

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Regionalism: Institutional Change, Security, and Development in the Sahel's Alliance of States

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional evolution of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from externally driven regional forums to the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a confederate alliance established in 2023. This research analyzes the draws on institutionalist and neoclassical realist frameworks, as well as qualitative document analysis, empirical data, and comparative review. The study finds that persistent insecurity, developmental stagnation, and the withdrawal of international actors are key drivers for the move towards greater regional autonomy. The article shows the advantages and the risks of the confederate structure of the AES by comparing it with previous and parallel African regional organizations. The findings highlight the propositions for sovereignty, governance, and external partnerships and the importance of inclusive regional governance in preventing democratic backsliding. Policy recommendations are provided to national governments, regional organizations, and international partners to promote stability, resilience, and development in the Sahel region.

Keywords: Sahel, regional integration, confederation, security, development, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso.

I. Introduction

The Sahel has emerged as a case study in regional security and development challenges in contemporary Africa. From the Atlantic to the Red Sea, the ecological richness of the region is tarnished by entrenched poverty, rapid population growth, weak state institutions, and recurrent environmental shocks (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2023). A decade of intersecting crises in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, with rising jihadist insurgencies, transnational criminal networks, and local militias exploiting porous borders and weak governance, has undermined efforts at sustainable development and destabilised the region (ACLED, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023). The response of international actors has been through military interventions, humanitarian aid, and development programs (Walther, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). These actors include the United Nations, the African Union, ECOWAS, the European Union, and France.

Nonetheless, there has been empirical evidence of the fact that some of the interventions that were supposed to aid have ended up increasing the locals' grievances or creating dependency (Batch, 2016; Leocq et al., 2019; Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023). For instance, Lecocq et al. (2019) proved that the G5 Sahel's dependence on the external donors and the consensus-based governance led to



fragmented and delayed responses, hence weakening the local ownership and legitimacy.

The approach of institutionalism explains the creation and growth of institutions in order to solve common problems, focusing on the roles of rules, structures, and norms in influencing the states' behaviors (March & Olsen, 1989; Keohane, 1984).

According to rational choice institutionalism, organizations such as the G5 Sahel and AES are formed to maximize their strategic interests, reduce costs, and cooperate when facing uncertain situations (Pierson, 2004). Nevertheless, the institutional designs can create path dependencies. Neoclassical realism combines both the international system influences and the domestic determinants, such as regime type, leaders, and legitimacy, to explain the states' actions (Rose, 1998; Smith, 2023).

The current situation in the Sahel region, characterized by the withdrawal of French and UN militaries, sanctions imposed by ECOWAS, and military regimes, gives the basis for reconsideration of the regional cooperation (Walther, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). Therefore, the AES should be understood as a response to the security voids at the international level and domestic demands at the same time. Consequently, the AES can be seen as a reaction to external security vacuums as well as internal demands for regime consolidation and legitimacy.

This double lens is central to understanding why Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso withdrew from the G5 Sahel and adopted a confederate model that privileges

sovereignty and autonomy. Neoclassical realism is frequently linked to the foreign policy of states, but it is a useful framework for the analysis of regional institutional change in times of crisis because it incorporates systemic as well as domestic factors. The study also notes the growing importance of norms, identity, and legitimacy for regional trajectories, in line with recent studies (Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023; Stewart, 2022).

II. Literature Review

Previous research sheds light on the challenges of establishing efficient regional bodies in the complex and precarious environment of Africa. For instance, Bach (2016) posits that most African regional organizations like ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel operate as pragmatic solutions to ongoing insecurity and economic fragmentation while being rather externally dependent and poorly institutionalized. Akintoye and Ukeje (2023) note that donor-driven frameworks are unable to adapt to the situation and develop sustainable capabilities, hence leading to institutional exhaustion and disillusionment of the population.

