ECOWAS, once an assertive power in West Africa, reduced to a paper tiger?

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ECOWAS, once an assertive power in West Africa, reduced to a paper tiger?

Dirk Kohnert ¹

Ecowas will not have it ...
Not everyone's happy with the coup d'état in Niger

Abstract: Economic integration among West African member states was the original mandate of ECOWAS. Threats to development, peace and security led the community to expand its mandate to include conflict management. ECOWAS has established a commendable record in peacekeeping. Its intervention in Liberia ended the conflict. In Sierra Leone, it provided the necessary support to the legitimate government, but in Guinea Bissau, it failed to stop the violence. In 2004, ECOMOG was replaced by the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), made up of military, police and civilian personnel. As part of its missions, ECOWAS has implemented conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms outlined in its Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). However, the organisation relies on its member states to achieve its objectives. Unfortunately, the latter are mostly characterised by a lack of political and financial commitment. In recent years, ECOWAS has focused on counter-terrorism strategies. However, these too have been hampered by capacity constraints, the persistence of a socio-economic environment increasingly conducive to religious fundamentalism and extremism, and varying levels of political will and commitment. The ECOWAS institution's conflict prevention tools are currently stronger than its conflict management tools. At present, the ESF lacks the logistical and financial capacity for military deployment. Nigeria, the main troop and financial contributor, was supposed to provide more than half of the pledged ESF troops. But it has internal security challenges of its own. It is therefore doubtful that it could spare its pledged troops for an ESF mission. All this suggests that ECOWAS, once a force to be reckoned with in West Africa, has been reduced to a paper tiger. It's warning to intervene, by military force if necessary, in the current conflict in Niger, where a coup has overthrown the legitimate government, was reckoned as an empty threat. Especially since the coup leaders in Mali, Niger and Guinea have been backed by Russia.

Keywords: ECOWAS, ECOWAS Standby Force, coup d'état, peace enforcement, governance, sustainable development, post-colonialism, informal sector, ODA, Sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Nigeria, African Studies


² Maarten Wolterink, born in the Netherlands in 1964, educated at Willem de Kooning academy of arts, Rotterdam, working as an independent cartoonist since 1992, see the more detailed CV of M. Wolterlink on cartoonmovement.com, cartoonists, 31 July 2023.
1. Introduction:

**Cartoon 2:** Niger - Bazoum government ousted by the army

On 26 July 2023, a junta ousted Niger’s elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, in a military coup. The commander of the presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, declared himself the leader of the country and imposed a nationwide curfew. They closed the borders, which were reopened five days later (Omer, 2023). ECOWAS, led by Nigeria, strongly condemned the coup and demanded the immediate reinstatement of the president. It immediately suspended relations with Niger, imposed financial sanctions and threatened Niamey with military intervention if Bazoum was not released and reinstated within a week, by Sunday 6 August. President Bazoum was the first leader to come to power in a peaceful transition since Niger's independence in 1960 and had already played a key role in the previous government as Minister of the Interior in the administration of former President Mahamadou Issoufou. Unconfirmed reports suggested that Bazoum had been planning a reorganisation of the presidential guard, including the removal of Tchiani from his post (Omer, 2023).

**Cartoon 3:** ECOWAS reinforces sanctions against Malian and Guinean authorities

The reaction of the Western world was unanimous. The EU, including France and Germany, the main troop contributors, who had about 1,000 troops in Niger, either cut off support or threatened to do so. Britain, the US, which had also about 1,000 troops stationed in Niger, helped ousted President Bazoum to combat Islamist insurgency, the AU and the UN joined

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3 Balloon: “This will teach you how to make coups! We will now see how you are going to travel and where you are going to find the money to spend!”.
ECOWAS in its demands and suspended humanitarian and development aid. A few days later, Nigeria also cut electricity to its neighbour as a result of the sanctions. Niger depends on Nigeria for 70% of its power (AFP & Le Monde, 2023). However, the people of Niamey were used to frequent power cuts already before, and as soon as the electricity went out, generators of all sizes took over in shops, petrol stations, pharmacies and opulent villas (AFP & arabnews, 2023).

The coup came as a bitter and unexpected blow, because Niger had been seen as a reliable partner and guarantor of stability in the Sahel region, which, like neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, is plagued by terrorism, violence and coups (Omer, 2023), although the country had been burdened by four previous coups since independence from France in 1960 (AFP & Le Monde, 2023). Only a few months ago, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Niamey and hailed it as a model of democracy and an anchor of stability in the region.

