, and ECOWAS should engage directly in the AU PSC's deliberations. This would not only enhance their situational awareness and reduce duplication, but also enable the AU to credibly champion ECOWAS-led operations in UN forums and boost their chances of receiving UN support. Ultimately, this is about both enhancing ECOWAS' coordination capacity and ensuring that the bloc can meet the conditions necessary to access UN-assessed funding for African-led peace operations.

2. Strengthen ECOWAS' role in global peace operations: ECOWAS should assert itself as a key actor in the future of global peace operations by seeking a seat at the UN-AU table. Practically, this includes participating in the UN-AU Joint Task Force on Peace and Security, gaining observer or consultative status on the UNSC and being actively involved in the design, review, and planning of potential future UN peace operations in West Africa. By the same token, the AU must actively promote ECOWAS's operational leadership in UN forums, which would ensure that ECOWAS-led missions would be eligible for logistical and financial support under Resolution 2719.

This could require the AU to formally endorse ECOWAS-led deployments and advocating for them within joint AU-UN frameworks, such as the annual consultative meetings between the AU PSC and the UN Security Council. It would also require coordination to ensure that ECOWAS missions are aligned with the AU's peace and security priorities, allowing the AU to present them to the UN as part of a unified African position—one of the key conditions for triggering support under the resolution. A more unified approach will amplify Africa's voice in global peace and security and bolster ECOWAS's credibility as a regional peacekeeping actor.

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