От ЭКОВАС к альянсу государств Сахеля: региональная фрагментация и снижение издержек выхода, 2020–2025 гг.

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В статье исследуется институциональный разрыв между Экономическим сообществом государств Западной Африки (ЭКОВАС) и Мали, Буркина-Фасо и Нигером с августа 2020 г. по декабрь 2025 г. Цель — определить, как альтернативные внешние партнерства взаимодействовали с политикой принуждения ЭКОВАС, изменяя ожидаемые издержки выхода из организации и создания Альянса государств Сахеля (АГС). Методы: структурированное сфокусированное сравнение и процесс-трейсинг на основе коммюнике и правовых актов ЭКОВАС, Липтако-Гурмской хартии, Ниамейского коммюнике 2024 г., Резолюции СБ ООН 2690, официальных финансовых документов, научных исследований и сообщений СМИ; издержки в сфере безопасности, дипломатии, экономики и легитимности оцениваются качественно по датированным обязательствам и сохраненным институциональным связям, а Гвинея используется как теневой случай, в котором переворот и санкции не привели к выходу. Результаты: диверсификация партнерств, вероятно, снизила ожидаемую изоляцию в сфере безопасности и дипломатии, тогда как смягчение санкций, сохранение торговых связей, свободы передвижения и членства в ЗАЭВС ограничили экономическое размежевание; российские контингенты появились в Мали и Буркина-Фасо до объявления о выходе в январе 2024 г., а в Нигере соглашение предшествовало объявлению, а развертывание последовало за ним. Вывод: последовательность событий согласуется с трактовкой диверсификации как способствующего фактора, не доказывая ее необходимости; результат определяется как конкурентный регионализм — институциональное соперничество при сохранении экономической и социальной взаимозависимости.

Ключевые слова: ЭКОВАС, Альянс государств Сахеля, Сахель, регионализм, издержки выхода, внешнеполитическая ориентация, хеджирование, внешние партнерства, процесс-трейсинг

Introduction

Between 2020 and 2023, soldiers took power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Each coup had its own domestic story, but the regional response tied them together and, in doing so, put the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its 2001 framework on democracy and good governance to its sternest test. The organisation did what its rules told it to do: it suspended the three governments, negotiated transition timetables, applied targeted measures and, in two cases, imposed broad economic and financial sanctions. All of this was meant to defend constitutional order. What it produced instead was a rival organisation. By September 2023 the three military governments had formed the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES). On 28 January 2024 they announced together that they were leaving ECOWAS [3]; the withdrawal took legal effect on 29 January 2025 [17]. Over the following year the AES acquired a common passport and an announced joint force [10], and in September 2025 the three governments jointly declared their withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC). A region that was already deeply interdependent now had two competing claimants to its authority.

The break with ECOWAS coincided with a break with the West. Mali ended its long-standing arrangements with France and asked the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to leave. Burkina Faso and Niger ended French military cooperation, and Niger subsequently secured the departure of the United States as well. Russia became more visible, first through Wagner and then through the Africa Corps, a body linked to the Ministry of Defence. Wagner's announcement in June 2025 that it was leaving concerned Mali; Russian deployments to Burkina Faso and Niger had been reported by international news agencies the year before. Türkiye, China and others offered security, commercial or diplomatic options of their own. It is tempting to read all this as an episode of great-power competition. That reading should be treated with care. That reading turns African governments into objects of others' rivalries, and it confuses things that happened at the same time with things that caused each other.

Leaving a regional organisation carries costs. ECOWAS membership carried rights of participation, trade preferences, and freedom of movement. Access to the coastal corridors and to regional finance rested on separate agreements and institutions, each with its own legal footing, and the security cooperation provided by France, the United States and the United Nations came through bilateral or multilateral mandates of their own rather than as a by-product of ECOWAS membership. So it helps to keep two things apart: the direct costs of formal exit, and the wider costs of a political realignment that also meant giving up established security relationships. The question that matters is how those anticipated costs changed. Alternative partners could reduce the prospect of isolation. Sanctions relief and the ties that survived withdrawal could limit its material consequences.

Put as a question: how did the availability of alternative external partnerships, combined with ECOWAS enforcement, affect the expected costs of exit and so the political feasibility of leaving the Community and building the AES, for Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, between 2020 and 2025? The working hypothesis is that the alternative partnerships enabled the rupture without originating it. They plausibly lowered the security and diplomatic costs of realignment once relations with ECOWAS and with the established Western providers had already deteriorated. They did not replace the regional economic ties, which survived in part through other institutions and through transitional arrangements. Three things are new here. Exit cost is broken into components that can be assessed with evidence other than the withdrawal decision itself. Guinea is brought in as a shadow case: a coup, a suspension and sanctions, but no exit and no comparable sequence of one security provider replacing another. And the outcome is described as competitive regionalism, which is neither "decolonisation" nor the swapping of one patron for another.

