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THE DICHOTOMY OF ECOWAS AND SAHEL SECURITY: THE HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES FOR AFRICAN UNITY

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ABSTRACT

The 2023-2024 institutional rupture between the Economic Community of West African States and the Alliance of Sahel States signals a deepening dichotomy between liberal normative and sovereigntist security orders in West Africa. This article employs a qualitative methodology combining document analysis of ECOWAS communiqués, AES charters, and AU policy texts with critical discourse analysis of elite speeches, policy briefs, and media narratives from 2020–2025. Drawing on regional integration theory and the concept of impure sovereignty, the study examines how ECOWAS's reliance on constitutional convergence, sanctions, and collective security doctrines has collided with the Sahel's emergent security pact, led by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which emphasizes regime survival, anti-French sentiment, and bilateral partnerships with extra regional actors. The analysis reveals three hidden consequences for African unity. First, the fragmentation of collective security norms undermines the African Union's principle of subsidiarity and weakens continental crisis-response mechanisms. Second, competing legitimacy narratives democratic constitutionalism versus popular sovereigntist militarism generate ideological fissures that erode the normative cohesion of the African Peace and Security Architecture. Third, the bifurcation of economic, mobility, and counterterrorism regimes disrupts ECOWAS's role as a building block for continental integration, threatening the African Continental Free Trade Area and free movement protocols. The findings suggest that the ECOWAS-Sahel split reflects a broader contest over sovereignty, regional hegemony, and African agency. Without pragmatic recalibration that accommodates plural security logics, the precedent of institutional secession risks cascading across the continent and imperiling African unity.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Alliance of Sahel States, African Unity, Impure Sovereignty, Regional Security, Qualitative Discourse Analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

The formal exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States in January 2024, alongside the institutionalization of the Alliance of Sahel States, constitutes the gravest fracture in West African regionalism since the early post-colonial period. What initially appeared as a dispute over post-coup sanctions has hardened into a structural divide between two rival conceptions of order. ECOWAS continues to anchor its authority in democratic constitutionalism, multilateral sanctions, and a security doctrine subordinated to the African Union's subsidiarity principle. In contrast, the AES advances a sovereigntist security framework that privileges regime preservation, anti-interventionist rhetoric, and pragmatic bilateral partnerships with non-Western powers.

Existing analyses tend to reduce the ECOWAS-Sahel split to either a reaction to military coups or a symptom of declining French influence. Such interpretations, while partially valid, neglect the wider normative and institutional fallout for the African project. The bifurcation of security arrangements, trade protocols, and free-movement regimes is already unsettling ECOWAS's long standing role as a pillar of continental integration. More critically, the clash of legitimating discourses liberal constitutionalism versus populist-sovereigntist militarism introduces ideological dissonance into the African Peace and Security Architecture, complicating collective responses to future crises.

This article examined the less visible repercussions of the ECOWAS-Sahel dichotomy for African unity. The study adopted a qualitative design that triangulates document analysis of ECOWAS summit communiqués, AES founding instruments, and AU policy frameworks with critical discourse analysis of presidential addresses, ministerial statements, and official media from 2020 to 2025. This approach exposes how competing narratives construct authority, threat, and belonging in ways that reshape regional identity.

Theoretically, the paper situates the rupture within debates on impure sovereignty and hegemonic transition in the Global South. It contends that the split manifests three hidden consequences. First, the erosion of shared security norms weakens the AU's subsidiarity mechanism and degrades the continent's capacity for coordinated crisis management. Second, the propagation of rival legitimacy claims fractures the normative consensus that sustains the African Peace and Security Architecture. Third, the decoupling of economic, mobility, and counterterrorism systems disrupts ECOWAS's function as a gateway to the African Continental Free Trade Area, thereby stalling the broader vision of integration.

The contribution here is deliberately dual. Conceptually, the article reframes the ECOWAS-Sahel divide as a case of contested hegemony rather than mere policy divergence, illuminating the constraints of liberal regionalism under conditions of fiscal stress and geopolitical realignment. Empirically, it traces how institutional secession, once normalized, risks producing a demonstration effect across other African sub-regions, jeopardizing the foundational goal of continental political and economic unity.

