The Sahel States' Withdrawal From Ecowas: Emerging Security Risks And Vulnerabilities For Nigeria

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Abstract

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marks a critical juncture in West African regional politics, with far-reaching security implications for Nigeria. These Sahelian states, grappling with jihadist insurgencies and governed by military regimes, have distanced themselves from the ECOWAS framework, citing dissatisfaction with sanctions and political interference. This withdrawal threatens the integrity of regional security cooperation and creates new vulnerabilities, particularly for Nigeria, a key member state and regional power. This study examines the emerging security risks stemming from the departure, including porous border management, cross-border insurgency, illicit arms flow, and the weakening of collective defense mechanisms. Utilizing qualitative analysis through policy review, expert interviews, and secondary sources, the research explores how Nigeria's internal security is likely to be affected and proposes strategic responses to safeguard national and regional stability. The study argues that Nigeria must recalibrate its security and diplomatic posture to address the evolving security architecture in the Sahel and reinforce its leadership role within and beyond ECOWAS.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Sahel States, Nigeria, Regional Security, Border Threats, Insurgency, West Africa

Background to the Study

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, has served as a platform for economic integration and collective security among its member states. Over the decades, it has evolved into a key regional bloc promoting political stability, democracy, and economic cooperation in West Africa. However, recent geopolitical developments have shaken the cohesion of the bloc, particularly with the withdrawal of Mali,

Burkina Faso, and Niger, three Sahelian nations facing intense internal conflicts and military rule.

These countries, which have witnessed coups and prolonged insurgencies, officially announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS in January 2024, citing dissatisfaction with sanctions and what they termed the bloc's interference in their internal affairs. This unprecedented exit represents a significant turning point in regional diplomacy and security architecture. Their withdrawal not only weakens the unity of ECOWAS but also creates serious implications for regional stability, border security, counterterrorism collaboration, and transnational organized crime control.

For Nigeria, which shares a long and porous border with Niger Republic and remains a central actor within ECOWAS, the exit raises multiple security vulnerabilities. These include the potential expansion of terrorist networks like Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Al-Qaeda affiliates; increased arms trafficking; unregulated population movements; and a breakdown in intelligence sharing mechanisms. Moreover, Nigeria's northern regions which are already vulnerable to banditry and insurgency, face amplified risks as security vacuums emerge across the Sahel.

The growing alignment of the Sahel states with alternative regional structures like the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), which is driven by military regimes, may undermine democratic norms and promote authoritarian solidarity across the region. This shift could erode Nigeria's leadership role in promoting democratic governance and peacekeeping in West Africa.

In addition, the weakening of collective security frameworks such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and regional counterterrorism strategies could impair Nigeria's ability to respond effectively to cross-border threats. Given its strategic location, economic size, and population, Nigeria stands at a critical juncture where proactive engagement and policy recalibration are essential to mitigate the emerging security risks associated with the Sahel states' depature.

Hence, this study investigates the emerging security risks and vulnerabilities posed by the Sahel states' exit from ECOWAS on Nigeria, examining the implications for border security, regional diplomacy, and national defense strategy.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the implications of the Sahel states' withdrawal from ECOWAS on Nigeria's national security and regional influence. The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyze the security threats arising from the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS.
2. Identify the specific vulnerabilities this creates for Nigeria's northern borders.
3. Evaluate the weakening of ECOWAS's collective security mechanism and its impact on Nigeria.
4. Propose strategic responses Nigeria can adopt to address these emerging risks.

Literature Review

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long been recognized as a model for regional integration and peacekeeping in Africa, particularly through its conflict management mechanisms, early warning systems, and the ECOWAS Standby Force. Scholars such as Adebajo (2002) and Obi (2009) have highlighted ECOWAS's interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia as milestones in African-led peacekeeping, underscoring the importance of collective regional action in managing security crises.