The argument runs in five steps. It begins by placing the study within the scholarship on ECOWAS, on comparative regionalism and on how weak states choose their alignments. It then defines exit cost, its components and competitive regionalism, and explains the comparative design, the coding rules and their limits. The results follow: ECOWAS enforcement, the withdrawal of the established providers and the arrival

of new ones, the Guinean counter-case, the balance of costs offset and costs retained, and the building of the AES. The discussion asks how far diversification can carry the explanation and what the case tells us more generally.

Materials and Methods

The method is a structured, focused comparison of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, combined with process tracing, which asks whether the things a proposed mechanism implies actually turn up in the record, and in the expected order [20]. The three cases share the outcome—collective exit—and much else: military rule and an insurgency none of them has contained. Guinea supplies the variation. It had a coup in September 2021, was suspended, and from September 2022 faced diplomatic, economic and financial sanctions; it stayed in ECOWAS. The sources reviewed here record no comparable departure of a major foreign security deployment from Guinea, and no comparable replacement. Its coastline and its very different threat environment mean it cannot serve as a controlled comparison, still less as proof that diversification was necessary for exit.

The period runs from the August 2020 coup in Mali to 31 December 2025, which captures almost the whole of the AES's first year outside ECOWAS. The primary sources are the 2001 ECOWAS democracy protocol; the Authority's communiqués of 25 March, 3 July and 22 September 2022, 30 July and 10 August 2023, and 24 February 2024; the ECOWAS statement marking the effective withdrawal; the Liptako-Gourma Charter as transmitted to the United Nations in document S/2023/695; the final communiqué of the July 2024 AES summit in Niamey; Security Council Resolution 2690 (2023); the record of the April 2025 Russia–AES ministerial meeting; the reporting of the September 2025 AES declaration on the ICC; the December 2025 ECOWAS records on Guinea; and the records of the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) for the 2025 financial year. Where official documents are silent, above all on the transition from Wagner to the Africa Corps, whose contractual terms have never been fully disclosed—peer-reviewed studies and verified agency reporting supply the dates.

Four indicators are coded for each case, and every coding decision rests on at least one dated, publicly documented event (Table 1). "Coercive escalation" records the move from suspension and mediation to targeted or broad sanctions and to an explicit threat of force. "Established-provider withdrawal" records the termination or withdrawal of French-led, other Western or United Nations security arrangements. "Partner substitution" requires something observable—a deployment, an agreement, a purchase, an official diplomatic mechanism; speeches do not count. Procurement that pre-dated the crisis, new commitments to cooperate and actual deployments are kept apart, because they imply different sequences and different levels of support. "Institutional exit" records the movement from resistance by a single government to a mutual-defence charter, a confederation treaty and completed withdrawal.

There is an obvious risk of circularity. If the only evidence that exit had become cheaper were the fact of exit, the argument would be circular. Three kinds of evidence are therefore used that do not depend on the outcome: the timing of agreements and deployments relative to each institutional decision; what the governments themselves said in the January 2024 announcement and in later AES documents; and the contrasting sequence in Guinea. Statements tell us about positions, not about private calculations. Economic continuity is assessed on its own terms, through WAEMU membership, ECOWAS's transitional arrangements for movement and trade, and the timing of sanctions relief. Table 2 draws these qualitative judgements together. It puts no numbers on costs and makes no claim about how large any offset was.

Stated motives and demonstrated effects are different things, and the method keeps them so. ECOWAS communiqués are authoritative on what was decided; they are not neutral verdicts on whether it worked. AES statements establish commitments and positions, not public legitimacy or improved security. Claims about popular attitudes are kept to a minimum, because there are no survey data to support them. Confidential security contracts and complete aid and trade flows lie outside the corpus. What the study can show is that partner diversification came before, or alongside, particular decisions and plausibly lowered their anticipated costs; that Guinea followed a different documented sequence and did not leave; and that institutional arrangements limited economic separation. That is enough to make the mechanism plausible. It is not enough to say what would have happened had the alternative partners not existed, and it cannot weigh the contribution of any single partner.

Literature Review

Historiography and Research Gap

The first body of writing concerns how ECOWAS turned itself from an economic community into a security actor. The studies of the interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone show a practice built from Nigerian leadership, improvised coalitions and rules that were formalised only gradually [1]. Later work traces the institutionalisation of conflict prevention, peace operations and constitutional norms, and notes the strain between legal ambition, member-state interests and the capacity to deliver. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance wrote the rejection of unconstitutional power into Community law and gave every later suspension and sanction its legal basis [11]. All this explains why ECOWAS responded to the coups as it did. It does not explain why enforcement ended in organised exit in three cases and in renewed bargaining in a fourth.

A second body treats West Africa through regional security complex theory and comparative regionalism. Neighbours are bound together by security because armed groups, displaced people, trafficking and local quarrels cross borders far more easily than they cross continents [6]. The "new regionalism" literature adds that regional orders are made not only by formal organisations but by overlapping political projects, informal networks and outside connections [28]. That fits the Sahel, where ECOWAS, the African Union, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the AES and the cross-border communities all coexist. But a formal withdrawal from ECOWAS raises a question this literature does not fully answer: what happens when regional frameworks compete, and what does leaving one of them actually cost?