Unless ECOWAS and the AU devise a pragmatic framework that acknowledges plural security rationalities while safeguarding core integration objectives, the West African precedent may evolve into a continental pattern. The stakes extend beyond the Sahel: they concern the viability of African-led order in an era of multipolar competition.

Statement of the Problem

The departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States and the inauguration of the Alliance of Sahel States have generated a systemic rupture in West African regional order. Prevailing interpretations foreground proximate drivers such as praetorian interventions, sanction regimes enacted by ECOWAS, and the erosion of Francophone patronage networks. The core problem, however, is the crystallization of two incommensurable governance paradigms within a common geopolitical space, each advancing distinct modalities of authority, security provision, and external alignment.

ECOWAS perpetuates a model of liberal institutionalism anchored in constitutional fidelity, norm cascade, and delegated subsidiarity under the African Union. The AES promotes a counterhegemonic formation based on sovereign reclamation, regime security imperatives, and strategic hedging with nontraditional global actors. Their coexistence produces institutional bifurcation, overlapping security complexes, and the suspension of integrative instruments governing trade liberalization, human mobility, and collective securitization against insurgency. This constitutes more than diplomatic dissonance; it signals the emergence of rival hegemonic projects that contest the foundational architecture of West African regionalism.

The problem assumes continental significance because the ECOWAS AES schism destabilizes three mechanisms essential to African unity. First, it fragments practices of collective securitization, thereby constraining the African Union's capacity for coordinated crisis intervention and institutional layering. Second, it disseminates antagonistic legitimization grammars that pit procedural constitutionalism against substantive popular sovereignty, corroding the normative consensus sustaining the African Peace and Security Architecture. Third, it severs functional linkages between regional economic communities and the African Continental Free Trade Area, undermining spillover dynamics critical to continental state formation.

This study is necessary because extant literature has not theorized the *longue durée* repercussions of institutional secession for African unity. Without examining how the ECOWAS AES divide reconfigures sovereignty practices, authority claims, and hegemonic ordering, analysts and policymakers risk mistaking structural transformation for episodic turbulence. The inquiry therefore seeks to interrogate whether contemporary fragmentation represents a transient perturbation or a critical juncture toward durable polycentrism that could recalibrate the entire project of African political and economic integration.

Research Objectives

The following objectives guided the study:

- To examine how the ontological divergence between ECOWAS's norm based institutionalism and the Alliance of Sahel States' Westphalian security praxis has transformed jurisdictional authority and collective threat management in West Africa.
- To analyze the ways in which antagonistic legitimacy discourses of procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereignty advanced by ECOWAS and the AES disrupt intersubjective cohesion within the African Peace and Security Architecture.

- To assess the structural consequences of regime complex overlap between ECOWAS and the AES for transactional interdependence, factor mobility, and the integrationist logic of the African Continental Free Trade Area.
- To determine whether the ECOWAS AES fissure represents a conjunctural crisis or an inflection toward entrenched polycentrism that reconfigures the normative and institutional trajectory of continental unity.

Research Questions

The following research questions further guided the study:

- In what manner has the ontological divergence between ECOWAS's norm based institutionalism and the Alliance of Sahel States' Westphalian security praxis transformed jurisdictional authority and collective threat management in West Africa?
- How do the antagonistic legitimacy discourses of procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereigntism advanced by ECOWAS and the AES disrupt intersubjective cohesion within the African Peace and Security Architecture?
- What structural consequences does regime complex overlap between ECOWAS and the AES produce for transactional interdependence, factor mobility, and the integrationist logic of the African Continental Free Trade Area?
- Does the ECOWAS AES fissure signify a conjunctural crisis or an inflection toward entrenched polycentrism that reconfigures the normative and institutional trajectory of continental unity?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDIES

The investigation employs a qualitative methodological orientation grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the structural and discursive underpinnings of the ECOWAS Alliance of Sahel States cleavage. This orientation is selected to apprehend intersubjective processes, legitimating vocabularies, and contestations over authority that elude quantification. A single embedded case study design is utilized, positioning the ECOWAS AES fracture as an inflection point in continental regionalism. The design permits context sensitive analysis of sovereignty enactments, hegemonic rivalry, and institutional transformation within West Africa.

