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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*



Source: © Maarten Wolterink, 31 July 2023 ²

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](#)

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1. Introduction:

Cartoon 2: Niger - Bazoum government ousted by the army



Source: © [Docteur Meddy](#), Tanzanian cartoonist, RFI Hausa, © RFI/FMM, [Facebook](#), 27 July 2023

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 ³



Source: © [Gagmoi](#), 30 November 2021

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

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).

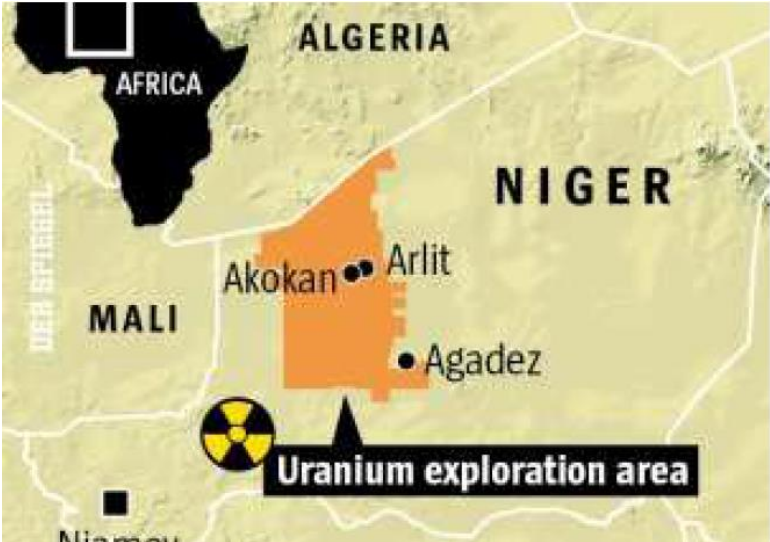
Neighbouring countries, also led by rebels, backed the Nigerien junta on Monday 31 July, warning that any military intervention against [Niger](#) would be tantamount to a declaration of war against [Burkina Faso](#) and [Mali](#). Malian coup leader Colonel [Assimi Goïta](#) and Burkina Faso's Captain [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).

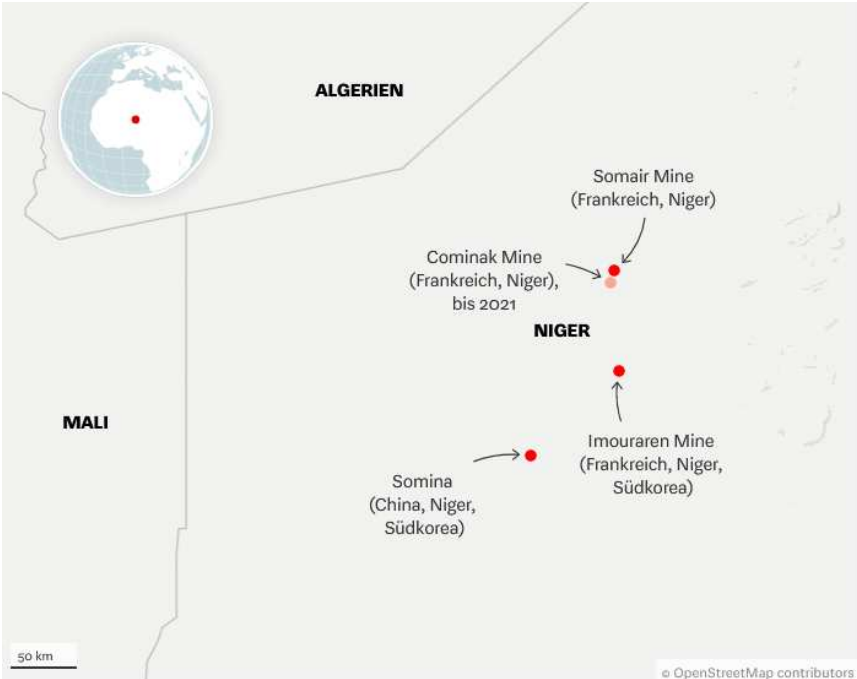
In 2019 Niger exported 3,718 tonnes at a trade value of US\$ 226 bn according to [WITS](#) trade data. It was among the world's biggest uranium producer (Onstad, 2023). Since 2011, [China](#) has also invested in the smaller Azelik mine, about 150 km north-west of [Agadez](#), which is operated by the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