For example, according to Stewart (2022), the G5 Sahel faced some operational difficulties, such as consensual decision-making and dependence on Western states. These things prevented the organization from timely adaptation to changing threats. At the same time, this organization lost its legitimacy because of conflicts among its leaders and its inability to solve crises quickly, especially after



the withdrawal of Mali in 2022 (Africa Confidential, 2024).

Comparative research claims that while confederate arrangements like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can provide some flexibility. They may lead to possible fragmentation and inefficiency without proper institutions and popular legitimacy (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022). Moreover, the International Crisis Group (2023) argues that recurrent intervention by external actors has resulted in the deepening of grievances, complication of power structure, and emergence of new dependencies in the region.

Civil society and human rights NGOs have raised concerns about the possibility of the promotion of authoritarianism if regional partnerships headed by military regimes are not properly controlled and monitored (Amnesty International, 2024; Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). These concerns are heightened in the context of the trend of military coups in the region since 2020. Most previous studies have focused on the structural weaknesses of donor-funded, consensus-driven regional cooperation and offered little analysis of the rise of sovereignty-centered, confederate models such as the AES.

There is also a lack of comparative research on the impact of these models on development, civil society, and the relations with key external actors such as France, the EU, and Russia. This research seeks to fill these gaps by analysing the drivers and early impacts of the AES, comparing it with previous and parallel models, and evaluating its implications

for sovereignty, development, and governance in the Sahel.

The following questions guide the study:

- 1) Motivations of the establishment of the AES, and what distinguishes it from previous regional frameworks?
- 2) How can the theories of institutionalism and neoclassical realism account for this change in regional cooperation?
- 3) What are the early impacts of the AES on security, development, and governance?
- 4) How do these compare with other African organisations?
- 5) What are the wider implications for sovereignty, external engagement, and democratic governance in the region?

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III. Methodology & Data

To analyze the institutional transition of the G5 Sahel to the AES and its impact on security, development, and governance, a qualitative case study methodology was



employed. The data consist of the documents of the AES; governmental and regional communiques (2022-2024). NGO reports (Amnesty International, 2024; Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024), international media (Jeune Afrique, 2024; Deutsche Welle, 2024), and academic literature (International Crisis Group, 2023; Walther, 2023; Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023). ACLED conflict event data (2024), World Bank development indicators (2023), UN OCHA humanitarian reports (2023).

All primary and secondary sources were systematically coded according to the thematic analysis. The themes include security cooperation, institutional changes, sovereignty, foreign intervention, and development impacts. The codebook and coding process were refined by means of constant comparison across the sources. It was useful for finding convergent and divergent themes.

The AES was systematically compared to G5 Sahel, ECOWAS, EAC, and GCC. The comparison includes such aspects as organizational structures, decision-making procedures, involvement in security and development activities, and interaction with external players. The results of analysis were triangulated using several data sources, including official statements, NGO reports, empirical datasets, and academic literature.

In case of any discrepancies or contradictions, e.g., in different evaluations of security improvement or internal governance, it was discussed and contextualized in the findings part. The triangulation increased the validity and credibility of the results as it used

at least two sources to prove the claim. Data visualization shows that the trends and findings are presented in tables and timelines for clarification.

Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 at the new country-level breakdowns and figures in the findings. Fieldwork and interviews could not be conducted due to security and political constraints. Thus, the research is based on publicly available sources and data.

IV. Discussion

a. From Regional Forum to Confederated Partnership

In 2014, the G5 Sahel was created to coordinate security and development actions between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (International Crisis Group, 2023). Its rotating presidency, consensus-based decision-making, and donor dependence (mainly France and the EU) led to slow responses and undermined local ownership (OECD, 2024; Stewart, 2022). The fall of the G5 was marked by the withdrawal of Mali in 2022 and coups in all three AES countries. This situation created the need for new regional arrangements.

The AES was established in 2023 as a direct consequence of these failures. The AES has a joint command and permanent secretariat, binding commitments to collective defence, and a development agenda that seeks to reduce external dependency and increase bargaining power with donors (Africa Confidential, 2024).