Cartoon 4: Military coup in Niger …
French chains replaced by Russian ones

Source: © Rahma Cartoons, 31 July 2023, cartoon-movement

Russia and the Wagner mercenaries' leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, however, praised the coup as an anti-colonial struggle, a sentiment echoed by the demonstrations of the local population in some parts of Niamey, who welcomed the uprising and marched in their thousands through the streets of the capital to denounce France’s involvement in their country (Omer, 2023).

Neighbouring countries, also led by rebels, backed the Nigerien junta on Monday 31 July, warning that any military intervention against Niger would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali. Malian coup leader Colonel Assimi Goïta and Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré expressed their solidarity with the 'people of Niger' and denounced ECOWAS's persistence in imposing sanctions as 'jeopardising the spirit of pan-Africanism'. They were followed by Guinea's Mamadi Doumbouya, who expressed similar sentiments (Le Cam, 2023).

A few days later, Niger's coup leaders accused France of planning a military intervention. Paris has 1,500 troops in the country and an air base near Niamey. Niger is the world's seventh largest producer of uranium. France relies heavily on uranium mining in the northern town of Arlit and at Akokan in the Sahara desert, the largest underground uranium mine in the world, to fuel its extensive nuclear power plant. The new rulers in Niamey announced that they would immediately stop all uranium exports to France. Paris tried to reassure its
population that uranium supply chains were extremely diverse, and Niger accounted for only four per cent of global production (Finkenzeller & Stölzel, 2023).

In 2019 Niger exported 3,718 tonnes at a trade value of US$ 226 bn according to WITS trade data. It was among the world’s biggest uranium producer (Onstad, 2023). Since 2011, China has also invested in the smaller Azelik mine, about 150 km north-west of Agadez, which is operated by the ‘Societe des Mines d’Azelik SA’ (SOMINA) (Finkenzeller & Stölzel, 2023).

Graph 1: Uranium exploration area in Northern Niger

Graph 2: Map of big uranium mines owners in Niger

Finally, there looms the threat of increasing migration of Africans via Niger to Europe. Niger occupies a strategic position on the migratory routes through the Sahara as a much used
transit corridor towards Libya and Tunisia. Since the EU summit on migration in Valletta (Malta) in November 2015, Niamey had helped the EU to stem the flow of arrivals of sub-Saharan migrants in North Africa (Bobin, 2016). Niamey implemented a series of measures aimed at restricting access to its northern border with Libya. From 2017, they target Agadez, the historic centre of Tuareg and Berber populations, which had become the gathering point for migrants preparing to cross the Sahara (Bobin, 2016).

**Graph 3:** Map of migration routes through Niger (Agadez), Libya and Tunisia to Italy

[Map of migration routes through Niger (Agadez), Libya and Tunisia to Italy]

Source: © Reliefweb, 9 March 2016, IOM

Italy, especially its island Lampedusa some 100 km from the coast of Tunisia, was the preferred entry point into the EU. Therefore, Rome was concerned about a possible increase in migration, either as a consequence of war in Niger or as explicit strategy of the junta in Niamey to put pressure on the EU. In fact, already before the coup of 26 July, migration doubled in the first seven months of 2023 compared with the same period of 2022 (Bobin, 2016).
2. ECOWAS's past role as a major security provider in West Africa

**Graph 4:** Map of ECOWAS 15 member states and their capitals

![Map of ECOWAS member states and capitals](source: the Sahel and West Africa Club, 2005)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; CEDEAO in French and Portuguese) is a regional political and economic union of fifteen West African member countries. Once, it was also a military force to be reckoned with within West Africa. Within the framework of its missions, it implemented conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms outlined in the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). It was meant to deal with problems, crises and conflicts that have both political and economic causes. To achieve its objectives, ECOWAS must rely on its member states. However, the latter were mostly characterised by a lack of political and financial commitment (Nadieline, 2016). To fully play its role as guardian of the principles of democratic governance and respect for human rights, ECOWAS could only have a decisive impact if it were accompanied by a significant and immediate investment in terms of human and financial resources, which in most cases were very limited (Yabi, 2010).

**Cartoon 5:** ECOWAS suspended Guinea because of coup

![Cartoon of ECOWAS condemning Guinea coup](source: © Bulama Cartoons, Deutsche Welle (DW), facebook, 9 September 2021)

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4 Balloon: “ECOWAS condemned the coup in Guinea! ... that's why they joined the ranks with Mali. There is nothing to do!”
ECOWAS’s recent action against coup plotters in Mali, Guinea and Niger has been rather tepid and has failed to impress the generals who deposed legitimate leaders. This has not always been the case, however. Previously, ECOWAS had also used a controversial ‘robust mandate’.