Graph 1: Uranium exploration area in Northern Niger



Source: Cordula Meyer, *Spiegel.de*, quoted in EJOLT 2015

Graph 2: Map of big uranium mines owners in Niger

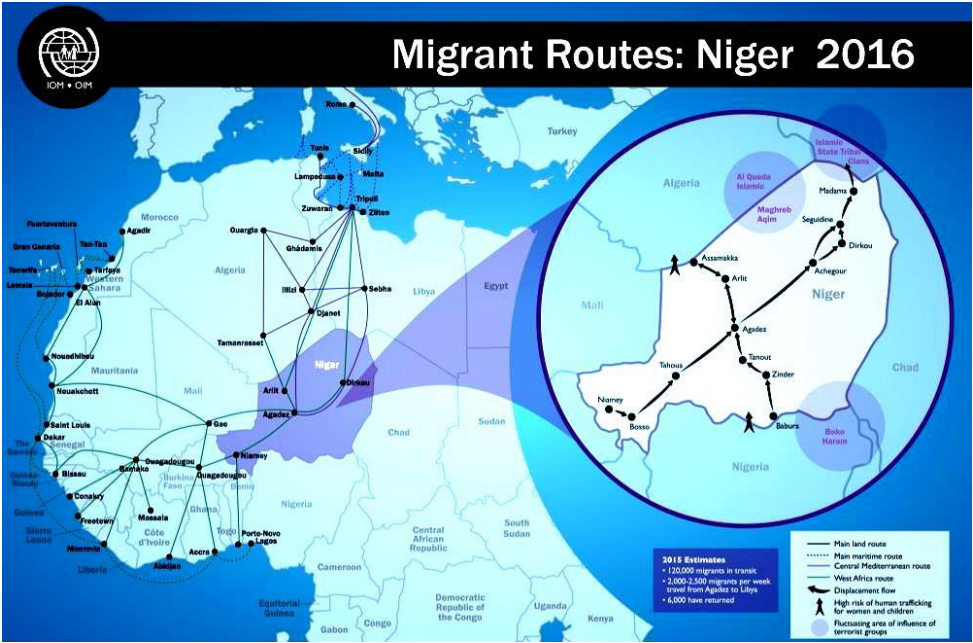


Source: Graph, Gerd Weber, Finkenzeller & Stölzel, 2023

Finally, there looms the treat 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



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



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 ⁴



Source: © [Bulama Cartoons](#),
Deutsche Welle (DW), [facebook](#), 9 September 2021

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*⁵



Source: © [Damien Glez](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), 1 August 2023

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).

In addition, case studies in [Burkina Faso](#) showed the complex nature of local perceptions of [ECOWAS](#) intervention, which was both more contested and more locally accepted than commonly assumed (Schnabel & Witt & Konkobo, 2022). Villagers did not see it as a mere 'paper tiger'. Rather, it had a local presence through its [agency](#) and was perceived as locally effective in its peace efforts. For them, it was already valuable because it contributed to the restoration of 'normal life', even if it did not lead to social peace. Local perceptions had also a spatial dimension revealing in particular how '(in)access' to intervention 'sites' shaped the geography of perceptions. The villagers did not share the political aspirations of the power elite. What mattered to them was the impact of interventions on their daily lives and their immediate needs, such as access to markets and the ability to meet in the village to discuss issues (Schnabel & Witt & Konkobo, 2022).

⁵ 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 Burkinabè 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 Force⁶

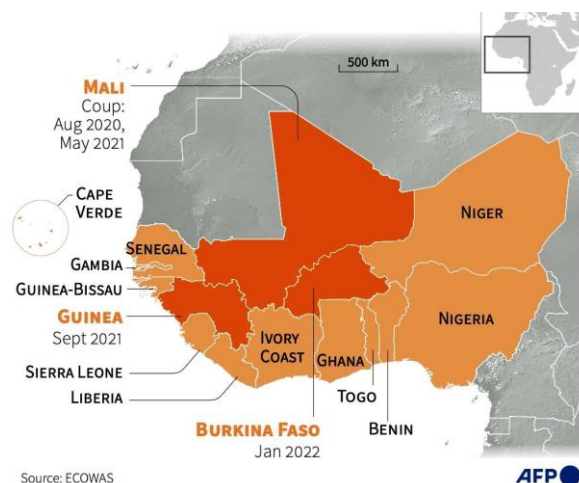


Source: © [Damien Glez](#), *Jeune Afrique*, 30 July 2022

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



Source: ECOWAS, AFP, January 2022, [arabnews.com](#)

