

## REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN WEST AFRICA AND THE IMPERATIVE FOR THE ECOWAS MILITARY INTERVENTION

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### **Abstract**

*The region of West Africa has been plagued by various security challenges, ranging from armed conflicts and political instability to terrorism and organized crime. These challenges have had a profound impact on the stability and development of the sub-region, hindered economic growth, and posed threats to regional peace. The Economic Community of West African States has emerged as a key player in addressing these security challenges through its military intervention efforts. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the regional security challenges in West Africa and highlight the imperative for the ECOWAS military intervention. This paper endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of the regional security challenges in West Africa and the imperative for ECOWAS military intervention, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of security threats and the intricacies of addressing them through regional mechanisms. By examining the lessons learned from previous ECOWAS military interventions in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, this paper aims to understand the role and contribution of ECOWAS integration in regional peace, security, conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Using content analysis, the paper assesses the effectiveness of ECOWAS mechanisms for conflict management and evaluate their achievements in addressing regional security challenges. Furthermore, the paper will explore the need for peacebuilding efforts that address underlying issues such as poverty, human rights abuses, and election fraud. The paper also delves into the challenges and limitations faced by ECOWAS in its military interventions and propose recommendations for strengthening its capacity to effectively address the security challenges in West Africa. Additionally, it will analyze the evolving nature of security threats in the region and the adaptability of ECOWAS responses to these dynamic challenges. Finally, the paper concludes that the complex security concerns confronting West Africa demand a cohesive, coordinated response by international powers, backed by regional and sub-regional bodies.*

**Keywords:** *ECOWAS, Military Intervention, West Africa, Security, Globalization,  
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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Throughout history, West Africa has seen significant impacts from many global events, including slavery, colonialism, independence movements, post-colonialism, the Cold War, post-Cold War period, globalisation, and the ongoing Global War on Terror after September 11. Each of these terrible events had a distinct influence on the security landscape in the region. During the 1990s, when the civil violence erupted in Liberia, ECOWAS assumed the role of a regional organisation by deploying peacekeeping troops to the country. This marked the start of ECOWAS's interference in local security matters. Subsequently, the security difficulties faced by member states have become an intricate issue for ECOWAS. The ECOWAS peace efforts in the region include the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, La Cote D'Ivoire, Mali, as well as the political situation in Gambia (Hirsch & Hirsch 2018).

Up until now, ECOWAS has only engaged in peace operations and conflict mediation, notwithstanding its remarkable accomplishments in the realm of security management in West Africa. The escalating security challenges in West Africa indicate that the lack of an effective regional strategy would exacerbate the situation, as new and emerging threats pose a greater risk to the region's peace and security. Although the anticipated outcomes of the shifting security dynamics were foreseen, ECOWAS' operational strategy for handling security in the region continues to present difficulties (Onuoha & Ezirim, 2013; Tejpar & de Albuquerque, 2015).

The security situation in West Africa is deteriorating. The danger presented by terrorist organisations and other entities overwhelms both the immediately afflicted states and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional body entrusted with maintaining regional peace and security. ECOWAS has had historical experience in handling intrastate crises in the area by deploying troops and settling disagreements between member states (Akokpari, 2016).

However, as globalization and the post-9/11 global order have taken root, West Africa has been overtaken by new and expanding security threats, including cybercrimes, organised transnational and cross-border crimes, and terrorism. As a consequence, the region has two separate security concerns. Intrastate conflicts emanating from the Cold War and postcolonial eras are on one side. On the other hand, there are new and emerging security dangers brought about by September 11 and globalisation, which have steadily blended and confounded the

security threat in the region. For ECOWAS to be effective, it must have strong strategies as it is the accepted regional body responsible with ensuring peace and security in the area. The study's key social change effect is the insight it delivers of the efficacy of ECOWAS in sustaining regional security and peace. With this knowledge, security professionals and politicians may be able to design a more united approach for insuring safety and security across the West African region (Onuoha & Ezirim, 2013).