Evidence is assembled through systematic triangulation of textual and oratorical data. Primary documentary sources include ECOWAS protocols, final communiqués of ordinary and extraordinary authority summits, and updated legal instruments; AES constitutive documents, mutual defense pacts, and intergovernmental declarations; African Union Peace and Security Council resolutions, Agenda 2063 policy documents, and African Continental Free Trade Area operational guidelines. A second corpus comprises elite enunciations collected through purposive sampling, encompassing head of state speeches, cabinet level briefings, legislative records, and authenticated broadcasts from national news agencies spanning 2020 to 2025. The timeframe captures antecedent institutional stability, successive military takeovers, the application and subsequent easing of coercive measures, and the crystallisation of bloc withdrawal.

Analytical procedure integrates two interpretive techniques. Content mapping of institutional documents is conducted to chart authority claims, jurisdictional boundaries, and the

evolution of cooperative arrangements. This technique reveals patterns of regime complex interaction and tracks the abeyance or redesign of frameworks regulating commerce, mobility, and collective defense. Discursive deconstruction is applied to elite utterances to excavate strategies of legitimation, securitization moves, and constructions of political community. Drawing on postfoundational approaches to discourse, the analysis probes how language produces and sustains competing orders of truth regarding constitutionalism and popular sovereigntism, and how these orders vie for normative dominance.

Trustworthiness is cultivated through cross validation of sources, maintenance of an audit trail, and reflexive engagement with researcher positionality. Ethical protocol is observed by relying exclusively on open access materials and ensuring fidelity in rendering multilingual texts. The methodological architecture thereby facilitates a disciplined examination of how the ECOWAS AES disjuncture reshapes regional governance, erodes normative consensus, and recalibrates the project of African unity.

Conceptual Clarification

- **Ontological Divergence:** Fundamental disagreement on nature of legitimate political authority.
- **Regime Complex:** Overlapping institutions without hierarchy causing authority competition.
- **Procedural Constitutionalism:** Legitimacy through legal processes and electoral constitutional order.
- **Substantive Popular Sovereigntism:** Legitimacy through popular will over legal formalities.
- **Polycentrism:** Authority distributed across multiple autonomous governance centers.
- **Intersubjective Cohesion:** Shared norms enabling cooperation within political community.
- **Continental Unity:** Project integrating Africa into coherent political community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intellectual genealogy of West African regionalism is dominated by liberal institutionalist accounts that portray the Economic Community of West African States as a mature security community evolving through incremental deepening. Seminal studies chart ECOWAS's trajectory from market integration toward collective defense, highlighting its role as a norm entrepreneur in constitutional governance, conflict resolution, and election observation (Engel & Porto, 2010; Møller, 2009). This corpus treats supranational authority and subsidiarity as stable achievements of regional statecraft. However, its teleological bias obscures the contingency of integration and fails to anticipate institutional disintegration. The analytical assumption that member states are embedded in a singular normative order leaves little space for theorizing organized exit or the crystallization of rival authority projects within the same geopolitical theater.

A parallel literature examines Sahelian political disorder through frameworks of neopatrimonialism, state retrenchment, and the securitization of development. Empirical work documents how cycles of praetorian intervention correlate with the erosion of civilian control, the privatization of violence, and the proliferation of transnational insurgencies (Clapham, 1996). External military partnerships are assessed for their effectiveness in stabilization yet critiqued for

reproducing dependency and legitimacy deficits. While this scholarship illuminates domestic drivers of rupture, it often reduces the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States to a defensive reaction against ECOWAS sanctions or Gallic disengagement. The possibility that the AES constitutes a deliberate exercise in Westphalian reclamation, regime security maximization, and the construction of an alternative security complex remains underexplored.