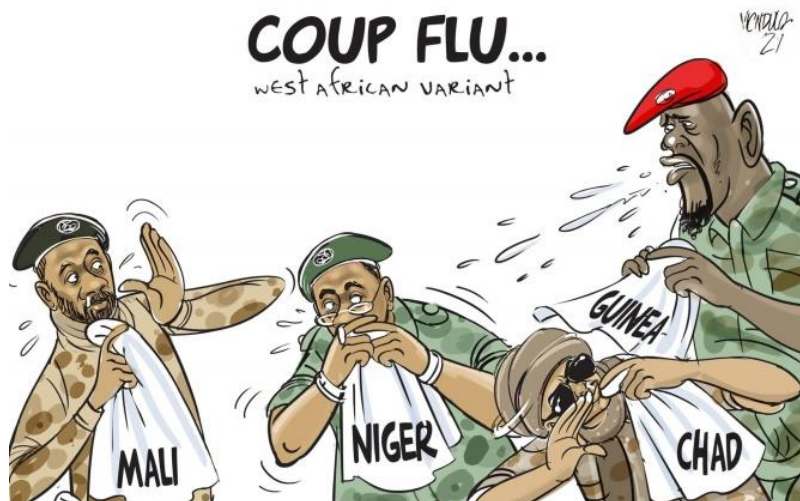
⁶ Comment by [Damien Glez](#): “The recent change at the head of the current presidency of ECOWAS seems to augur as much a velvet hand as an iron glove.” © Damien Glez, *Jeune Afrique*, 30 July 2022.

[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*



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.

Graph 6: Military coups in the Sahel zone and West Africa since 2019



Source: dpa - 105933, 2023, * presumably; Borutta & Schwarte, 2023

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'ECOMOG 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 promises pour une mission ESF. Tout cela suggère que la CEDEAO, autrefois une force avec 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.

Zusammenfassung : [*ECOWAS, einst eine durchsetzungsfähige Macht in Westafrika, reduziert auf einen Papiertiger?*] – Die wirtschaftliche Integration der westafrikanischen Mitgliedsstaaten war das ursprüngliche Mandat der ECOWAS. Bedrohungen für Entwicklung, Frieden und Sicherheit führten dazu, dass die Gemeinschaft ihr Mandat auf die Konfliktbewältigung ausweitete. ECOWAS hat eine lobenswerte Bilanz bei der Friedenssicherung vorzuweisen. Sein Eingreifen in Liberia beendete den Konflikt. In Sierra Leone leistete sie der legitimen Regierung die nötige Unterstützung, nur in Guinea-Bissau gelang es ihr nicht, die Gewalt zu stoppen. Im Jahr 2004 wurde ECOMOG durch die ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) ersetzt, die aus Militär, Polizei und Zivilpersonal besteht. Im Rahmen ihrer Missionen hat die ECOWAS Mechanismen zur Konfliktverhütung und -lösung implementiert, die in ihrem Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) festgelegt sind. Um ihre Ziele zu erreichen, ist die Organisation jedoch auf ihre Mitgliedsstaaten angewiesen. Letztere sind leider meist durch mangelndes politisches und finanzielles Engagement gekennzeichnet. In den letzten Jahren hat sich die ECOWAS auf Strategien zur Terrorismusbekämpfung konzentriert. Allerdings wurden auch diese durch Kapazitätsengpässe, das Fortbestehen eines sozioökonomischen Umfelds, das zunehmend religiösen Fundamentalismus und Extremismus begünstigt, und ein unterschiedliches Maß an politischem Willen und Engagement behindert. Die Konfliktpräventionsinstrumente der ECOWAS-Institution sind derzeit stärker als ihre Konfliktmanagementinstrumente. Dem ESF fehlen derzeit die logistischen und finanziellen Kapazitäten für einen Militäreinsatz. Nigeria, der Haupttruppensteller und Finanzgeber, sollte mehr als die Hälfte der zugesagten ESF-Truppen stellen. Aber das Land hat erst einmal seine eigenen internen Sicherheits Herausforderungen zu bewältigen. Es ist daher fraglich, ob es seine zugesagten Truppen für einen ESF-Einsatz entbehren könnte. All dies deutet darauf hin, dass die ECOWAS, einst eine ernst zu nehmende Kraft in Westafrika, auf einen Papiertiger reduziert wurde. Die Warnung, notfalls mit militärischer Gewalt in den aktuellen Konflikt in Niger einzugreifen, wo ein Putsch die rechtmäßige Regierung gestürzt hat, gilt als leere Drohung. Zumal die Putschisten in Mali, Niger und Guinea von Russland unterstützt werden.