West Africa has encountered additional analogous security risks since the Liberian conflict (1990–1997), asking for equally comparable remedies, including the deployment of ECOMOG Forces. The disputed military coup d'état conducted by Major John P. Koroma, which deposed President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's cabinet a year after his election and forced him from the country, gave birth to the Sierra Leonian War (1997–2000). The prevalence of child soldiers being recruited to fight in the rebel army serves as an illustration of how the situation in Sierra Leone would grow into one of the bloodiest civil crises in Africa. Member states of ECOWAS once again had to prepare and deploy the ECOMOG soldiers. In addition, there was the conflict and continuing civil war in Côte d'Ivoire from 2002 to 2012, as well as the Guinea-Bissau crisis in 1999. There was the internal turmoil that followed the political succession problems in Guinea (Conakry) in 2006 and Togo in 2005–2006. Tension in the sub-region stemmed from the military's intervention via a coup d'état in Niger, as previously indicated, owing to the politics of term extension, another form of political succession problem. Consequently, the country was forbidden from participation in ECOWAS activities (Alli, 2012).

In terms of Mali, where ethnic Tuareg Islamist extremists had split the country into two halves in order to form their own nation, the military's recapture of power in March and April 2012 faced yet another tough security situation. While ECOWAS was invited by Samuel Doe's government to assist in quelling the uprising and insurgency against their government, the organisation was also asked to assist in bringing Tejan Kabbah, the democratically elected president of Sierra Leone, back to power after he was overthrown by soldiers, and to stop the rapidly worsening security situation. In both operations, Nigeria seized the lead (Alli, 2012).

Two sorts of security threats are conceivable. conventional security issues, which are tied to a foreign body or government and are frequently managed in line with established norms and doctrine (Bassey, 1993). The phrase "new or emerging security threats" refers to the second type of security threats, which are typically nongovernmental, dynamic, unpredictable, and driven by a variety of motives. There are two sorts of these. First and foremost are the hazards

to political security. The sub-region's overall security situation has been distinctively characterised by the political implications from the democratisation process in the period of globalisation, which has brought about a large degree of political unpredictability and volatility (Alli, 2012).

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The ECOWAS military participation to solve regional security problems in the West African area is described in this paper using the institutionalist paradigm. Devitt (2011) highlighted that the theory of institutionalism arose as a counterargument to the notion of realism, which argued that the emphasis of understanding international relations should be on global governance and international institutions. The birth of liberal institutionalism may be observed in the aftermath of World War I, when the establishment of peace was the war's principal purpose. At first, it was aggressively sought by forming an entity that would embody a new liberal order, such as the League of Nations (Richardson, 2015). The formation of regional and worldwide organisations in the years following World War II resurrected "functionalist" concepts that had started to run opposed to crucial practical principles in the 1930s. Functionalism maintains that nation-states do not necessarily usurp power beyond territorial states, a concept made conceivable by works like David Mitrany's 1933 book "The Progress of International Government". Rather, the government is a conglomerate of duties that may and will be done outside state boundaries by a combination of state and non-state actors with specialist expertise in specific areas. This is self-sustaining: nation-states offer foreign institutions even greater authority when their organisations across various practical fields have considerable knowledge and work together successfully to wield power. Furthermore, this relationship deters conflict in the liberal sense (Abdullahi & Onapajo, 2023).

As observed in Keohane and Nye's *Power and Independence* (1977), the rising economic interdependence of states in international relations during the 1970s forced an even more dramatic reformation of institutionalism. Finding the fields of international relations ruled by a logic other than realist theory was their principal objective. International organisations play a significant role in encouraging international cooperation, as recognised by researchers of liberal international relations. They claim that institutions that are able to offer a common space for discussion function as intermediaries and foster communication between the parties. They

continue to maintain that states' similar aims will probably minimise their differences and establish the framework for long-term partnership. States are fair players; they work together to achieve absolute profits and are less concerned with the marginal advantages earned by other states. When it comes to executing and/or amending state policy objectives and choices, institutions are considered as intermediary elements that have a substantial influence on state action (Abdullahi & Onapajo, 2023).

Similar to their neo-realistic and realistic predecessors, liberal institutionalists argue that anarchy is a substantial impediment to state cooperation. Nevertheless, they think that anarchy doesn't make it harder to develop cooperation. The effect of mistrust between countries and the "dishonesty" of some of them while still being a member of a made at the same time is non-cooperation in the international system. The liberal institutionalists make an attempt to enhance cooperation by stressing elements such as the formation of common values that enable cooperation, accountability based on norms of proper conduct, and the long-term connection between a relatively limited number of States. Institutions reinforce shared values across states, prevent or restrict governmental misconduct, and encourage enhanced international collaboration (Nuruzzaman, 2008).