Scholarship on African continental integration offers a macrostructural perspective but tends to bracket subregional fragmentation. Analyses of the African Continental Free Trade Area concentrate on regulatory convergence, industrial policy coordination, and the promise of developmental regionalism (African Union, 2018). They presuppose the institutional durability of regional economic communities as intermediary pillars. Likewise, research on the African Peace and Security Architecture foregrounds doctrines of subsidiarity, African solutions, and the operationalization of the African Standby Force (African Union, 2002; Tieku, 2019). These studies recognize normative heterogeneity yet rarely interrogate how antagonistic legitimization grammars inside a single subregion can destabilize the intersubjective foundations of continental peace and security (Witt, 2020). The conceptual vocabulary for understanding how institutional secession cascades upward to continental order is therefore underdeveloped.

Recent contributions on multipolarity and African agency provide partial correctives by examining strategic hedging, nonalignment renewal, and the diversification of patronage networks. This work situates Sahelian realignments within global systemic transitions and traces how new external partners recalibrate sovereignty practices (Acharya, 2016). Still, the linkage between geopolitical repositioning and the internal architecture of African regionalism is seldom theorized. The emergence of the AES is discussed as a symptom of great power competition rather than as a generative moment that reshapes regional ordering principles, authority claims, and the telos of unity.

Critical regionalism and regime complex theory offer promising yet underutilized lenses. Critical approaches problematize integration as a political project embedded in power asymmetries and competing imaginaries of community. Regime complex scholarship explains how overlapping institutions produce forum shopping, strategic inconsistency, and contested authority (Alter & Meunier, 2009; Keohane & Victor, 2011; Raustiala & Victor, 2004). Nevertheless, few studies apply these frameworks to African cases of organized secession where a breakaway bloc actively negates the foundational norms of its parent organization. The literature lacks a sustained account of how regime complex overlap, when driven by sovereigntist ideology rather than bureaucratic duplication, generates normative dissonance that migrates from subregion to continent (Orsini et al., 2013).

Discursive and poststructural analyses of African international relations provide tools for examining legitimization but are seldom deployed to study intraregional schisms. Research on sovereignty as performance, on securitization, and on the politics of belonging reveals how language constitutes political reality. Yet applications to the ECOWAS AES divide remain scarce. There is limited investigation of how procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereigntism function as antagonistic discursive formations, each mobilizing distinct historical memories and external reference points to claim authentic representation of the people. The present study responds to these gaps by synthesizing critical regionalism, regime complex theory (Alter & Raustiala, 2018), and discourse analysis to interpret the ECOWAS AES disjuncture as a critical juncture. It posited that institutional bifurcation is not a temporary anomaly but a structural transformation with three consequences. First, it reconfigures jurisdictional authority by creating parallel security complexes with incommensurable rules of

engagement. Second, it corrodes normative cohesion by institutionalizing competing grammars of legitimacy that challenge the African Peace and Security Architecture (Witt, 2020). Third, it disrupts functional spillover by severing the transactional interdependence between regional economic communities and the African Continental Free Trade Area (African Union, 2018). By addressing these dimensions, the research advances a theory of polycentric regionalism in Africa and clarifies the conditions under which fragmentation becomes durable, thereby contributing to debates on sovereignty, hegemony, and continental unity in an era of systemic multipolarity (Obi, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Regime Complex Theory as elaborated by Raustiala and Victor (2004) and extended by Alter and Meunier (2009), which explains how overlapping and nonhierarchical institutions generate forum shopping, strategic inconsistency, and contested authority. The framework is particularly suited to analyzing the ECOWAS and Alliance of Sahel States disjuncture because it moves beyond unitary institutionalist accounts and accommodates fragmentation as a structural condition rather than a temporary aberration (Keohane & Victor, 2011). In regime complexes, authority is dispersed across multiple institutions with divergent mandates and memberships, producing governance outcomes that are neither coordinated nor centrally directed (Orsini et al., 2013).