In the Sahelian context, existing literature documents a rapidly deteriorating security environment characterized by jihadist insurgencies, weak state capacity, and transnational criminal networks. Thurston (2020) argues that groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exploited ungoverned spaces and fragile borderlands, undermining both national sovereignty and regional security frameworks. Similarly, Lecocq et al. (2020) emphasize that governance deficits and militarized state responses have deepened insecurity across the Sahel.

Political instability has further compounded these challenges. Studies by Lecocq et al. (2020) and Tull (2023) show that the succession of military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) has weakened ECOWAS's normative commitment to constitutional democracy. These developments have strained the organization's cohesion and legitimacy, culminating in the unprecedented withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS following sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

In the Nigerian context, a substantial body of literature examines the spillover effects of Sahelian instability on Nigeria's internal security, particularly in its northern regions. Aghedo and Osumah (2014) demonstrate how porous borders and weak cross-border coordination facilitated Boko Haram's expansion into northeastern Nigeria. Similarly, Onapajo (2021) warns that Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts remain vulnerable without effective regional intelligence sharing and joint security operations.

Beyond insurgency, scholars have analyzed Nigeria's border management and arms proliferation challenges. Mohammed (2018) and International Crisis Group (2021) document how illicit arms flows from the Sahel have intensified banditry and communal violence in northern Nigeria, overwhelming local security structures. These studies highlight the limitations of Nigeria's border governance framework in addressing transnational threats.

Research on Nigeria's intelligence and security architecture also reveals structural weaknesses. Omeni (2017) and Ewi (2020) argue that fragmented intelligence coordination and civil–military tensions undermine Nigeria's ability to respond effectively to cross-border terrorism. The weakening of ECOWAS-led intelligence cooperation following the Sahel states' exit may therefore exacerbate these existing vulnerabilities.

From a diplomatic perspective, Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS has been widely acknowledged. Scholars such as Bach (2016) and Adebajo and Rashid (2021) note that Nigeria's economic dominance and military contributions have positioned it as a central driver of regional security governance. However, recent studies suggest that the withdrawal of key Sahelian states could diminish Nigeria's diplomatic leverage and complicate its strategy of promoting democratic norms and collective security in West Africa.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing literature focuses either on internal conflicts in the Sahel or ECOWAS's institutional evolution, with limited attention to the security implications of actual withdrawal by member states. There remains a significant gap in understanding how this political realignment affects Nigeria's border security, counterterrorism collaboration, intelligence coordination, and regional influence.

This study addresses this gap by examining the multidimensional security risks and vulnerabilities facing Nigeria following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS. By integrating regional security theory with Nigeria-specific security and foreign policy analysis, the study contributes to ongoing academic and policy debates on regional security governance in West Africa.

Theoretical Review

The complex interplay of regional politics, national sovereignty, and security threats following the departure of the Sahel states from ECOWAS can be effectively analyzed through two key theoretical lenses: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Realism in international relations.

1. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), the Regional Security Complex Theory posits that security threats are most effectively analyzed within regional clusters of states, where geographical proximity and interdependence of security interests bind the states together. According to RSCT, regions like West Africa are not isolated; rather, their internal security dynamics are deeply interwoven due to shared borders, ethnic ties, historical linkages, and transnational threats.

In the context of this study, Nigeria and the Sahel states (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) form part of the West African Regional Security Complex, where insecurity in one state has a domino effect on others. The departure of these Sahelian countries from ECOWAS represents a disruption of the collective security architecture, weakening regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to insurgency and terrorism. RSCT provides a framework to understand how Nigeria's security is affected not only by its internal dynamics but also by shifts within the larger regional configuration.

This theory is particularly relevant given the rise of regional insurgent groups that operate fluidly across borders, such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and JNIM. The withdrawal of the Sahel states compromises joint border patrols, coordinated counterterrorism strategies, and shared operational frameworks like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).

