A Theoretical Analysis of Security-Led Integration: The Case of Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Clement Adjei Arhin

University Of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Background: The traditional regional organization in Africa mostly focuses and rally around economic integration and democratic governance, unlike the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) which is a defense pact focused on collective defense, regime survival, and resistance to external influence. The AES was founded in 2023 by Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali through the Liptako-Gourma Charter.

Objective: This article performs a theoretical analysis of the AES case as an example of integration led by security concerns.

Method: Secondary data from official charters, ECOWAS protocols, think tank reports, and academic writings were analyzed. With this data, the study applies the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to analyze the historical background, institutional frameworks, and theoretical implications of the AES.

Results: The analysis illustrates that the AES was created as a direct response to the sanctions and Jihadist insurgencies as well as fragile borders. However, it also acts as a counter-narrative to the ECOWAS and African Union democratic frameworks. The analysis also shows that the AES acts as a response to 'crisis regionalism', a term which describes a Jihadist insurgency and fragile borders in which there is cooperation based on threats rather than economic convergence. This depicts both the possibilities and the limitations of integration with a security first approach.

Conclusions: The article concluded that, states from a conceptual standpoint, the AES challenges existing regional integration theories like neofunctionalism by emphasizing survival issues as the center of regionalism.

Keywords: Alliance of Sahel States, Security-led integration, Regional Security Complex Theory, African regionalism,

INTRODUCTION

African regionalism discourse in literature predominantly illustrates the different types of integration models that exist on the continent. Some of these normative models in their formative stage tend to diverge from the liberal-democratic path. As Nolan (2010), Foester & Larsen (2021) and Rummel & Schmidt, (2021) argue that, during different periods in history regions have depended on collaborative security mechanisms as means to economic and political integration. The EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are prime examples of this notion (Rummel & Schmidt, 2021). Coordinated responses to multilayered and bilateral security issues tend to yield institutional trust, cooperation habits (Angelo, 2024), and governance frameworks that enable the deepening of regional integration (Goniewicz et al., 2025). Thus, resolving immediate existential threats through security cooperation transforms and enables cooperation among other dimensions (Müller et al., 2013).

Such cooperation is well defined in the Global North, while such relations between security cooperation and regional integration, especially in the context of the Global South, are less examined and more difficult to understand because of the colonialization, external militancy, and asymmetric governmental capabilities

(Krapohl, 2017). Pan-African ideals have been the guiding principles of African integration, as set forth in the Abuja Treaty of 1991, the Lagos Plan of Action, and the African Union's Agenda 2063 (Nughta, 2021: Wapmuk, 2021, Nkala & Monyae, 2024). The focus has been on economic integration, with notable achievements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). However, as Reznikova (2022) observe, ensuring long-term integration nowadays demands that the security environment is first stabilized. The Sahel and other fragile zones have witnessed ongoing terrorism, insurgencies, unconstitutional government takeovers, and the rise of non-state armed groups (Ofori Ayeh, 2022). These problems have highlighted the inefficiencies of multilateral institutions such as ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel, which have been labeled as slow and biased in handling crises, particularly by regimes in transition (Berg, 2022: Bendebka, 2025).

It is regarding this matter that the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was created in 2023 by Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Drafted under the Liptako-Gourma Charter (Criekemans, 2024), the AES stands out for its clear security focus and its dedication to collective security, sovereignty, and regional self-reliance (Osuchukwu, 2024). Departing from the traditional dependency on foreign security patrons like France and the United Nations, the AES is a step forward to self-defined security collaboration (Grütjen, 2024; Kohnert, 2024). Although its initial rationale was grounded in counterterrorism collaboration, the AES has swiftly transformed into a wider political and ideological endeavor, one that stresses anti-imperialism, state-centric sovereignty, and the repudiation of external meddling.