To account for the ideational drivers of fragmentation, the framework incorporates critical regionalism. This perspective problematizes regional integration as a political project embedded in power asymmetries and competing imaginaries of community (Acharya, 2016). It foregrounds how sovereignty claims and legitimacy discourses are mobilized to constitute and contest regional order, thereby revealing integration as contingent and reversible. Critical regionalism complements regime complex analysis by explaining why states pursue institutional exit or create parallel organizations when existing norms are perceived as hegemonic or externally imposed.

The study further integrates discourse analysis to examine the antagonistic legitimization grammars deployed by ECOWAS and the AES. Procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereigntism are treated as discursive formations that produce distinct understandings of rightful rule, security, and belonging. Discourse theory holds that such grammars are performative: they do not merely describe political reality but actively constitute authority and delimit the boundaries of the political community (Witt, 2020). The clash between these formations generates normative dissonance that migrates from the subregional to the continental level, thereby destabilizing the intersubjective foundations of the African Peace and Security Architecture (Tieku, 2019).

Collectively, the framework posits three causal mechanisms. First, ontological divergence over sovereignty produces parallel security complexes with incommensurable rules of engagement, transforming jurisdictional authority from hierarchical to polycentric (Zürn, 2018). Second, antagonistic legitimacy discourses erode normative cohesion by institutionalizing competing criteria for governmental recognition, which challenges the African Union's doctrine of subsidiarity (African Union, 2002). Third, regime complex overlap disrupts functional spillover by severing transactional interdependence between regional economic communities and the African Continental Free Trade Area, thus complicating continental integration (African Union, 2018).

This synthesis of regime complex theory, critical regionalism, and discourse analysis enables a comprehensive interpretation of the ECOWAS AES schism as a critical juncture. It reframes fragmentation not as institutional failure but as a reconfiguration of authority that produces entrenched polycentrism. The framework therefore contributes to broader debates on global governance by demonstrating how normative pluralism and sovereigntist contestation reshape regionalism in an era of systemic multipolarity (Alter & Raustiala, 2018).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Ontological Divergence and the Transformation of Jurisdictional Authority and Collective Threat Management

The ontological divergence between ECOWAS's norm based institutionalism and the Alliance of Sahel States' Westphalian security praxis has produced a structural reordering of jurisdictional authority in West Africa. ECOWAS maintains a legal rational conception of authority grounded in treaty obligations, supranational protocols, and the codification of constitutional convergence as a precondition for membership (Hartmann, 2017). Its jurisdiction is exercised through Article 45 suspension mechanisms, targeted sanctions, and mandated mediation under the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The AES advances an ontological claim rooted in sovereign voluntarism, revolutionary legitimacy, and the primacy of territorial defense over external normative scrutiny (AES Charter, 2024). Its founding charter establishes mutual defense as the supreme obligation and explicitly rejects the authority of external institutions to adjudicate domestic political transitions.

This divergence has generated parallel command structures for collective threat management. ECOWAS retains the Standby Force and the early warning system as instruments of collective securitization, yet their operational reach is truncated by the withdrawal of AES states (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). The AES has instituted a Joint Force with unified command and rules of engagement that are incompatible with ECOWAS doctrine on civilian oversight and multilateral authorization (AES Joint Statement, 2025). The result is jurisdictional duplication. Two separate chains of command now claim responsibility for counterinsurgency, border control, and stabilization within the same security complex, reflecting what Alter and Meunier (2009) describe as regime complex fragmentation.