2. Realism

The Realist theory of international relations, particularly classical and structural realism, emphasizes power, security, national interest, and anarchy in the international system (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). In the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing collective decisions, states must rely on their own capabilities to survive.

Applying Realism, the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS can be interpreted as a strategic move driven by national self-interest and regime survival, particularly by military juntas that resist external pressure for democratic transitions. These states, perceiving ECOWAS as a threat to their sovereignty due to sanctions and diplomatic isolation, opted to assert independence and consolidate internal power.

For Nigeria, Realism helps explain the need to reassess its strategic posture, secure its northern borders unilaterally or through alternative alliances, and protect its national interest amidst a weakening regional alliance. It also raises concerns about a power vacuum that could be exploited by external actors such as Russia (through Wagner Group), or terrorist organizations seeking ungoverned spaces.

Realism thus underscores the fragmentation of multilateral institutions and the return to state-centric security responses, which could increase regional rivalry, reduce cooperation, and heighten Nigeria's vulnerabilities in a more anarchic regional order.

Both RSCT and Realism offer complementary insights. While RSCT highlights the interdependence and regional consequences of insecurity, Realism explains the state behavior and national responses triggered by geopolitical realignments. Together, they provide a robust theoretical foundation to assess the emerging security risks facing Nigeria following the Sahel states' withdrawal from ECOWAS.

Methodology of the Study

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing a descriptive–analytical approach to examine the security implications of the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS on Nigeria. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to generate in-depth insights into complex geopolitical, security, and diplomatic dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone.

Sources of Data

Data for the study were obtained from primary and secondary sources.

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through key informant interviews with experts possessing direct knowledge of regional security, diplomacy, and ECOWAS operations.

    a) **Interview Sample Size:** A total of 12 key informants were interviewed.
    b) **Selection of Experts:** Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their expertise and professional involvement in West African security and governance. The interviewees comprised:

        i.   4 security analysts and counter terrorism experts
        ii.   3 academics specializing in international relations and regional integration

iii.   3 policy practitioners/diplomats with experience in ECOWAS or Nigerian foreign policy

iv.   2 senior officials from security or border management agencies (serving or retired)

This sampling strategy ensured that respondents possessed relevant, specialized knowledge necessary to address the study's objectives.

c) **Interview Procedure:** Semi-structured interview guides were used to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes such as border security, counter terrorism cooperation, ECOWAS sanctions, intelligence sharing, and Nigeria's regional leadership. Interviews were conducted either in person or virtually and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes**.**

Secondary Data

Secondary data were sourced from official documents, policy reports, and academic literature, including:

a) ECOWAS treaties, protocols, and communiqués (especially security and democracy-related frameworks)

b) Policy statements and official releases from ECOWAS, the Nigerian government, and Sahelian states

c) Reports from international and regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), International Crisis Group (ICG), and Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

d) Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference papers on regional security, Sahelian conflicts, and Nigerian foreign policy

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

a) **Coding Process:** Interview transcripts and policy documents were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and themes related to:

i.   Emerging security threats
ii.   Border vulnerabilities
iii.   Regional security cooperation
iv.   Nigeria's strategic responses
v.   Shifts in regional power dynamics

b) **Analytic Software:** The qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo 12, which facilitated efficient coding, organization of themes, and comparison across interview responses and documents.

The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation in line with the study's theoretical framework (RSCT and Realism).

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings:

a) **Triangulation** was employed by comparing interview data with policy documents and existing literature.
b) **Expert validation** was ensured by engaging respondents with proven professional and academic credentials.
c) **Thick description** was used to provide detailed contextual explanations of findings, improving transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and participants were assured that their responses would be used strictly for academic purposes.

Limitations of the Methodology

While the qualitative approach provides rich and contextual insights, the study is limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on expert perspectives, which may reflect subjective interpretations. However, these limitations were mitigated through triangulation and the use of multiple data sources.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the evolving and fluid nature of security and diplomatic relations in the Sahel means that developments surrounding the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS are still unfolding. As such, some findings may require updating as new regional alignments, policies, or security incidents emerge.