The third body is about how weak states choose their partners. The theory of omnibalancing holds that leaders of internally threatened regimes align abroad to counter the threats that worry them most, which are usually at home or next door rather than in the international system at large [8]. The hedging literature adds that states facing uncertainty diversify their partners so as not to depend on any one of them [24]. The writing on multipolarity finds more room than before for regional actors to diversify alignments and build institutions of their own [9], and Russian scholars have traced the deeper political roots of Sahelian insecurity [22]. Read together, these literatures suggest that partner diversification is best understood as risk management by regimes, not as something designed from outside.

Recent international work addresses the rupture directly. Kufuor [23] deals with its legal and institutional consequences; Aina, Afolabi and Fayemi [4] connect democratic relapse, insecurity and the alternative integration offered by the AES. Sissoko et al. [27] trace the macroeconomic channels—trade, investment, transaction costs, monetary credibility—through which withdrawal is likely to hurt three landlocked economies. Marangio [26] applies hedging to the three military governments and makes the important observation that staying in WAEMU softens the economic risk of leaving ECOWAS. Chikhachev [7] shows that the end of Operation Barkhane was one symptom of a wider crisis in French policy towards the Sahel.

Russian scholarship has started to treat the AES as a subject in its own right. Loshkarev [25] sees it as a new kind of minilateralism, notes how little sustained attention Russian researchers had paid it, and observes that training and rearmament were taken out of the tripartite framework and handled bilaterally with Russia. Adu and Mezyaev [2] examine the legal basis of the ECOWAS sanctions on Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger and argue that enforcement cut loose from Community norms and humanitarian imperatives risked splitting the organisation. Fain, Issaev and Korotayev [19] call the Sahelian seizures of power "coupvolutions", military action fused with mass mobilisation, and Degterev, Issaev, Krasovskaya, Mardasov and Subbotin [10] assess the AES's military-political capacity together with the instruments still held by France, the United States, China, Türkiye, Iran and the Gulf states. This is the institutional and empirical ground on which a more explicit comparison of enforcement, partner availability and the feasibility of exit can be built.

What this article adds is a way of connecting these debates: a comparison of the sequence and the components of anticipated exit cost. It looks at how sanctions, sovereignty claims and partner availability worked on one another; it separates the costs an outside actor might reduce from the ties that regional institutions preserved; and it uses

Guinea to ask why a coup and sanctions did not always end in withdrawal. The result is a bounded claim about a mechanism, not a general law of regional disintegration.

Theoretical Framework

ECOWAS is three things at once: a legal organisation, a security institution and a political arena. Its authority rests on treaty rules, but also on whether members comply and on whether they regard enforcement as legitimate. Hirschman's distinction between exit, voice and loyalty is the natural starting point [21]. The suspended governments began with voice, arguing over transition timetables. Exit from a regional organisation is not a single announcement. It is a process that runs from contesting the rules, through mutual-defence commitments and a rival institutional project, to legal withdrawal.

Exit becomes feasible when the expected costs of leaving fall below the expected costs of staying and complying. Here the expected cost of exit is broken into four parts. The security cost is the loss of outside counterterrorism support—training, intelligence, equipment—that had come through established bilateral or multilateral arrangements. The diplomatic cost is isolation: losing a voice in ECOWAS and being exposed to coordinated pressure; suspension from African Union bodies is treated separately, as a consequence of unconstitutional government rather than of exit. The economic cost is the loss of ECOWAS-mediated market access, coastal corridors, regional financial institutions and freedom of movement, together with the direct effect of sanctions. The legitimacy cost is the reputational burden of pariah status and the narrative a government has to sustain at home to justify its position. These costs belong to overlapping processes and cannot all be attributed to formal withdrawal. Each can in principle be reduced by a different actor, and each can fall for reasons that have nothing to do with any partner—for example, when the sanctioning organisation loses the will or the capacity to enforce.

External partnership diversification here means the deliberate widening of security, diplomatic, commercial and development relationships so that dependence on any one provider goes down. It is not the same as alignment with a single state, although Russia was the most visible alternative security partner in all three cases; it can include working ties with Türkiye, China, the Gulf states and others. Nor does diversification show that the new relationships are any more effective or durable than the old. The claim is narrower. A wider portfolio changes what decision-makers expect to lose if established support is withdrawn. Expected availability and actual deployment are kept distinct throughout, because a government can quite rationally discount the cost of exit on the strength of a partner's demonstrated willingness to support a neighbour in the same position, before any deployment has taken place on its own territory.

Competitive regionalism is the name given here to what results. ECOWAS and the AES make partly incompatible claims about legitimate political order and about who leads on security, yet they operate in the same economic and social space. Competition does not abolish interdependence. People go on trading, migrating and carrying documents issued under ECOWAS rules, and armed groups cross the new boundary as readily as the old ones. The concept steers between two errors—that the AES has replaced ECOWAS in the Sahel, and that withdrawal is merely symbolic—and it directs attention to what was actually separated and what was kept.