In relation to the AES, Kohnert (2024) notes that, as an organization, it is still at its earliest stage. However, it represents a budding and bold initiative of security-first regionalism within a sub-region marked with volatility and fragmentation. Hence, it embodies a textbook case of what scholars have identified as "crisis regionalism" (Fawcett, 2013), whereby cooperation is driven and organized mainly due to pressing or near-immediate threats, rather than for the sake of remote or distant economic or institutional benefits. The AES stands as a stark example of how the insecurity of a region can act as a catalyst to integration efforts, and how the integration efforts can be an avenue to tackle the insecurity as the Sahel region faces. In fact, the AES exemplifies how one can practically understand the link between the security needs of the integration of weak states and the pursuit of collective action as a means of survival. The Sahel region stands as an example of how the pursuit of collective regional action through integration as a means of dealing with persistent fragility regional security matters, which is a steep shift from the ECOWAS and AU frameworks.

RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptualizing Regional Security Cooperation and Integration

The concept and practice of collaboration in regional security and integration matters has significant layers and has advanced from both a conceptual and practical perspective. Thakur and Van Langenhove (2007) in their work criticize the conventional notion of regional integration and offer a new perspective. They bring to the attention of the audience that integration is, in fact, a voluntary process that involves cooperation among sovereign states in the regulation of their policies, institutions, or economies with the aim of achieving a collective goal using supranational or intergovernmental institutions. Moreover, their critique complements the work of Mattli (1999), which is considered the cornerstone in the study of the outcomes of regional integration, considering it from an economic standpoint. Van Langenhove (2007) adds to the conversation by stating that it is generally related to economic convergence like a customs union, common market, or monetary union; however, the concept broadly extends to political, legal, and increasing security cooperation (Mattli, 1999).

Security cooperation in a regional setting relates to the alignment of defense policies, intelligence sharing, collective security assurances, combined military action, and institutional structures to deal with threats that go beyond the boundaries of a single country (Lake & Morgan, 1997; Acharya, 2001). Within regionalism, this form of collaboration can take the shape of regional security communities or defense pacts, but also more relaxed forms such as ad hoc alliances or two-party agreements founded on shared interests.

In principle there is a major theoretical difference between regionalism driven by economics and that driven by security. Estevadeordal et al., (2014) concur that economic integration focusses on development and market access through trade liberalization, infrastructure connectivity, and the alignment of regulations. It is thus

growth-centric regionalism aiming at economies of scale, investment attraction, and improved competitiveness (Balassa, 2013; Herzenberg, 2011). On the other hand, security-centric regionalism is more reactive and immediate as it focusses on common threats of terrorism and other risks, civil wars, insurgencies, or criminal activities that cross borders; it prioritizes the survival of state entities, territorial integrity, and regime security at the cost of long-term economic planning (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). As Osland and Erstad (2020) state, Fragile and conflict prone regions, such as the Sahel, characterized by weak state institutions, porous borders, and threats that are external yet too strong to be subdued on a national level, create a strong need for security cooperation. In these instances, regional security collaboration may spring not from normative or economic reasoning but from pure need. States' Strategic convergence is facilitated while bypassing a formal system of legalistic integration due to shared vulnerabilities that push states (Adeniji et al., 2015). This is sometimes descriptively known as "crisis regionalism," whereby regions cooperate primarily to confront immediate dangers, lacking the longer foresight for integration and cooperation ideals (Fawcett, 2013).

African Regionalism: Normative Ambitions vs. Structural Constraints

Historically, the focus of African regional organizations has been defined by their high level of normative aspirations as argued by (Mamford, 2021), he acknowledges that elements such as unity, collective self-reliance, peace, and sustainable development are conceptualized around the 'Pan-African rhetorical trap'. The initial steps to implement the vision are the Abuja Treaty, which Agenda 2063 of the African Union envisions as a framework for a political, economic, and security integration blueprint at the continental level (Adeogun, 2025).