**Cartoon 6: Mali and Burkina facing ECOWAS: angry exchange and noise of boots**

In the bloody first Liberian civil war (1989–97), for example, mostly Anglophone countries, led by Nigeria, took the unprecedented step of sending an ECOWAS peacekeeping force into Monrovia, known as the Economic Community Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Anonymous, HRW, 1993). Later on, ECOWAS deployed ECOMOG forces also to control conflicts in five other cases: First, in 1997, in Sierra Leone, to stop the RUF rebellion. Second, in 1999, in Guinea-Bissau, to end the Guinea-Bissau Civil War, and third, in 2003, in the ECOMIL mission, during the Second Liberian Civil War to halt the occupation of Monrovia by rebel forces as peace efforts were ongoing. ECOWAS also supported France and the UN in the Ivorian civil war (2010-2011) to support the government of Alassane Ouattara, against former president Laurent Gbagbo. During the 2012 coup in Mali which led to the incursion of Islamist terrorists in the north of the country, ECOWAS headed the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) to support the government in fighting the rebels in 2013. The mission was authorised by a UN Security Council resolution and its initial mandate was one year. Chad (1,800) and Nigeria (1,200) again contributed most of the troops (Al Jazeera, 2023). In 2017, finally, Gambia’s long-time dictator, Yahya Jammeh, accepted his electoral defeat only after military intervention by ECOWAS, which threatened to overthrow him by force if he did not step down voluntarily (Wittenbrink, 2023).

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Balloon: “If our enemies strike each other, what will become of us? ... A little holiday in August never hurt.” – Comment of Damien Glez: “Spirits are on fire and tongues are on fire. Referring to the Niger putsch on Sunday, the leaders of ECOWAS did not rule out a “use of force”. The next day, a joint communiqué from the Malian and Burkinabé juntas stipulated, in stereo, that “any military intervention against Niger (…) would amount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali”. Flagrant, the verbal one-upmanship raises the double question of the unprecedented radicalism of ECOWAS and the operational means of the solidarity regimes of General Abdourahamane Tiani.”
3. Reasons for weakening ECOWAS's ability to intervene militarily

**Cartoon 7: ECOWAS – Anti-Putsch Force**

In general, however, African states participate in military interventions mainly for reasons of national and personal interests rather than humanitarian reasons or out of a primary interest in preserving regional stability. **Nigeria**, moreover, pursued regional hegemonic strategies. Also, **Abuja** justified its interventions in terms of the need to curb the regional migration influx or the diffusion of small arms. In the end, most interventions were examples of **Realpolitik** (Tavares, 2011).

In 2008, the draft protocol for an **ECOWAS standby force** was formally adopted in **Algiers**. It provided for a standby arrangement comprising military, police and civilian components, and comprised an **ESF Task Force** (ESF) with 2773 soldiers of all ranks with headquarters in **Abuja** (Nigeria) (Birikorang, 2013). However, the ESF did not have the logistical and financial capacity for military deployment. Moreover, given Nigeria's internal security challenges, notably the **Boko Haram** terrorists and rebel groups in the **Niger Delta**, it was doubtful whether it could spare its troops pledged for an ESF mission. This was a serious problem given that Nigeria was expected to contribute more than half of the pledged ESF troops (Tejpar & Albuquerque, 2015).

**Graph 5:** Map of 3 ECOWAS states suspended and sanctions imposed as of 2021

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6 Comment by Damien Glez: “The recent change at the head of the current presidency of ECOWAS seems to augur as much a velvet hand as an iron glove.” © Damien Glez, Jeune Afrique, 30 July 2022.
**ECOWAS** has managed the broader security agenda involving a range of non-state actors. Its shared security culture has influenced the organisation's response to transnational challenges. In particular, ECOWAS has developed a public discourse that focuses on both human and regional security. However, for some international relations scholars such as the neorealists, the effectiveness of international institutions such as ECOWAS in constraining state behaviour is questionable. For them, multilateral institutions are either paper tigers or 'scraps of paper' (Aning, 1999). While ECOWAS has succeeded in establishing the relevant institutions, facilitating regional coordination and forging cooperation to effectively implement the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy, challenges related to capacity deficiencies, the persistence of socio-economic environments conducive to religious fundamentalism and extremism, and varying levels of political will and commitment undermine the effectiveness and impact of the strategy (Vhumbunu, 2023).

Comparing **West Africa** with **Asian** countries, the invocation of human security seems less characteristic of similar regional arrangements in Asia, although concern for the well-being of their populations also animates Asian regional governments (Haacke & Williams, 2008).