The proposed mechanism has four stages. Domestic governance and security crises come first and precede the unconstitutional change of power. ECOWAS enforcement then raises the material cost of defiance while feeding a counter-narrative about sovereignty. The withdrawal of established partners and the availability of alternatives next shift the anticipated costs of resistance and of exit. Finally, the governments turn alignment into an institution. The stages may overlap from case to case. The shadow case tests the narrower proposition that coup plus sanctions is not enough to explain withdrawal. On the economic side the expectation is that retained regional arrangements and sanctions relief limit separation even where no outside partner replaces the old markets, finance and transit rights.

Results

ECOWAS enforcement and the failure to restore constitutional order

ECOWAS went into the crisis with a clear mandate. The 2001 Protocol forbids obtaining or holding power by unconstitutional means and makes constitutional convergence a condition of belonging [11]. The difficulty did not lie in the rule. It was turning a formally consistent norm into compliance when member governments disputed whether enforcement was legitimate, proportionate or wise.

Mali came first. After the coup of August 2020 and the second seizure of power in May 2021, the bargaining was about the length and credibility of the transition. On 9 January 2022, once the transition authorities had proposed a timetable stretching years ahead, ECOWAS imposed broad economic and financial sanctions, closing borders and suspending financial transactions. The measures were upheld on 25 March 2022 [12] and lifted on 3 July, after the Authority accepted a 24-month transition counted from March 2022; suspension from decision-making bodies stayed in place [13]. The sanctions secured a negotiated timetable. They did not bring back elected government, and they gave the junta a usable grievance, with outside pressure recast as foreign interference.

Burkina Faso was treated less coercively, at least at first. The communiqué of 25 March 2022 threatened economic and financial sanctions if no acceptable timetable arrived by 25 April [12]. On 3 July the Authority accepted a 24-month transition running from 1 July 2022 and described itself as lifting the economic and financial sanctions adopted on 25 March [13, paras. 19–20]. The record needs reading carefully here: the March decision was conditional, and the July wording does not establish that a border-and-transactions blockade of the Malian kind was ever enforced. A second coup in September 2022 showed the limits of timetable-based bargaining. Burkina Faso drew steadily closer to Mali on security and diplomacy, which is one reason the severity of economic sanctions cannot by itself account for the later collective exit.

Niger, in July 2023, was the sharpest escalation. ECOWAS demanded that President Mohamed Bazoum be restored, imposed sweeping commercial and financial sanctions, closed the borders and gave the coup leaders a seven-day ultimatum [15]. On 10 August the Authority ordered the ECOWAS Standby Force activated, while still saying it preferred diplomacy [15]. No force was sent and constitutional government did not return. The Liptako-Gourma Charter that followed committed the three governments to defend one another [29], and turned their quarrels with ECOWAS over sovereignty and intervention into an institution.

On 24 February 2024 ECOWAS lifted the main border, trade, financial and utility restrictions on Niger, citing humanitarian grounds. It also removed specified individual sanctions on Mali's transition authorities and the economic and financial sanctions on Guinea. This was not a blanket lifting of identical measures across Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso [16]. Bazoum had not been released and no Nigerien timetable had been agreed. The relief came after the three AES governments had announced they were leaving. The sequence says something about the constraints on ECOWAS's enforcement and cohesion, though it leaves open how much humanitarian concern and other political calculations contributed.

Table 1
Coded evidence matrix: dated observable events by indicator and case, 2020–2025

Indicator	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger	Guinea (shadow case)
Coercive escalation by ECOWAS	Suspension Aug 2020; broad economic and financial sanctions 9 Jan 2022, upheld 25 Mar 2022, lifted 3 Jul 2022; suspension maintained. Coded: HIGH.	Suspension Jan 2022; conditional economic/financial sanctions threatened 25 Mar; July communiqué described those measures as lifted after acceptance of a 24-month timetable. No comparable broad blockade established. LOW–MEDIUM.	Suspension, broad sanctions, border closure and 7-day ultimatum 30 Jul 2023; Standby Force activation ordered 10 Aug 2023; broad measures lifted 24 Feb 2024. Coded: VERY HIGH (threat of force).	Suspension Sept 2021; diplomatic, ECOWAS financial-institution and targeted sanctions, 22 Sept 2022; subsequent transition bargaining. Economic/financial measures lifted Feb 2024. MEDIUM.