The transformation is visible in the fragmentation of intelligence sharing and joint operations. Prior to 2023, the Accra Initiative and the G5 Sahel facilitated coordinated action against transnational armed groups under ECOWAS normative umbrella (Obi, 2021). Following the AES formation, information exchange protocols were suspended and multilateral task forces were disbanded. The AES prioritizes bilateral and trilateral arrangements that exclude ECOWAS observers, while ECOWAS reconstitutes its security architecture without AES participation. The consequence is a security dilemma wherein each bloc interprets the other's force posture as a latent threat (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

Forum shopping has become a structural feature of threat management. Nonstate armed actors exploit the jurisdictional seam by relocating operations across the ECOWAS AES boundary to avoid concentrated pressure. Member states likewise select the institutional venue that validates their security preferences. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso invoke AES mechanisms to legitimize military led transitions and to solicit external partners without ECOWAS oversight. Coastal ECOWAS states invoke community protocols to justify border closures and financial

restrictions against AES members. The regime complex thus incentivizes institutional evasion rather than collective compliance, consistent with Raustiala and Victor's (2004) propositions on regime complex behavior.

The cumulative effect is a transition from delegated supranationalism to contested polycentric governance. Jurisdictional authority is no longer vested in a single regional hegemon but is distributed across rival institutional nodes. Collective threat management is redefined from a multilateral public good to a competitive club good. The ontological divergence therefore does not merely alter policy preferences but reconfigures the very architecture of regional security ordering in West Africa, marking a departure from the integrative expectations of neofunctionalist theory (Haas, 1961).

Antagonistic Legitimacy Discourses and the Disruption of Intersubjective Cohesion in the African Peace and Security Architecture

The discursive contest between procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereigntism has eroded the intersubjective foundations of the African Peace and Security Architecture. ECOWAS discourse constructs legitimacy through legal continuity, electoral periodicity, and adherence to community texts (ECOWAS Authority Communiqué, 2023). Communiqués consistently reference the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes, and the authority of the Authority of Heads of State. This grammar positions the organization as guardian of a rules based order whose validity is independent of domestic popular will, echoing liberal institutionalist premises (Keohane, 1984).

AES discourse constructs legitimacy through revolutionary rupture, mass mobilization, and antiimperial authenticity (Traoré, 2024). Presidential addresses and joint declarations invoke the will of the people, liberation from neocolonial tutelage, and the mandate of the streets as superior to externally imposed constitutional templates. The discourse delegitimizes ECOWAS by associating it with former colonial power and regional hegemons perceived as comprador elites. Each discursive formation operates as a closed semiotic system with its own criteria of truth, its own historical referents, and its own audience, illustrating poststructural insights on discourse as constitutive of political reality (Milliken, 1999).

The antagonism disrupts intersubjective cohesion because the African Union's subsidiarity doctrine assumes a baseline normative consensus among regional mechanisms (African Union, 2002). The Peace and Security Council relies on regional economic communities to interpret and implement continental norms at the subregional level. When ECOWAS and the AES produce diametrically opposed interpretations of constitutional order, the African Union confronts a legitimation crisis. Endorsing ECOWAS positions it against the sovereigntist claims of the AES and risks alienating states that identify with antihegemonic narratives. Endorsing the AES undermines the African Charter on Democracy and Good Governance and the Lomé Declaration (Tieku, 2019).

Diplomatic practice reveals the breakdown of shared meaning. Mediation initiatives facilitated by the African Union collapse when parties cannot agree on the status of transitional authorities. ECOWAS insists on transitional timetables and civilian restoration as prerequisites for dialogue (ECOWAS Mediation Report, 2024). The AES insists on recognition of military councils as legitimate governments and on the lifting of sanctions as preconditions for engagement (AES Diplomatic Note, 2024). The absence of a common language of legitimacy

means that negotiation is displaced by mutual denunciation, a dynamic anticipated by studies of normative contestation in regional organizations (Acharya, 2011).

The findings indicate that discursive antagonism has migrated from subregional politics to continental architecture. The Peace and Security Architecture was designed to manage material conflicts, not ontological conflicts over the meaning of sovereignty and representation. The ECOWAS AES schism therefore exposes a structural vulnerability. When regional economic communities cease to share the same legitimacy grammar, the African Union loses its capacity to function as an impartial arbiter. Intersubjective cohesion is replaced by normative polarization, and the architecture's integrative function is suspended, confirming critiques of subsidiarity under conditions of norm fragmentation (Williams, 2007).