In relation to the Abuja Treaty, it is crucial to note that it very rightly put emphasis on the incremental approach of regional integration through the enhancement of RECs such as SADC, IGAD, ECOWAS, and others (Yogo, 2025: Magu, 2023). It outlined six steps beginning with integration within the RECs and ending with an economic and monetary union at the continental level. The plan regarded the adjustment of sectoral policies, construction of regional infrastructure, and maintenance of peace and security as indispensable and critical elements that would enable integration to move forward (Ojonugwa, 2024).

Building upon the integration vision, the AU Agenda 2063, which was adopted in 2013, re-established the continent's commitment to "an integrated, prosperous, peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens." The agenda details the 50-year plan, focusing on the implementation strategies for the flagship projects of the AfCFTA, the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), and the African Standby Force. Along with these initiatives, the agenda also identifies the policies for democratic governance, gender equality, and the silencing of guns as the core requirements for the region's (African Union Commission, 2015) integration.

As outlined earlier, the African normative ideals are pursued operationally through the RECs as the building blocks for the continent. ECOWAS has been specially focused on peacekeeping and political mediation. SADC is more concerned with economic integration and infrastructure development, while IGAD handles droughts, conflict resolution, and migration issues in the Horn of Africa. These organizations are supposed to function as subregional entities, but they operate as vehicles of integration, which in due course should consolidate into the AU at the continental level (Bach, 2024).

Nonetheless, the regional African integration efforts are threatened by continued technical and structure challenges. The challenge posed by institutional fragmentation is one of the most widespread. While it is asserted that Africa has 8 RECs, most African nations are members of more than one. For example, Kenya belongs to the EAC and COMESA, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo is part of both SADC and ECCAS. Such dual membership of regional blocks is known to create conflicting obligations for countries, lead to the creation of redundant institutions, and spark unproductive competition for resources and mandates (Mattli, 1999; Engel & Gomes Porto, 2010: Kuditchar, 2025).

In other instances, the mandates of the AU and the RECs clash with each other, which leads to a lack of coordination, especially in conflict resolution and peace-keeping operations. Theoretically, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) was supposed to help the cooperation between the AU and the RECs, yet conflicts over authority and vague jurisdictions continue to be an issue. Such incoherence is, in fact, increased by uneven institutional capacities indeed, certain RECs like ECOWAS and SADC are strong, while others like

ECCAS and AMU are weak and underfunded. Thus, regionalism in Africa functions in a context of normative convergence but operational divergence where shared goals are 'watered down' by operational, political, and financial constraints (De Waal, 2016; Murithi 2012).

A further disadvantage is dependency from outside, as African regionalism is, overall, externally funded and influenced by the likes of the European Union, China, or the United Nations, raising concerns of ownership, independence, and sustainability. Ultimately, as regional integration starts to respond to the priorities of donors, its local legitimacy and relevance can become seriously compromised (Taylor, 2010).

In brief, the normative framework around African regionalism as seen in the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063 is lofty and compelling, but it is crippled in implementation by structural problems like institutional fragmentation, overlapping REC mandates, imbalances of capacity, and reliance on funding. These tensions highlight the duality of the continent's vision and the realities on ground of a region and add strife to the challenge of integration.

ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel: At the Intersection of Interventionism and Crisis of Legitimacy

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long stood out as one of the most active and interventionist regional organizations in Africa. Its more hands-on approach in the preservation of peace, democratic norms, and the prevention of state collapse, particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and most recently, Mali, underlines a new dimension of care for the region (Ezeilo, 2018; Isaac et al., 2024). These stand as the main features that ECOWAS prominently became the leading peace and security organization: the creation of the ECOWAS Standby Force; the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001); and the proactive actions of the ECOWAS Commission Directorate of Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

With the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023, questions arise regarding the legitimacy of ECOWAS, especially with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger experiencing coupe-based regime changes. The critics often mention that interventions are made inconsistently and seem to support geopolitical interests instead of supporting norms along the principled lines. For example, the swift response to the Gambian crisis overturned in 2017 is in stark contrast to the region's slow attitude in dealing with the military juntas in the Sahel and the late imposition of sanctions (Adetula, 2021). Confidence in the proposed impartiality of ECOWAS has been damaged because of these differences in response to the various crises, and as a result, so has its normative authority.