An extended presupposition that the model of state relations was tied to the size of the issue that international institutions were meant to solve was incorporated in the early development of these organisations as remedies to the difficulties of global governance. For instance, institutions that displayed teamwork were self-reinforcing and did not require severe monitoring or specific laws. They were likely very institutionalised and codified as a consequence. Conversely, cooperative methods to prisoner's dilemma concerns were careful about implementation and monitoring, and they were alert to defection and dishonesty (Stein, 2008).

### **3. SECURITY**

In a society where danger and uncertainty are felt, the demand for security takes centre stage in political speech and conduct. It appears to leverage a general demand for improved stability, tangibility, and dependability against the threatening forces of unpredictability, swift change, and complexity. Paradoxically, however, there is no commonly acknowledged definition of security for the term itself. Instead, it delineates the limits of a highly contested territory. How

is security meant to be attained? To whom and from what risks is security intended? Furthermore, what actually transpires when we "speak security"? In order to think critically about any in/security problem, we must first define our own attitude and line of reasoning in respect to a variety of basic queries concerning the nature and idea of security (Boemcken & Schetter, 2015).

Put differently, security would refer to an actual condition of circumstances that exists independent of how it is articulated in everyday language. Various individuals have conceptualized this ontological sense of security in entirely distinct ways. For instance, it was either deemed an absolute condition of the future or a relative condition of the present in the classic conflict between realism and idealism in international relations theory. Nonetheless, security references tried to convey a certain impartiality in both instances. There are at least two repercussions of this manner of thinking for how we should approach investigating it. First, security is considered as something that can be objectively understood and consequently needs to be thoroughly studied, monitored and improved upon by means of reason and scientific inquiry. Second, security takes on a normative component, making it appear like something beneficial that we should actively aim towards (Boemcken & Schetter, 2015).

Thus, the act of limiting any damage to persons and their valued possessions is what security is all about. For this reason, Buzan says that security is about freedom from challenges to one's identity, the ability of governments to retain their independence, oppression, hazard, poverty, defence, preservation, and protection of core values, as well as threats to those values. According to William (2008), security is frequently connected to the mitigation of threats to profoundly held beliefs, especially those that jeopardize the continuous existence of a specific reference point (Afolabi, 2015).

In line with the above definition, as cited in Afolabi (2015), Ogoba (2010) argues that:

Security has to do with freedom from danger or threats to a nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and legitimate interest and enhance the well-being of its people. Thus, internal security could be seen as the freedom from or the absence of those tendencies, which could undermine internal cohesion, and the corporate existence of a country and its ability to maintain its vital institutions for the promotion of its core values and socio-political and economic objectives, as well as meet the legitimate aspirations of the people.

Regarding the notion of security, there are two primary schools of thought: conventional and non-traditional. The conventional school of thinking recommends hanging onto the security notion from the Cold War. According to this school of thought, security in this case refers to being safe from injury as well as from outside interference or attack. The state acts as the referent object in the classical security paradigm, which is a realist definition of security (Abolurin, 2010). It integrates security with non-offensive defence, deterrence measures, and other military ways of sustaining peace and averting conflict. Walt views security as the study of military force threat, utilisation, and control for this reason. It focuses at the situations that raise the potential of employing force, the repercussions that force has on individuals, governments, and communities, as well as the precise means that countries take to either initiate or terminate conflicts. Due to the intimate links between this school of thought and the military, Barry Buzan argues that security is immature and needs to be addressed. According to Nwolise, the Cold War period brought the conventional security doctrine high-level supremacy to the point where security is built on the concept that only a military system can successfully prevent attack and the threat of force (Nwolise, 2008).

The non-traditional school of thinking is the second school of thought on the issue of security. This school makes an attempt to define security more broadly and fully. It says that rather than concentrating on the state's survival, other challenges like the environment, political, economic, and social hazards affect people's lives and property. It does imply that a definition centred largely on the military misses the potential that environmental, health, political, social, and economic challenges represent a larger risk to a state's capacity to exist than military ones. As Sola Ogunsanwo, quoted in Afolabi, 2015, accurately states, there are many various opinions and ideas concerning security today:

Security is more than military security or security from external attacks. For many inhabitants in the developing countries, security is conceived as the basic level of the struggle for survival. Therefore, in order to provide an integrated African Security Assessment, the non-military dimension of security should be added. Henceforth, security as a concept should be applied in its broader sense to include economic security, social security, environmental security, food security, equality of life security and technological security.