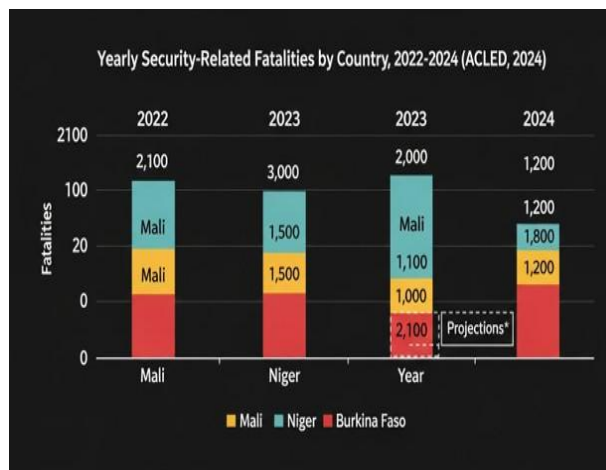


Fig. 1. Yearly Security-Related Fatalities by Country, 2022–2024

Source: ACLED (2024).

Notes: 2024 figures are first-half projections

Mali recorded the highest number of security-related deaths in 2023, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, and saw a decrease in the first half of 2024 amid an increase in joint AES operations. Violence in Niger and Burkina Faso followed a similar pattern, although localised violence continued in border areas.

Tab. 1. Major Security Incidents and Fatalities in AES States, 2022–2024

Year	Incidents	Fatalities	Notable Events
2022	1.500	5.000	Mali coup, Barkhane exit
2023	2.100	7.200	AES formed, Niger Coup
2024	1.600	4.000*	Joint AES operations (Q1-Q2)

Source: ACLED (2024)

1) Security Needs

Since 2012, jihadist violence and state collapse in northern Mali have spilled over into Niger and Burkina Faso, overwhelming security forces and resulting in displacement and humanitarian crises (International Crisis Group, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). In early 2024, the AES responded with joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and border closures, leading to a measurable reduction in cross-border attacks (Ministry of National Defence of Niger, 2023).

International interventions were often limited by a lack of resources, ambiguous mandates, and changing donor priorities (Walther, 2023). The French and UN missions' withdrawal has left a vacuum to be filled by local actors, highlighting the need for regional self-reliance (Sahel Tribune, 2024).



2) Development Drivers

Development concerns remain relevant even as security dominates the agenda. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso rank among the poorest countries in the world on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023). Poverty, malnutrition, and lack of infrastructure contribute to instability in the region. The goal of the AES is to bring coherence into the agricultural policies, infrastructure, and social development funding pools in order to improve aid effectiveness and reduce donor dependence (OECD, 2024).

Pooled humanitarian efforts like those in the response to the 2023 Niger floods show improvement in terms of coordination, although the key challenge lies in providing development to communities (United Nations OCHA, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Comparative Perspective The confederation-style organization of the AES makes it unique in Africa. As ECOWAS stresses democracy and uses sanctions against military governments, the AES stresses autonomy and security (ECOWAS, 2023). The EAC is less involved in security issues and more focused on economic cooperation, whereas divisions within the GCC limit its collective security agenda (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022).

security and more concerned with economic integration, while internal divisions hinder the GCC's collective security efforts (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022).

3) Comparative Perspective

The AES's confederate model is unique in Africa. While ECOWAS highlights democratic norms and sanctions military regimes, the AES emphasises autonomy and security (ECOWAS, 2023). The EAC is less interventionist in



Tab.2 Comparative Features of Regional Organizations

Organization	Structure	Security Role	Donor Dependency	Civil Society Inclusion	Decision-making
AES	Confederacy	High	Low	Weak	Joint command
G5 Sahel	Forum	Medium	High	Weak	Consensus
ECOWAS	Union	Medium	Medium	Limited	Rotating President
EAS	Community	Low	Medium	Medium	Secretariat
GCC	Confederacy	High	Low	Weak	Supreme Council