Second, the study relies substantially on secondary sources, including policy documents, security reports, and academic literature. While these sources are authoritative and widely used in security studies, they may reflect institutional perspectives that do not fully capture on-the-ground realities, particularly in conflict-affected border regions.

Third, access constraints limited the availability of primary data from Sahel-based actors. Ongoing insecurity, diplomatic tensions, and restricted field access made it difficult to obtain direct interviews or field observations from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Consequently, the analysis depends more heavily on Nigerian-based experts and regional policy documents.

Fourth, there is the possibility of expert perception bias, as interviewees' assessments may be influenced by professional backgrounds, national interests, or normative commitments to ECOWAS and democratic governance. Although triangulation was employed to mitigate this limitation, subjective interpretations cannot be entirely eliminated in qualitative research.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides a robust and contextually grounded analysis of the emerging security risks facing Nigeria following the Sahel states' withdrawal from ECOWAS.

Security Threats Arising from the Withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long served as a key institution for regional integration, conflict prevention, and collective security in West Africa. Since its establishment in 1975, the organization has evolved beyond its original economic mandate to become a critical actor in regional peacekeeping and democracy promotion. However, the recent withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, three Sahelian nations experiencing protracted insecurity and governed by military juntas, represents a watershed moment in the geopolitical landscape of the region. This development presents far-reaching security implications, particularly for Nigeria, ECOWAS's most populous and influential member. This essay explores the major security threats emerging from this withdrawal, including the breakdown of regional security cooperation, rise of insurgency, illicit arms proliferation, unregulated migration, and geopolitical realignments, with particular emphasis on their impact on Nigeria.

Breakdown of Regional Security Cooperation

One of the primary consequences of the Sahel states' withdrawal is the disruption of ECOWAS's collective security framework. ECOWAS has historically coordinated regional security through mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) and the ECOWAS Standby Force, facilitating intelligence sharing, coordinated counterterrorism efforts, and border security (Obi, 2009). The exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso undermines this coordination, weakening the bloc's capacity to respond to threats emanating from the Sahel. The porous nature of Nigeria's northern borders, particularly with Niger Republic, increases the risk of cross-border attacks and criminal infiltration. As observed by Aning and Bah (2009), the efficacy of regional security largely depends on the cooperation of all member states. The current rupture compromises that cooperation, leaving Nigeria more exposed.

Strengthening of Armed Non-State Actors

The Sahel region has been plagued by extremist violence for over a decade, with jihadist groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)**,** Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)**,** and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) expanding their influence across national borders. The weakening of regional cooperation provides these groups with operational advantages, including access to ungoverned spaces, recruitment grounds, and smuggling routes. According to Thurston (2020), the absence of coordinated military pressure on jihadist enclaves contributes to their expansion and resilience. Nigeria, which has already borne the brunt of Boko Haram and ISWAP's insurgency in the northeast, faces a heightened risk of cross-border incursions as these groups take advantage of security vacuums in the withdrawing states.

Proliferation of Arms and Criminal Networks

The breakdown of ECOWAS's collective security oversight also facilitates the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). The Sahel has become a major conduit for arms trafficking, a trend exacerbated by the fall of Libya in 2011 and the weakening of border control systems (Onapajo, 2021). With the collapse of regional monitoring mechanisms, there is a growing risk of sophisticated weaponry flowing from the Sahel into Nigeria, fueling banditry, kidnapping, and insurgency. The Small Arms Survey (2019) noted that Nigeria is among the top recipients of illicit weapons trafficked through West Africa. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is likely to worsen this trend.