Indicator	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger	Guinea (shadow case)
Established-provider withdrawal	French withdrawal completed Aug 2022; MINUSMA mandate terminated 30 June 2023 and withdrawal completed in Dec 2023. PRESENT.	End of French Sabre operations marked on 18 Feb 2023 and announced the next day. PRESENT.	French forces withdrew Dec 2023; U.S. withdrawal completed Sept 2024. Major French/U.S. provider withdrawal: PRESENT.	No equivalent withdrawal of a major foreign counterinsurgency deployment established in the reviewed sources. NOT DOCUMENTED.
Partner substitution (observable)	Russian personnel present before Jan 2024 announcement; Turkish drones acquired during 2022–2024. Wagner announced departure in June 2025 while Africa Corps remained. PRESENT before announcement.	Turkish procurement before collective exit; Russian personnel reported arriving on 24 Jan 2024, before the 28 Jan announcement. PRESENT before announcement.	Turkish procurement preceded the 2023 coup. Russia–Niger cooperation agreement: 16 Jan 2024; Russian instructors: Apr 2024. PRESENT: commitment before, deployment after announcement.	No equivalent new replacement deployment established in the reviewed sources. This does not imply an absence of diversified external ties. NOT DOCUMENTED.
Institutional exit	Co-founds Liptako-Gourma Charter 16 Sept 2023; confederation treaty 6 Jul 2024; withdrawal effective 29 Jan 2025; AES ICC declaration 22 Sept 2025. ECOWAS exit: COMPLETE.	Same tripartite steps; withdrawal effective 29 Jan 2025. Coded: COMPLETE.	Same tripartite steps; hosts Niamey summit Jul 2024; withdrawal effective 29 Jan 2025. Coded: COMPLETE.	No ECOWAS exit through Dec 2025. Constitutional referendum Sept 2025; presidential election 28 Dec observed by ECOWAS [18]. ABSENT.

Source: Compiled by the author from ECOWAS [12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18], United Nations Security Council [29; 30], Degterev et al. [10] and dated agency and official reporting (Reuters, February 2023, January and April 2024; the joint statement of the U.S. Department of Defense and Niger's Ministry of National Defense, September 2024; Al Jazeera, June 2025). Levels of coercion are qualitative assessments of formal scope, not estimates of economic impact. "Not documented" records a limit of the reviewed corpus.

Provider withdrawal and partner substitution

The old security providers left before, or while, the three states withdrew from ECOWAS. French forces left Mali in August 2022; Resolution 2690 ended MINUSMA's mandate on 30 June 2023 and required it to be gone by the end of the year [30; 7]. In Burkina Faso a flag was lowered at the French Sabre camp on 18 February 2023 and the armed forces announced the end of French operations the next day. French forces left Niger in December 2023, and in September 2024 the United States and Niger confirmed that the American withdrawal was also complete. Each of these was a separate national decision and a separate operational process. None followed automatically from leaving ECOWAS.

As the established providers withdrew, Russia offered something in their place. Russian personnel were in Mali before the January 2024 announcement, although what the authorities called them and what outside reporting called them were not the same. Wagner announced on 6 June 2025 that it was leaving; the Africa Corps, by the same reports, stayed. That was a reorganisation of Russian support in Mali, not the first appearance of the Africa Corps in the three countries. In Burkina Faso, Russian personnel were reported by Reuters arriving on 24 January 2024—four days before the joint announcement. The chronology shows that alternative support was available. It does not show that the new deployments reproduced either the capabilities or the results of the forces that had left.

Niger is the most instructive case, because commitment and deployment fall on opposite sides of the announcement. On 16 January 2024 Russia's defence ministry announced an agreement to develop military ties with Niger. The first publicly reported arrival of Russian instructors, according to Niger's state broadcaster, came in April 2024. So a commitment preceded 28 January and the deployment followed it. Mali's and Burkina Faso's relationships with Moscow, and the AES mutual-defence commitment, were also visible to decision-makers in Niamey. That supports an interpretation built on anticipated support. What the public record cannot tell us is how much weight Nigerien decision-makers gave to each of these signals.

Nor was diversification only about Russia. Degterev et al. [10, pp. 10, 16, 23] document Turkish drone purchases by all three states. Niger's began before its July 2023 coup, so on its own it proves nothing about a post-coup switch; Mali's and Burkina Faso's followed their own national timelines. China's commercial and infrastructure ties, and dealings with other partners, widened the range of options without assuming any of the functions ECOWAS performed [4; 26]. The Russia–AES ministerial meeting of 3 April 2025 gave the relationship a collective diplomatic format after legal withdrawal. That meeting is evidence of consolidation afterwards, not of a cause operating before January 2024.

The Guinean shadow case

Guinea had its coup on 5 September 2021, was suspended, and then bargained over its transition for a long time. On 22 September 2022 the Authority ordered ambassadorial consultations, suspended assistance and transactions in Guinea's favour by ECOWAS financial institutions, and imposed targeted asset freezes and travel bans [14, paras. 9–13]. These were not the border and commercial restrictions applied to Mali and Niger. ECOWAS lifted the economic and financial sanctions on Guinea in February 2024 while the dialogue over the transition went on [16]. So Guinea shares the coup and the enforcement with the AES cases, but the coercion was not the same in content, and it did not have the same consequences.