The G5 Sahel, consisting of Mali, Burkino Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, was created in 2014; with these members, it was designed as a genuinely regional format aimed at dealing with the security issues in the Sahel, particularly those linked to the jihadist insurgencies. Initially, the G5 Sahel was positively received due to its focus on the Sahel region and its strategic partnership with France and the EU. However, external actors came to control all financing and practically all decision-making, Charbonneau., & Ricard 2022). The withdrawal of Mali from this platform following its disputes with France and ECOWAS in 2022 dealt the final blow to the credibility and cohesiveness of G5. Such developments raise deep questions about the future viability of traditional regional security arrangements in West Africa. Both ECOWAS and G5 Sahel mark important institutional attempts of security collaboration, they seem even more disconnected from political realities of the region, especially in places where democratic transitions either fail or are starkly rejected. As opposed to this, HWI tends to focus on governance-related outcomes or critiques of foreign policy, with an abundance of theoretical or empirical analyses given to issues of institutional failure translating to the rise of neo-security regional orders.

Hence, the rise of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) needs to be addressed as part of this more complex issue of a resolved crisis of legitimacy and deep institutional fatigue. The response in this case was not just political but rather structural recalibration to end structural inadequacies. The analytical challenge then is to comprehend how these types of formations reshape regionalism from a security-first viewpoint and what that implies for integration in West Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed under the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and pioneered by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, provides the central lens for this paper. Unlike prior work in security studies, RSCT focuses on the 'region,' where security threats are most intense. In "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" Buzan & Wæver, (2003), note that security concerns are clustered by geography because 'most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones' (p.4). This is because when a region forms clusters based on common security issues, it forms what are known as Regional Security Complexes (RSCs). These are clusters of countries whose security is intertwined to the extent that no one country can be studied without taking the others into account.

RSCT gets major attention in unstable and postcolonial environments such as the Sahel region, where thinly guarded borders, insurgency, and regime vulnerability result in strong dependence Amable (2022). Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have intertwined security issues that make analysis impossible without taking all three into account, including governance problems, jihadist insurgencies (e.g., ISGS, JNIM), and arms smuggling. Through the securitization process, political elites frame these intertwined issues as existential issues that require extraordinary measures. In the Sahel, regime elites politicize and securitize not only jihadist violence but also external factors such as France as well as ECOWAS sanctions, framing them as threats to sovereignty and autonomy. The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) created in 2023 through the Liptako-Gourma Charter reflects this logic: responding collectively to linked internal insurgencies and perceived external aggression.

AES's creation as an ECOWAS-independent sub-regional bloc is explained by RSCT. It demonstrates how the interdependence of security matters by itself and in the absence of strong institutions or economic convergence can result in regional alignment. RSCT is thus a potent framework for understanding security-driven integration in weak institutional and authoritarian settings. Nonetheless, RSCT also has limitations: security matters for the emergence of security complexes, it has fewer tools for understanding the transition to broader political or economic organizations. It is also stat-centric, and in many instances neglects the non-state armed groups and local resilience actors crucial to the Sahel (Bach, 2016). In addition, the strength of its description may, without intention, present the cooperation under authoritarian regimes as normal without the critique of accountability or inclusivity (Acharya, 2007).