Regime Complex Overlap and the Structural Consequences for Transactional Interdependence and AfCFTA Integration

The regime complex overlap between ECOWAS and the AES has generated measurable disruption to transactional interdependence and the integrationist logic of the African Continental Free Trade Area. ECOWAS operated as a customs union with a common external tariff, harmonized trade procedures, and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (ECOWAS Revised Treaty, 1993). These instruments reduced transaction costs and enabled factor mobility across fifteen member states. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS nullified their participation in these regimes and reintroduced border controls, visa requirements, and divergent tariff schedules (UNECA, 2024).

Trade data and customs reports demonstrate the material effects of institutional bifurcation. Corridors linking coastal ports to Sahelian hinterlands now face dual regulatory regimes. Goods transiting from Tema to Niamey are subject to ECOWAS rules at the Ghana border and AES rules at the Niger border. The absence of mutual recognition agreements has increased clearance times and compliance costs (World Bank, 2025). Informal trade has expanded as economic actors bypass formal channels, undermining revenue collection and regulatory oversight in both blocs, a pattern consistent with studies on institutional overlap and compliance gaps (Gehring & Faude, 2014).

Factor mobility is similarly constrained. The ECOWAS Protocol guaranteed residence and establishment rights for community citizens. Its suspension by AES states has reinstated work permit requirements and quotas for nonnationals. Migrant labor networks that sustained agriculture, mining, and informal commerce are disrupted. The reimposition of monetary controls and the threat of new currency arrangements further complicate cross border investment and remittance flows. The regime complex thus replaces legal predictability with political contingency, undermining the developmental regionalism thesis (Söderbaum, 2004).

For the African Continental Free Trade Area, the schism fractures the building block model. The AfCFTA secretariat assumed that regional economic communities would function as implementation nodes for continental liberalization (AfCFTA Agreement, 2018). The emergence of the AES creates a competing node that does not recognize ECOWAS as a legitimate interlocutor. Negotiations on rules of origin, tariff concessions, and trade facilitation now require trilateral engagement among the AfCFTA, ECOWAS, and the AES. This multiplies veto points and slows continental harmonization, exemplifying the pathologies of regime complexity identified by Keohane and Victor (2011).

The structural consequence is the inversion of integrationist logic. Rather than generating spillover from economic to political cooperation, the regime complex produces spillback from political antagonism to economic fragmentation. Transactional interdependence, once a driver of regional cohesion, becomes a casualty of institutional rivalry. The findings suggest that without reconciliation mechanisms, the AfCFTA cannot achieve seamless continental market integration because its subregional foundations are no longer unified, challenging linear models of African integration.

Conjunctural Crisis or Inflection toward Entrenched Polycentrism in Continental Unity

Evidence indicates that the ECOWAS AES fissure represents an inflection toward entrenched polycentrism rather than a conjunctural crisis amenable to short term resolution. Five indicators support this assessment. First is institutionalization. The AES has moved beyond ad hoc coordination to establish permanent structures including a confederal executive, a joint parliament, and a collective security council (AES Founding Documents, 2024). These organs are codified in treaty language and are being staffed and funded, signaling long term commitment rather than tactical alliance, a marker of regime consolidation (Hofmann, 2019).

Second is material entrenchment. The AES has concluded defense agreements, infrastructure financing arrangements, and resource extraction contracts with external partners independent of ECOWAS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mali, 2025). These commitments create sunk costs and path dependencies that raise the price of reabsorption. Simultaneously, ECOWAS has reconfigured its internal governance to operate without AES states, adopting new decision rules and budgetary allocations that assume their permanent absence (ECOWAS Council Minutes, 2025).

Third is discursive closure. The legitimacy grammars of procedural constitutionalism and popular sovereigntism are incommensurable. Compromise would require one side to abandon its foundational narrative. For ECOWAS, recognizing military governments without electoral timetables would negate its normative identity (Adepoju, 2023). For the AES, submitting to ECOWAS conditionality would negate its revolutionary mandate. The absence of a shared vocabulary of legitimate rule makes negotiated reintegration structurally improbable, reflecting the dynamics of ontological security in regional politics (Mitzen, 2006).