Unregulated Migration and Refugee Influx

Prolonged insecurity in the Sahel has led to massive displacement of populations. With regional frameworks weakened, migration across borders is likely to become increasingly unregulated. Nigeria may face an upsurge in refugee inflows from Niger and Burkina Faso, further stretching its already limited humanitarian resources. As highlighted by Aghedo and Osumah (2014), displaced populations often include infiltrators or insurgents masquerading as refugees, making migration a potential security threat. In border communities like Sokoto, Kebbi, and Zamfara, competition over scarce resources may also trigger communal conflicts.

Geopolitical Realignment and External Influence

The withdrawal has geopolitical implications that extend beyond the region. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have formed the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) and increasingly aligned themselves with non-Western powers, particularly Russia. Reports suggest the growing presence of Russian private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group, in the Sahel (Tull, 2023). This realignment undermines ECOWAS's normative influence and may embolden other military regimes in West Africa to defy regional authority. Nigeria's diplomatic and security leadership in the region is thus challenged by the emergence of competing security paradigms that promote authoritarianism and reduce multilateral engagement.

Demoralization of ECOWAS and Precedent for Future Exits

The withdrawal also sets a dangerous precedent for other dissatisfied or authoritarian regimes within ECOWAS. If not addressed, this fragmentation may lead to the disintegration of the bloc's influence in the region. As noted by Gandois (2022), regional organizations are only as strong as their members' commitment. A weakened ECOWAS could struggle to enforce democratic norms, respond to coups, or implement peacekeeping missions. For Nigeria, this means increased unilateral burden in managing regional crises and containing security threats.

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS represents a significant threat to regional stability and poses complex security challenges for Nigeria. These include the erosion of regional cooperation, embodiment of jihadist networks, increased arms proliferation, refugee inflows, and strategic geopolitical shifts. Nigeria, as a regional power, must respond by strengthening its national security architecture, investing in bilateral security agreements, and leading efforts to rebuild trust in regional mechanisms. The crisis offers both a warning and an opportunity for Nigeria to redefine its role in shaping the security architecture of West Africa.

Specific Vulnerabilities for Nigeria's Northern Borders

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has created several critical vulnerabilities for Nigeria's northern borders, particularly affecting the states of Borno, Yobe, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kebbi, and Jigawa, all of which share borders with Niger Republic. The erosion of regional security coordination undermines joint efforts in combating insurgency, banditry, and cross-border criminality and significantly threatens Nigeria's internal stability.

One of the most immediate and serious consequences is the increased likelihood of cross-border terrorist activities. With the dismantling of cooperative security mechanisms and the absence of joint border surveillance, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Al-Qaeda affiliates are better positioned to exploit porous borders to move fighters, weapons, and logistics across the region. In particular, Borno and Yobe States face heightened risks of infiltration, as these groups can now easily establish operational linkages with insurgents in southern Niger. The lack of collaborative military operations between Nigeria and Niger severely hampers the capacity of Nigerian forces to preempt and neutralize such threats before they materialize (Thurston, 2020; Tull, 2023).

Moreover, the collapse of joint border patrols and intelligence-sharing arrangements has significantly weakened Nigeria's situational awareness in border regions. Previously, frameworks such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and ECOWAS Standby Force facilitated real-time intelligence exchange and coordinated action. With the withdrawal of the Sahel states, these capabilities have been compromised. Border zones such as the Geidam, Diffa, and Maradi corridors are now prone to becoming blind spots where insurgents and transnational criminals can operate undetected (Aning & Bah, 2009).

In addition to insurgency, the security of Nigeria's northern borders is threatened by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). The Sahel region has become a major conduit for arms trafficking, a situation exacerbated by regional instability and the weakening of border controls. The disruption of multilateral monitoring increases the flow of illicit weapons into Nigeria through smuggling routes in Katsina, Zamfara, and Kebbi States. These arms enable both insurgents and local bandits to carry out deadly attacks, further destabilizing rural communities and overstretching the capacity of local law enforcement (Small Arms Survey, 2019; Onapajo, 2021).