#### **4. REGIONAL SECURITY**

It is suggested that these considerations begin with a state's notion of international security in order to attain the purpose outlined above. National security is, in the widest sense, the absence of hazards to a state's existence or survival. Thus, it means supplying such key components as territorial integrity, sovereignty, the freedom to select a political system, and adequate possibilities for social progress and well-being. However, it is crucial to identify the distinctive two-planeness if a state's external security concern is taken into consideration in a regional context. It is largely focused with the exterior dimensions of national security, which include developing and sustaining bilateral or multilateral ties with other regional players in international relations, such as other states, institutions, military alliances, integration groups, etc. It will also be linked to the world system as a whole. In the latter situation, these elements will be essential from the standpoint of a state's international security in the context of the region (Kusztal, 2017):

- a. Countries and its region's standing in the international system;
- b. The system's structure and organisation; and
- c. The importance put on or taken away from regional connections and activities within that system.

"Regional security, as a concept, has a long history in international affairs. It is described as the system of mutual connections between nations in the area being adequately safeguarded against dangers of instability, crises, armed conflict, and regional conflicts." Regional security institutions are typically, but not always, constituted on the basis of geographical borders of the area, at the interface of functional collaboration. Typically, security at the regional level is established upon a system or an alliance working inside the designated territory. However, it's also crucial to understand that the geographic reach of regional security groups could occasionally differ as functional interests, like trade, may be "across" by the shared security. Its unusually high frequency happens in the case of military alliances, which frequently covered - and continue to cover - an area wider than the region in terms of geography or economics in the post-war international order (Kusztal, 2017).

The principal hazards in this sector must also be highlighted when it comes to regional security. These key security concerns in the context of the region are the same as those described in the catalogue that follows the recommendations of many current security plans. They give special



consideration to threats like the potential for war to break out, the spread of WMDs and the means to deliver them, international terrorism, organised crime, uncontrolled migration, social unrest, environmental disasters, corruption, infectious diseases, or demographic threats linked to slow population growth and ageing populations in the states within a particular region (Kusztal, 2017).

## **5. IMPERATIVE FOR ECOWAS MILITARY INTERVENTION IN WEST AFRICAN SECURITY CHALLENGES**

Since the close of the Cold War, a range of violent events, including fatal civil wars, sectarian conflicts, coup d'états, and separatist insurgencies, have hampered West Africa's march towards democratization and sustained socioeconomic development. Even though the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been able to manage some of these conflicts to some extent through its various interventions, the region is still being hindered by new security threats, particularly as fresh waves of terrorism pose a threat to the territorial integrity and legitimacy of some member states, as more painfully evident in Nigeria and Mali, among other member states (Maiangwa, 2013).

For instance, there was dead terrorist activity in northeastern Nigeria, which was the source of deadly bomb attacks purposefully intended at numerous public and religious sites (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012). Additionally, this group has carried out targeted assassinations of elected officials, ordinary people, and traditional and religious leaders. This outfit thinks it is on a divine mission to establish Sharia Islamic principles throughout Nigeria and purge the country of corruption and bad governance. The rest of the leadership and the surviving sect members reportedly fled Nigeria to neighbouring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon in order to regroup, recruit more members, and get ready for future attacks after the group was harshly intervened upon by the Nigerian authorities, killing the group's founder and leader (Maiangwa, 2013).

Mali is confronting a similar situation. A triumvirate of radical Islamist sects, including the Tuareg separatists of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the Islamist fighters of Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), took control of the country's north with the help of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), approximately six months after President Amadou Toumani Touré was overthrown in an unfortunate coup led by the Malian Army. The objective of the

extreme Islamists in Mali is to build a united country controlled by Sharia law, just as Boko Haram does in Nigeria. Prior to the joint French and West African military intervention in the region, the local residents in the north had been subjected to severe dress and behaviour codes, as well as the amputation and death of several of them, all in compliance with an extremely stringent interpretation of Sharia law (Ariel, 2013). In addition to the military takeover, Lacher and Tull blame the rising terrorist presence in northern Mali and the impetus for the situation's expansion in January 2012 to the West African nations' lack of regional security cooperation. Additionally, they believe that despite regional attempts to resolve the problem, the basic roots of this lack of collaboration are still neglected (Lacher & Tull, 2013).