Through December 2025 Guinea stayed in ECOWAS and followed an electoral route. The December summit welcomed progress after the constitutional referendum, and ECOWAS observed the presidential election of 28 December [18]. These engagements show that bargaining continued; they say nothing about democratic legitimacy or about how inclusive the settlement was. Nothing in the corpus records a major foreign counterinsurgency provider leaving Guinea and a new deployment arriving in its place. That is the narrow finding. It does not make Guinea a state without foreign relationships of its own.

Guinea is an imperfect comparison, and it is not presented as anything else. It borders Mali, but it has a coastline and a different insurgency environment, and both affect the costs of realigning on security and of separating economically, so that its exit costs cannot simply be ranked against those of the three landlocked states. What Guinea does show is that a coup and sanctions did not invariably lead to withdrawal. It cannot show that partner substitution was necessary, because geography, exposure to threat, existing commercial relationships and regime strategy all varied as well.

Costs offset and costs retained

Breaking exit cost into parts shows that diversification dealt with some anticipated losses far more directly than others. By January 2024 Mali had Russian personnel on its territory, Burkina Faso had just received a Russian contingent, and Niger had announced a cooperation agreement with Moscow. It is reasonable to infer from this that the expected cost of security isolation had fallen. It is not reasonable to infer that the support was equivalent to what had been lost, or that French, American or United Nations capabilities had been matched. The insurgencies went on [10], and human-rights organisations continued to document abuses against civilians, which is a further warning against equating the availability of a provider with better security.

The diplomatic component had an external side and a regional one. Russian engagement showed that suspension from ECOWAS did not mean diplomatic isolation, and the ministerial meeting of April 2025 later gave that engagement a collective form. Within the region, the AES charter and confederation let the three governments coordinate positions and back one another [29; 10]. These channels reduced their dependence on ECOWAS for diplomatic coordination. How large the effect was, and how much it weighed in the original decision, remain matters of inference.

On the economic side the story is continuity through regional institutions, not replacement by an outside partner. Access to the coastal ports, to the regional livestock and labour markets and to development finance still mattered. Degterev et al. [10, p. 36] report that the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development retained commitments to Burkina Faso of more than €290 million; that is a commitment figure, not a measure of losses caused by leaving. Sissoko et al. [27] set out the

potential macroeconomic costs, from disrupted trade to weaker investment. Three arrangements limited the damage: the sanctions relief of February 2024; ECOWAS's decision in January 2025 to keep recognising documents, allowing visa-free movement and applying the Trade Liberalisation Scheme until further notice; and continued membership of WAEMU and the CFA franc zone [16; 17; 5]. The BCEAO's financial statements for the year to 31 December 2025 list Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger among the eight members of the West African Monetary Union [5, p. 17], which settles the question of monetary integration at the end of the period. WAEMU and ECOWAS have different memberships and different legal competences; keeping one did not preserve every benefit of the other. Marangio [26] reads the 0.5 per cent AES import levy of March 2025 as an additional instrument laid on top of WAEMU membership, not a substitute for it.

Two qualifications are necessary. WAEMU joined in the sanctions on Niger, so the monetary union was not a neutral refuge throughout the crisis [10]. And while the three governments kept their monetary ties, they announced their departure from other multilateral bodies, among them the G5 Sahel and the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie [26]. That pattern supports the idea of a selective exit. It does not show that every political institution was abandoned, or that the economic costs went away.

Legitimacy is the hardest component to judge without representative evidence on what people thought. In their joint statement of 28 January 2024 the three governments accused ECOWAS of acting under foreign influence, of failing to help against terrorism, and of imposing sanctions they called "illegal, illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible" [3; author's translation]. That is a shared narrative about sovereignty. It is not evidence of how far the public accepted it, or that the domestic cost of pariah status had been substantially offset. Table 2 keeps these stated justifications apart from the institutional arrangements that can actually be observed.

Table 2
Components of expected exit cost: alternative support, retained ties and evidentiary limits

Cost component	Relevant ties and potential losses	Alternative support and evidence	Retained ties and limits
Security	Training, equipment, intelligence and operational support under separate bilateral or multilateral arrangements; associated with the wider realignment, not guaranteed by ECOWAS membership.	Russian cooperation and deployments; Turkish procurement; AES collective defense. Alternative support documented; reduction in anticipated isolation inferred.	Support was not functionally identical to former missions. Improved security outcomes or the magnitude of cost replacement are not established.
Diplomatic	Voice in ECOWAS and regional diplomatic coordination. African Union (AU) suspension followed separate rules on unconstitutional government.	Russia–AES dialogue and mutual support within the AES. Additional diplomatic channels documented; effect on expected exit costs inferred.	Alternative channels did not restore ECOWAS participation or automatically remove other institutions' restrictions.
Economic	ECOWAS trade preferences, free movement and development finance; coastal corridors and regional markets supported by overlapping arrangements.	No equivalent replacement of these regional rights is established. Commercial diversification may mitigate selected losses but is not quantified.	Sanctions relief Feb 2024; ECOWAS transitional arrangements Jan 2025; CFA franc monetary union retained through end-2025 [16; 17; 5, p. 17].
Legitimacy	Standing as a constitutional member of a rules-based community.	Shared sovereignty narrative and collective diplomatic identity. Official claims documented; domestic public acceptance not measured.	Human-rights criticism continued. The Sept 2025 ICC announcement created a further dispute over accountability; its reputational effect is not measured.