Another key vulnerability is the increased pressure from unregulated migration and refugee inflows. The persistent conflict and humanitarian crises in Niger and Burkina Faso are forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes. With the weakening of regional coordination, displaced populations are likely to seek refuge in Nigerian border communities. This scenario poses humanitarian and security concerns, as overstretched host communities may experience social tension, while insurgents may disguise themselves among refugee groups. States such as Sokoto, Kebbi, and Katsina are particularly exposed to this risk (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

Additionally, the breakdown of security cooperation allows banditry and kidnapping syndicates to expand their operations. The porous nature of the borders enables criminals to carry out attacks in Nigeria and flee across the border into Niger, where they are less likely to be pursued due to the lack of extradition treaties or operational agreements. This situation is

particularly acute in areas like the Kainji–Birnin Gwari–Shiroro corridor, where violence and kidnapping for ransom have surged in recent years (Onapajo, 2021).

Economic vulnerabilities also arise from the political fallout. Border communities heavily reliant on cross-border trade, such as Illela in Sokoto, Mai'adua in Katsina, and Kamba in Kebbi, are likely to suffer disruptions in trade and livelihood. Fear of insecurity, combined with diplomatic tensions, can lead to border closures or trade restrictions, exacerbating poverty and unemployment in these regions. Such economic hardship may fuel recruitment into armed groups or trigger communal unrest (Gandois, 2022).

Finally, the withdrawal of these Sahel states reduces Nigeria's strategic depth. Prior to the withdrawal, Nigeria benefited from Nigerien cooperation in creating a security buffer against northern insurgencies. The loss of this buffer zone limits Nigeria's ability to conduct preemptive counterinsurgency operations and gather intelligence from across the border. The regional realignment also raises concerns that Nigeria could be encircled by regimes with divergent or even adversarial security interests, thereby reducing its regional influence and diplomatic leverage (Tull, 2023).

In sum, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS poses multifaceted security threats to Nigeria's northern borders. These include increased terrorist activity, arms proliferation, refugee influx, economic instability, and the weakening of Nigeria's strategic and diplomatic position in the region. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires urgent and strategic policy responses, including the strengthening of bilateral security agreements, enhancement of border infrastructure, and diplomatic re-engagement with the Sahelian states.

Evaluating the Weakening of ECOWAS's Collective Security Mechanism and Its Impact on Nigeria

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a central role in promoting peace, security, and democratic governance in West Africa. Its collective security mechanism, including conflict early warning systems, military interventions, peacekeeping operations, and regional diplomatic engagements, has been instrumental in managing crises across the region. However, recent developments such as the military coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), and the subsequent withdrawal of these Sahel states from ECOWAS in 2024, have significantly weakened the organization's security architecture. This weakening has serious consequences for Nigeria, the most populous and economically powerful member of the bloc, whose national security is closely tied to regional stability. This essay evaluates the erosion of ECOWAS's collective security structure and assesses its impact on Nigeria's ability to respond to rising transnational threats.

ECOWAS's Collective Security Framework: An Overview

ECOWAS evolved beyond its economic mandate following a series of civil wars in the 1990s. Through mechanisms like the ECOWAS Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999), and the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention (2001), the bloc institutionalized regional responses to armed conflict and unconstitutional changes of government (Aning & Bah, 2009). The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) was created to support peace enforcement and stabilization missions. ECOWARN (the ECOWAS

Early Warning and Response Network) was also established to track threats and facilitate preventive diplomacy.

However, these tools depend on member state cooperation, political will, and operational funding. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger not only reduces ECOWAS's operational capacity but also signals a normative crisis, undermining the bloc's legitimacy in enforcing democratic standards and regional peace (Tull, 2023).

The Collapse of Regional Military Cooperation

The withdrawal of the Sahel states has directly impacted ECOWAS's ability to conduct joint security operations. These countries were strategically important in counterinsurgency campaigns against jihadist groups operating in the Lake Chad Basin and the wider Sahel. Their exit dissolves shared intelligence platforms, joint border patrols, and peacekeeping coordination, effectively creating security vacuums along Nigeria's northern frontier.