Fifteen West African nations make up the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), some of which have endured lengthy periods of violent separatist movements, military wars, and civil instability. These nations are: Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Benin, Senegal, Togo, Sierra Leone, Niger, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, and Nigeria (Adedeji, 2004). The ECOWAS's 1975 objective of economic integration has been greatly impeded by these crises and revolutions. West Africa is still far from calm, even if some of these disputes have been partly handled by ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), or the United Nations (UN). This is because opportunistic dangers are continually appearing in the region. The most serious of these worries is the terrorist wave that is consuming multiple member states, with more visible and terrible repercussions in certain member countries (Oshita & Alli, 2020).

West Africa has suffered major security concerns lately, such as political instability, violent extremism, and terrorism. The stability, economic growth, and general development of the region have all suffered as a consequence of these challenges. In order to solve these security challenges, it is vital that ECOWAS respond fast and begin military involvement. As a regional entity with the required political power, ECOWAS is well-positioned to solve the security concerns confronting West Africa. As part of its obligation to defend the security and stability of its member states, ECOWAS may discover that military action is an important tool. Through the establishment of a regional military force, ECOWAS may give tailored assistance to states experiencing security problems. This help may take the shape of coordinated counterterrorism operations, border security to limit the spread of extremism and violence, and the training and equipping of local security forces. In addition, ECOWAS military action would transmit a strong message of unity and devotion to the security of the region, notifying the people and the

outside world of the group's willingness to tackle the risks posed by terrorism and other security challenges. Moreover, ECOWAS's engagement would dissuade possible destabilizing groups, encouraging a more peaceful and serene West Africa (Maiangwa, 2013).

ECOWAS should give emphasis to diplomatic and political measures in addition to military ones in order to address the underlying causes of insecurity, which include social grievances, economic injustice, and inadequate governance. Through a complex approach that includes military, diplomatic, and development methods, ECOWAS may strive towards attaining long-term stability and resilience in the region. Furthermore, ECOWAS's capacity to respond to security challenges as a group may be reinforced and regional cooperation fostered by a well-coordinated military deployment. Additionally, by establishing mutual trust and collaboration among member states, this policy may open the door for future cooperation in solving other regional challenges like governance, trade facilitation, and economic integration (Sesay, 2020).

Additionally, the successes of ECOWAS's earlier interventions such as ending hostilities in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire showcase the group's expertise and skill in resolving conflicts and fostering peace. All things considered; it is evident that ECOWAS military intervention is inevitable given the mounting security issues in West Africa. ECOWAS can effectively combat terrorism, resolve disputes, safeguard human rights, and promote peace and stability in the region by acting fast and decisively. The deleterious impacts of political instability, terrorism, insufficient governance, and societal dissatisfaction on the economic growth and development of ECOWAS member states make the necessity for military involvement by the organisation in West African security concerns evident. In order to address the security concerns affecting West Africa and defend its people from terrorism, ECOWAS military intervention is essential. To defend the security and welfare of the people residing in its member states, ECOWAS must act militarily to address the security challenges in West Africa. Furthermore, military engagement by ECOWAS may assist to safeguard member states' territorial integrity, halt conflicts from spreading, and shelter vulnerable populations from breaches of human rights and violence. By confronting the fundamental causes of instability, ECOWAS military intervention may assist foster peace and prosperity throughout West Africa (Odubajo & Busari, 2021).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the peace and stability of the region are significantly challenged by the security concerns confronting West Africa. Numerous political conflicts and wars in states such as Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea have called attention to the demand for a coordinated and effective response from the international community. With different degrees of effectiveness, the ECOWAS military intervention has been essential in resolving these concerns. Governments are ultimately in responsibility of safeguarding peace, security, and human rights, but civil society groups also play a vital role. They have proved they are capable of assisting government activities for security and peace, particularly when it comes to foreseeing, avoiding, and terminating confrontations. Their direct engagement with communities and in-depth awareness of the local context have demonstrated to be particularly beneficial in furthering the protection of human rights, the prevention of mass crimes, and the safety of people in conflict-affected countries. Furthermore, coordination between international institutions and sub-regional and regional groups has proved more beneficial than unilateral efforts. It is evident that the complex security concerns confronting West Africa demand a cohesive, coordinated response by international powers, backed by regional and sub-regional bodies. In conclusion, the military intervention by ECOWAS has demonstrated to be a feasible method for addressing security challenges in the West African region.

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