Source: Author's qualitative synthesis of the events in Table 1 and ECOWAS [16; 17], BCEAO [5], Marangio [26], Sissoko et al. [27], Degterev et al. [10] and Agence Nigérienne de Presse [3]. The table identifies documented arrangements and analytical inferences; it does not quantify costs.

AES institutionalization and competitive regionalism

The fourth stage was turning alignment into institutions. On 16 September 2023 Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, whose collective-defence clauses made an attack on one an attack on all [29]. The charter came after ECOWAS's escalation over Niger and gave the earlier Mali–Burkina alignment a formal, three-way basis. At the first AES summit in Niamey on 6 July 2024 the three heads of state adopted a treaty creating a confederation, with priorities in defence, diplomacy and development [10]. Withdrawal from ECOWAS took effect on 29 January 2025, in the same month that the AES introduced a common passport and publicised plans for a joint force [10]. In September 2025 the three governments announced together that they were leaving the ICC, which they described as an instrument of neo-colonial repression. Under Article 127 of the Rome Statute a withdrawal takes effect a year after the Secretary-General receives written notice, unless a later date is specified, so the September announcement cannot be coded as a completed legal withdrawal in 2025. It does show that the AES had become a vehicle for coordinated positions on international law and not only on defence. Communiqués, however, are evidence of intention. They are not evidence of administrative capacity or of anything delivered.

What was cut and what was kept is what defines competitive regionalism. The AES Confederation also sits uneasily beside the African Union's 2006 moratorium on recognising new regional economic communities beyond the eight already in existence, ECOWAS among them [10]; the moratorium is about recognition as a regional economic community, not a ban on forming a security alliance or a confederation, so the AES's standing in the continental architecture is one thing and its existence as an intergovernmental project another. Political and security authority was separated: the AES claims legitimacy for a sovereignty-first approach and for diversified foreign relations, while ECOWAS keeps its constitutional-governance mandate over those who remain. Economic and social separation stayed incomplete. ECOWAS's transitional measures, WAEMU membership and the cross-border markets still bind the two blocs together. Both seek regional authority; neither can ignore the other. Counterterrorism, pastoral movement, transport corridors, electricity grids and food markets all cross the institutional line. Competition may make both sides adapt. Unmanaged rivalry can also fragment intelligence, raise transaction costs and weaken the response to transnational threats that remained acute throughout.

The rival explanation: did ECOWAS lower the cost itself?

There is a rival account, and it deserves serious consideration. On this view the costs of exit fell not because new partners appeared but because ECOWAS could no longer impose them. Adu and Mezyaev [2] supply the legal version: sanctions detached from Community norms and humanitarian considerations undermine the organisation's own authority. Three observations fit. The threatened intervention in Niger never happened; on 5 August 2023 Nigeria's Senate urged President Tinubu to try diplomacy instead. In February 2024 ECOWAS lifted Niger's broad restrictions without getting Bazoum released or a timetable agreed. And after the withdrawal it kept the movement and trade arrangements in place [16; 17]. All of this points to limits on coercion. None of it shows that ECOWAS had lost every means of imposing costs.

The two explanations can work together, though the public record does not allow their separate weights to be established. Alternative support plausibly reduced the anticipated isolation on security and diplomacy; sanctions relief and the integration that survived limited the economic disruption. The relief of February 2024 came after the withdrawal announcement, so it cannot straightforwardly explain a decision taken earlier unless one can show that relief was anticipated. It may instead have lowered the cost of completing withdrawal and shaped the terms of what followed. Equally, the claim that exit would have been impossible without a replacement provider goes beyond what these cases can demonstrate. What the chronology supports is complementary mechanisms, and possibly a feedback loop between defection and concession.

The process-tracing inference is therefore bounded. Crises of governance and security came before the coups; ECOWAS enforcement sharpened the dispute over authority; alternative relationships gave the three governments more options while that dispute ran. Deployments preceded the January 2024 announcement in Mali and Burkina Faso; in Niger an agreement preceded it and the deployment followed. Economic separation was limited by sanctions relief, ECOWAS's transitional arrangements and continued WAEMU membership. The AES institutionalised collective resistance, and Guinea shows that a coup and sanctions could coexist with continued membership. Taken together, this

makes diversification a plausible enabling factor. It does not make it a necessary one, or a sufficient one.

Discussion

The findings qualify the geopolitical narrative in three ways. First, diversification helps explain how exit became feasible without fully explaining why it was wanted. The motive lay in the meeting of regime survival, an insurgency that no one had defeated and a regional organisation whose enforcement was experienced as illegitimate. That is what omnibalancing predicts: regimes threatened at home pick their foreign partners according to the threats that matter most to them, which were domestic and regional [8]. The outside partners entered a bargaining situation that African governments had already defined. Loshkarev [25] reaches a compatible conclusion from the institutional side: the AES kept counterterrorism coordination in its own hands and contracted training and rearmament out to Russia bilaterally—exactly what one would expect of regimes managing their dependence rather than transferring it.