Fourth is demonstration effect and contagion potential. The successful maintenance of the AES challenges the norm that regional economic communities are indivisible. Other states experiencing sanctions or hegemonic pressure observe that exit is viable and that alternative patronage is available. This lowers the threshold for future defection and suggests that polycentrism may proliferate beyond West Africa. The African Union's inability to reverse the AES exit reinforces perceptions of institutional weakness, a condition that encourages further fragmentation (Nathan, 2016).

Fifth is the reconfiguration of continental trajectory. The African Union's Agenda 2063 envisions progressive integration through harmonized regional blocs (African Union, 2015). Entrenched polycentrism replaces that trajectory with a model of competitive regionalism. Continental unity shifts from a teleological endpoint to a negotiated equilibrium among rival normative projects. The ECOWAS AES schism therefore marks a critical juncture where the architecture of African international relations moves from hierarchical subsidiarity toward horizontal contestation, supporting arguments about the end of integrationist inevitability (De Vries, 2023).

The findings conclude that the fissure is not a cyclical episode but a structural transformation. It reconfigures the normative and institutional trajectory of continental unity by normalizing fragmentation, validating sovereigntist regionalism, and embedding regime complex dynamics at the heart of African governance.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the rupture between ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States constitutes a paradigmatic shift from institutional integration to regime complex formation in African regionalism. Drawing on Regime Complex Theory, the analysis reveals that the schism is rooted in ontological divergence over sovereignty and legitimate authority, producing overlapping jurisdictions and competing legitimacy grammars that undermine collective threat management.

The antagonism between procedural constitutionalism and substantive popular sovereigntism has eroded the intersubjective cohesion underpinning the African Peace and Security Architecture. This normative fragmentation carries material consequences, disrupting transactional interdependence, constraining factor mobility, and complicating the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Contrary to interpretations of the schism as a conjunctural crisis, the findings suggest an inflection toward entrenched polycentrism. The coexistence of multiple autonomous governance centers challenges the hierarchical assumptions of subsidiarity and continental unity that have long guided African integration. While polycentrism risks forum shopping and strategic incoherence, it also reflects the reassertion of state agency in defining regional order.

The implications extend beyond West Africa. As regional architectures globally confront normative pluralism, the ECOWAS AES case demonstrates that managing regime complexes requires institutional innovation rather than enforced reintegration. Mechanisms for jurisdictional deconfliction, pragmatic economic interfaces, and reformed subsidiarity doctrines offer viable pathways to mitigate fragmentation.

Future research should examine how other regional economic communities navigate similar tensions between integration and autonomy. The durability of the African Union project will depend on its capacity to accommodate ontological divergence within a framework of functional coexistence. Continental unity in the twenty first century may be secured not through normative uniformity but through structured management of difference.

Recommendations

Addressing Ontological Divergence in Jurisdictional Authority, ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States should establish a joint jurisdictional mapping committee under African Union facilitation to delineate areas of exclusive and shared competence in security and governance, preventing operational duplication in collective threat management.

Mitigating Discursive Antagonism in Legitimacy Claims, the African Union Peace and Security Council should convene a normative dialogue platform that engages both procedural constitutionalist and popular sovereigntist perspectives to rebuild intersubjective cohesion and restore a common legitimacy grammar within the African Peace and Security Architecture.

Managing Regime Complex Overlap for Economic Integration, the AfCFTA Secretariat should develop parallel interface protocols and mutual recognition agreements that allow AES

states to access continental trade regimes while ECOWAS retains its customs union, thereby limiting disruption to transactional interdependence and factor mobility.

Navigating Polycentrism in Continental Unity, the African Union should reform its subsidiarity doctrine to formally recognize and manage entrenched polycentric governance, creating arbitration mechanisms that accommodate multiple regional centers without assuming hierarchical integration as the sole pathway to continental unity.

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