### 4. Conclusion

**Cartoon 8: Coup flu, the West African variant**

![Coup flu, the West African variant](Source: © Ndula, editorial cartoon, *Nation*, 7 September 2021, Facebook)

While the **Russian aggression in Ukraine** is lasting, and peaceful solutions are only distant prospects if at all, there develops a new Frontier Zone for the West in **Sub-Saharan Africa**. Coup plotters in **Mali**, **Burkina Faso** and **Niger**, backed by **Wagner mercenaries** with Putin's approval, are confronted by **ECOWAS**, the **AU**, the US and the **EU**, especially **France**. For Africans, like the **Nigerians**, who are still being evacuated from **Sudan** because there is no end in sight to the civil war, it is a bleak prospect (Birdbyrde, 2023). Moreover, Nigerian soldiers are taking the fall for defending democracy in **West Africa** and could soon be at the forefront of the fight against rebel regimes in neighbouring **Sahel** states.
The credibility of Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, who is also the current chairman of ECOWAS, will depend on what he can do in Niger. Nigeria's army chief, General Christopher Musa, threatened that his troops were ready to intervene. But it is doubtful whether they have the means to bring lasting peace to neighbouring countries (Lepidi, 2023). Tinubu himself was already involved when the Nigerian army was deployed under ECOWAS mandates in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, and more recently in The Gambia. But the situation in Niger today is very different. Also, the effectiveness of the Nigerian army, even on Nigerian soil, has been questioned, given its failures to enforce the law over the past twenty years, including Islamist violence, industrial-scale crude oil theft in the Niger Delta and an explosion of banditry in the north-west (Lepidi, 2023).

China, which had played a crucial role in the region, including supporting ECOWAS, for example by building the permanent headquarters of ECOWAS in Abuja in 2022, thus reuniting operations at three different locations in Abuja, remained remarkably aloof in the conflict.

Niger's current inclination towards Russia may only be a sign of the inclination of the rebel's and the population's inclination towards belonging to a multipolar world. As in the days of the Cold War, a seesaw policy of cooperation with whoever makes the best offer may be preferable. That could be Russia, but also the West or China (Borutta & Schwarte, 2023).
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Résumé : [La CEDEAO, autrefois puissance affirmée en Afrique de l'Ouest réduite à un tigre de papier ?] – L’intégration économique entre les États membres de l’Afrique de l'Ouest était le mandat initial de la CEDEAO. Les menaces au développement, à la paix et à la sécurité ont conduit la communauté à élargir son mandat pour inclure la gestion des conflits. La CEDEAO a établi un bilan louable en matière de maintien de la paix. Son intervention au Liberia a mis fin au conflit. En Sierra Leone, il a fourni le soutien nécessaire au gouvernement légitime, seul en Guinée Bissau, il n’a pas réussi à arrêter la violence. En 2004, l’ÉCOMOG a été remplacé par la Force en attente de la CEDEAO (ESF), composée de militaires, de policiers et de civils. Dans le cadre de ses missions, la CEDEAO a mis en place des mécanismes de prévention et de résolution des conflits décrits dans son Cadre de Prévention des Conflits (ECPF). Cependant, l'organisation compte sur ses États membres pour atteindre ses objectifs. Malheureusement, ce dernier se caractérise surtout par un manque d'engagement politique et financier. Ces dernières années, la CEDEAO s'est concentrée sur les stratégies de lutte contre le terrorisme. Cependant, ceux-ci ont également été entravés par des contraintes de capacité, la persistance d’un environnement socio-économique de plus en plus propice au fondamentalisme et à l’extrémisme religieux, et des niveaux variables de volonté et d'engagement politique. Les outils de prévention des conflits de l'institution de la CEDEAO sont actuellement plus solides que ses outils de gestion des conflits. À l'heure actuelle, les ESF n'ont pas la capacité logistique et financière pour un déploiement militaire. Le Nigeria, principal contributeur de troupes et financier, était censé fournir plus de la moitié des troupes promises par le FSE. Mais il a ses propres problèmes de sécurité intérieure. Il est donc douteux qu'il puisse épargner ses troupes à laquelle il faut compter en Afrique de l'Ouest, a été réduite à un tigre de papier. C'est un avertissement d'intervenir, par la force militaire si nécessaire, dans le conflit actuel au Niger, où un coup d'État a renversé le gouvernement légitime, a été considéré comme une menace vide. D'autant plus que les putschistes au Mali, au Niger et en Guinée ont été soutenus par la Russie.