Second, diversification worked unevenly across the components of cost. The evidence for alternative security and diplomatic channels is far more direct than any evidence that outside partners replaced regional economic rights. Continued WAEMU membership and ECOWAS's transitional arrangements show that formal withdrawal could go together with substantial economic ties. That selectivity is consistent with African agency and cost-conscious bargaining. It does not, by itself, rule out outside influence, and it does not prove that economic considerations decided the matter.

Third, the Niger sequence separates anticipated support from deployment. A cooperation agreement signed before the withdrawal announcement is a stronger observable signal than expectations inferred from what neighbours had done. The deployment that followed is consistent with the commitment, but it cannot retrospectively prove what the government calculated at the time. A regional demonstration effect—support for one government changing another's expectations—remains a hypothesis. Establishing it would take elite interviews and other evidence of how decisions were actually made.

The case also shows the limits of regional organisations and outside partners alike. ECOWAS retained control of important trade and mobility arrangements; WAEMU and the BCEAO ran separate monetary institutions. The outside partners provided selected capabilities and diplomatic channels; they did not take over these regional functions. Sanctions relief, for its part, reflected political, humanitarian and enforcement considerations that cannot be reduced to foreign intervention. Regional coercion and external support both operated inside an interdependence of geography and institutions that neither could escape.

There is a lesson here about multipolarity too. More choice can widen the autonomy of weak states, but what it achieves depends on which costs choice can offset and on the domestic institutions through which it is exercised. Diversification can strengthen a government's bargaining position. It can also allow a government to move between partners without strengthening its own institutions, and what it does for security performance has to be judged separately. The useful question for future research is not whether any particular partner is liberating or destabilising. It is whether diversification produces security and development that outlast the regimes that pursued it.

Conclusion

This article has examined how alternative external partnerships interacted with ECOWAS enforcement as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left the Community between 2020 and 2025, with Guinea as the shadow comparison. The evidence supports a bounded conclusion. Diversification plausibly lowered the anticipated cost of isolation on security and diplomacy within a conflict over legitimacy that was already under way. It does not show that outside partners started that conflict, or that their support was necessary for withdrawal. Guinea's continued membership shows that a coup and sanctions did not always lead to exit, while the differences between the cases keep the causal inference modest.

Taking the costs apart shows where substitution stopped. New security and diplomatic relationships did not replace the region's economic architecture. Sanctions relief, ECOWAS's transitional measures and continued WAEMU membership limited the consequences of formal departure. What resulted was selective institutional separation with interdependence intact. That pattern fits agency under constraint, though the size of the expected cost reduction and the relative weight of domestic, regional and external actors remain unmeasured.

The chronology also separates commitment from implementation. Russian personnel were in Mali and Burkina Faso before the January 2024 announcement; Niger agreed to develop military ties with Russia before the announcement and received instructors after it. That supports an explanation resting on anticipated availability. It does not establish a cascade in which each departure automatically makes the next one cheaper.

The AES has moved beyond rhetoric: a mutual-defence charter, a confederation treaty, a common passport and joint positions on international law. Its administrative capacity is unproven, and announcements are not performance. ECOWAS's continued accommodation of movement and trade shows that the regional order has fragmented without disintegrating, and competitive regionalism is the name for that coexistence of institutional rivalry and practical interdependence. Future research should test the mechanism with elite interviews, contract and budget data and trade flows, and should carry the shadow-case logic forward to the coup of late 2025 in Guinea-Bissau and the attempted coup in Benin [18], to see whether and how ECOWAS changed its enforcement practice after the Sahelian exit.

From ECOWAS to the alliance of Sahel states: regional fragmentation and the falling cost of exit, 2020–2025

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Between 2020 and 2023 military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger led the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to suspend, sanction and threaten the three governments; by January 2025 all three had left the Community and built the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Purpose: to establish how alternative external partners, combined with ECOWAS enforcement, changed the expected cost of leaving and made withdrawal feasible. Methods: structured, focused comparison and process tracing applied to ECOWAS communiqués and legal instruments, the Liptako-Gourma Charter, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2690 and official records; expected exit cost is broken into security, diplomatic, economic and legitimacy components assessed through dated commitments and retained institutional ties, with Guinea as a shadow case. Results: new partners plausibly reduced the anticipated cost of security and diplomatic isolation, while sanctions relief, ECOWAS transitional arrangements and continued membership of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) limited economic separation; Russian deployments preceded the January 2024 announcement in Mali and Burkina Faso, whereas in Niger agreement preceded it and deployment followed. Conclusion: diversification enabled the rupture without originating it and without being shown to be necessary; the outcome is competitive regionalism—institutional rivalry with interdependence intact.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, Sahel, regionalism, exit costs, alignment, hedging, external partnerships, process tracing

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