Source: Stewart (2022) ; Akintoye & Ukeje (2023)

Notes: Compiled by authors



This comparative analysis aligns with Findings from Stewart (2022) and Akintoye & Ukeje (2023) that regional organizations' effectiveness depends on institutional design, leadership, and external relations.

b. Country-Specific Dynamics and Domestic–International Interplay

Internal political dynamics play a decisive role in shaping each member's stance within the AES:

- 1) Mali's leadership, following the expulsion of French/UN forces, adopted a narrative of national sovereignty to justify restricting civil society, consolidating military authority, and seeking new security alliances, especially with Russia.
- 2) Niger's 2023 coup placed it at the center of AES security planning. The junta used the alliance to legitimize its rule internationally while suspending domestic democratic institutions and intensifying security measures.
- 3) Burkina Faso balanced domestic demands for stability with a deliberate distancing from France and an embrace of Russian support, aiming to shore up regime stability and assert regional leadership.

This domestic–international interplay produced both cooperation and friction within the AES, as differences in regime priorities, civil liberties, and external partnerships required negotiation to maintain

alliance cohesion. For example, while all three states reject Western military presence, they differ in their openness to civil society engagement and their approach to regional economic integration. External actors such as France and the EU have been marginalized, suspending aid and imposing sanctions. Russia's influence is growing through security partnerships and military support to AES states (Walther, 2023; ACLED, 2024).

NGOs remain essential to humanitarian response but face regulatory constraints and a shrinking civic space (Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

c. Governance, Civil Society, and Democratic Risks

All AES governments are military-led, having suspended constitutions and elections. Civil society organizations warn that without genuine reform and accountability, the AES could entrench military rule and exclude public participation that "The alliance must not become a vehicle for indefinite military rule or the marginalization of citizens' voices" (Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024).



d. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's reliance on secondary data and coverage of the AES's early years are limitations. The analysis does not capture gender- or community-level effects, nor can it fully assess long-term impacts on development and governance. Future research should 1) conduct fieldwork and interviews with local actors, civil society, and affected communities (Human Rights Watch, 2024), 2) employ mixed-methods, including surveys and participant observation, to track the AES's evolution, 3) compare AES with other regional confederate models in Africa and globally, and 4) examine the impact of AES on marginalized groups and local governance.

e. Policy Recommendations

The first part of the policy recommendations is for AES Member States:

1) Publicly commit to credible electoral and constitutional timelines, 2) Establish transparent, independent oversight bodies for AES operations with civil society representation, 3) Prioritize inclusive, locally led development, and ensure humanitarian response reaches the most vulnerable, and 4) Guarantee freedom of expression and civic participation to prevent authoritarian drift.

The second part of the policy recommendations is for Regional Organizations (ECOWAS, AU): 1) Move beyond blanket sanctions; engage with AES governments through targeted dialogue and

technical support, and 2) Facilitate knowledge sharing on governance, crisis management, and democratic transitions.

The third part of the policy recommendations is for International Partners: 1) Align financial and technical assistance with local priorities and human rights benchmarks, 2) Balance security support with funding for civil society and independent media, and 3) Monitor the impact of external partnerships (especially with Russia and Turkey) for compliance with good governance and human rights.

VI. Conclusion

The Alliance of Sahel States represents a major shift in African regionalism, combining pragmatic adaptation to crisis with a strong assertion of sovereignty. By drawing on institutionalist and neoclassical realist frameworks, this study shows that the AES's emergence was driven by intertwined security, developmental, and political imperatives in a context of external withdrawal and internal upheaval. Early signs suggest improved security coordination and humanitarian response, but the alliance's long-term legitimacy will depend on its ability to balance sovereignty and autonomy with inclusive development and accountable governance. The AES's confederate model challenges established norms and provides important lessons for scholars and practitioners seeking adaptive, resilient approaches to regional crisis management in Africa and beyond.



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