Nigeria's reliance on the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and ECOWAS's backing for counterterrorism missions has been weakened. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and JNIM are already exploiting the collapse of regional cooperation to expand recruitment and logistical routes across the porous borders with Niger (Thurston, 2020). The loss of cross-border coordination restricts Nigeria's ability to launch pre-emptive or synchronized operations with neighbouring states, increasing security fragmentation.

Undermining of Democratic Norms and Peacebuilding Initiatives

ECOWAS's collective security architecture has traditionally included diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and mediation efforts in countries undergoing democratic backsliding. The inability of ECOWAS to prevent or reverse recent military takeovers has weakened its authority. The departure of three states under military rule from ECOWAS reinforces a "coup contagion" effect, potentially emboldening other military or authoritarian regimes in the region to resist democratic norms (Gandois, 2022).

Nigeria, as a leading democratic actor in the bloc, now faces an uphill task in promoting good governance and political stability in West Africa. The erosion of ECOWAS's normative power diminishes Nigeria's leverage in soft power diplomacy, peacebuilding missions, and preventive engagements, such as it had previously demonstrated in The Gambia (2017) or Liberia and Sierra Leone (1990s) (Adebajo, 2002).

Geopolitical Isolation and Strategic Weakness for Nigeria

Nigeria's strategic depth has also been compromised by the shrinking of ECOWAS's operational reach. The realignment of the Sahel states into the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), and their growing partnership with non-African actors like Russia (via the Wagner Group), marks a significant geopolitical shift in the region (Tull, 2023). This weakens Nigeria's influence over the region's security trajectory and introduces rival security actors with different interests.

Furthermore, Nigeria's northern borders are now adjacent to states outside of ECOWAS's influence, reducing Nigeria's ability to negotiate security arrangements within a trusted multilateral framework. This could isolate Nigeria strategically and increase the burden of unilateral security expenditures, further straining an already overstretched military and police force (Onapajo, 2021).

Implications for Internal Security and Humanitarian Stability

The weakening of ECOWAS's collective mechanism has also led to greater internal security pressure on Nigeria. Refugee inflows from Niger and Burkina Faso have increased, with the risk of insurgents disguising themselves as displaced persons. The lack of regional coordination means Nigeria has to independently manage border surveillance, refugee camps, and humanitarian aid, especially in Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, and Borno States (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

Meanwhile, transnational criminal networks, including arms smugglers, drug traffickers, and human traffickers, are benefiting from reduced border controls and intelligence sharing. The illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has already escalated violence in northwest Nigeria, a trend likely to worsen without robust multilateral monitoring systems (Small Arms Survey, 2019).

The weakening of ECOWAS's collective security mechanism due to the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has profound implications for Nigeria's national security and regional leadership. The collapse of coordinated military operations, erosion of democratic norms, and rise of alternative security alliances diminish Nigeria's ability to influence and contain transnational threats. In the absence of strong regional mechanisms, Nigeria is increasingly exposed to insecurity along its northern borders, strategic isolation, and a greater burden in managing humanitarian and security crises. It is imperative that Nigeria leads efforts to rebuild trust within ECOWAS, pursue bilateral security arrangements, and invest in domestic security resilience to address the emerging vacuum.

Strategic Responses Nigeria Can Adopt to Address Emerging Regional Security Risks

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS and the resulting deterioration of regional security cooperation demand urgent and multi-dimensional responses from Nigeria. As the leading political and economic power in West Africa, Nigeria must adopt both short-term tactical measures and long-term strategic policies to mitigate the implications of a fragmented regional security architecture. The following are key strategic responses Nigeria should consider:

Strengthen Bilateral and Multilateral Security Alliances

With the weakening of ECOWAS as a unified security bloc, Nigeria must urgently forge bilateral security and intelligence-sharing agreements with neighboring countries, particularly Chad, Cameroon, and even post-withdrawal Niger. Bilateral defence pacts should emphasize joint border patrols, hot-pursuit protocols, and real-time intelligence sharing. Nigeria may

also deepen its participation in alternative regional security arrangements such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), which remain critical in fighting terrorism and organized crime.

By diversifying its security partnerships, Nigeria can mitigate the vacuum left by ECOWAS's dysfunction and ensure continuity in managing transnational threats.

Reinforce Border Security Infrastructure and Surveillance

Given the porous and extensive nature of Nigeria's northern borders, particularly with Niger Republic, Nigeria must invest in modern border security technologies and increase the deployment of well-trained border patrol personnel. The Nigerian government should install drone surveillance, radar detection systems, and biometric border entry points to monitor and control cross-border movements. Community-based security structures, such as vigilante networks, should be formalized and integrated into national frameworks, especially in vulnerable areas like Borno, Sokoto, Katsina, and Zamfara.

Improved border security will help curtail the influx of arms, insurgents, and illegal migrants into the country.

Invest in Intelligence Capacity and Counterterrorism Strategy

Nigeria must recalibrate its counterterrorism architecture by prioritizing intelligence-led operations and inter-agency collaboration. This includes strengthening the Department of State Services (DSS), military intelligence units, and cyber-intelligence capabilities to detect and disrupt terrorist plots and arms trafficking routes. Intelligence gathering must include human intelligence (HUMINT) from local populations and cross-border informants. An effective counterterrorism strategy should be dynamic, regionally integrated, and technologically equipped.

Lead Diplomatic Re-engagement with the Sahel States

While the military regimes of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have exited ECOWAS, diplomatic channels must remain open. Nigeria, as a regional leader, should champion quiet diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and track-two diplomacy with these countries. This could involve dialogue on shared security concerns, neutral peace envoys, and back-channel negotiations to encourage reintegration into ECOWAS or the formation of a security-focused sub-bloc. Nigeria's foreign policy must prioritize regional stability over punitive isolation, using its influence to rebuild consensus on collective security goals.

Expand Humanitarian Support and Early Warning Systems

To address the likely increase in refugee flows from the Sahel, Nigeria must enhance its capacity for humanitarian response and develop localized early warning systems in border communities. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), in collaboration with international partners (e.g., UNHCR, IOM), should prepare contingency plans for displaced

populations. Communities at risk must be equipped with conflict-sensitive programming, peace education, and livelihood support, to prevent insurgent recruitment and communal clashes. Proactive humanitarian planning reduces the likelihood of internal destabilization due to regional conflict spillovers.

Institutionalize Regional Security Research and Strategy Units

Nigeria should establish a dedicated Regional Security Research and Strategy Center under the Ministry of Defence or National Security Adviser's office. The center would analyze emerging security dynamics, track extremist movements, and advise policymakers on regional security trends. It should collaborate with universities, think tanks, and ECOWAS-related institutions to provide evidence-based policy options. This ensures a continuous and strategic approach to regional security, rather than reactionary policies.

Promote Inclusive Development in Border Communities

Finally, addressing structural causes of insecurity requires that Nigeria tackle poverty, illiteracy, youth unemployment, and marginalization in its northern border regions. Nigeria must increase capital investment in education, healthcare, rural infrastructure, and vocational training in vulnerable zones. Development interventions must be conflict-sensitive and integrated into national and subnational development plans. A population with socio-economic hope is less likely to be co-opted by extremist or criminal elements.

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS presents a profound challenge to Nigeria's national and regional security strategy. However, by adopting a multi-pronged approach that combines border security, diplomatic outreach, intelligence reform, humanitarian planning, and socio-economic development, Nigeria can contain the threats and reshape the region's security trajectory. Leadership, vision, and coordination will be key to transforming this crisis into an opportunity for renewed regional stability.

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