On the other hand, Neofunctionalism, a classical theory of integration put forward by Ernst Haas (1958), focuses on the spillover from economic to political and security cooperation. Its main argument is that functional cooperation in a particular sector produces integration pressures in other sectors. Although the theory works with most of the European integration experience, it cannot explain the AES. As opposed to the European Union or ECOWAS, the AES was not the result of economic integration or institutional cooperation. Instead, it was formed because of a crisis-driven security partnership and regime support. This points out the limitations of neofunctionalism in relation to the Sahel region but also demonstrates the strong explanatory power of RSCT.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, the chosen method is qualitative analysis based on secondary data. The reason for this approach is the research question itself, which aims to theorize about the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as an instance of security-driven integration instead of trying to collect new empirical evidence.

Primary materials include official documents such as the Liptako-Gourma Charter (2023) forming the AES, joint statements of the member countries, and relevant protocols of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). These materials allow an understanding of the stated goals, guiding principles, and institutional context of the AES. The data were sourced from peer-reviewed scholarly articles, policy documents, regional and international think tank analyses, news reports, and African studies, all of which situate the AES within larger discussions around African regional integration and security challenges. The use of these sources was crucial in secondary data gathering.

This research adopts an analytical approach to content analysis; the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is the primary analytic framework, while neofunctionalism offers the opposite comparison. The data were analyzed for the following three broad themes and coded accordingly:

Security imperatives – narratives of insurgency, external threats, and regime survival.

Institutional design – organizational mechanisms, defense arrangements, and sovereignty provisions in the AES Charter.

Normative positioning – discursive framing of ECOWAS, Western intervention, and sovereignty.

A relativist orientation (Villa, 2010) informs this analytical approach, as it accepts that political and security matters do not have fixed characteristics and cannot be evaluated against universal criteria which is also cited by scholars such as (Kuditchar, 2022). Rather, political and security matters must always be explained in terms of local logic, contextual factors, and actor rationality. The choices made by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to establish the AES are examined in this study with respect to how they are contextually driven and rationally derived from competing geopolitical insecurity, sanctions, and contestation as opposed to being considered deviations from universal integration norms.

The study faces the limitation of its dependence on secondary data which might have interpretative biases. Nonetheless, the process of triangulation of data with various other sources such as official documents and statements, academic writings, and policy papers, adds to the credibility of the findings. Additionally, while RSCT strongly aids in the development of hypotheses regarding the emergence of security-led integration, it is deficient in suggesting methods for studying the long-term institutional changes, which is a limitation that this study clearly states.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Historical Evolution and Strategic Foundations of the AES

The creation of the AES in September 2023 by signing the Liptako-Gourma Charter alongside Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, signifies a critical moment in the changing paradigm of West African regionalism. Unlike other models for African integration which center on democratic governance, the liberalization of markets, and peacekeeping under multilateral or donor frameworks, AES centers on sovereign security cooperation between regimes facing common existential threats. Its founding features can be traced to the shifting political-security dynamics of the Sahel, marked especially by the unprecedented series of military takeovers, increasing strategic frustration with ECOWAS, and the continuous jihadist insurgency that has undermined national and regional leadership since 2012 (Irrum & Humza 2025).

AES certainly did not come from nowhere. Rather, it is the curation of political, strategic, and ideological trajectories coming to a head across three fragile states. With the military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023, ECOWAS responded with the suspension, imposition of travel and financial sanctions, and threats of military intervention in a timely and forceful manner. These sanctions, which in some ways are justified through the constitutionally mandated governance protocols of ECOWAS and their blanket prohibition on unconstitutional changes of government, have posed a problem for regional diplomacy. As the region's legitimacy is increasingly being taken away from electoral mandates and given to military stewardship, the military governments of Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey now identify and speak of themselves as defenders of their nation's existence, dismissing ECOWAS's terms as irrelevant, Sahelian foreign elites, and out of touch with the Sahelian (De Carvalho, 2023; Aning & Sow, 2022).

The strategic logic of a security-based approach, in reference to the AES, marks a sharp pivot to regional cooperation in the face of regime survival and territorial protection. In this regard, the Liptako-Gourma Charter presents relevant principles that stand out in comparison to ECOWAS's approach, which is centered on governance. In this light, each article also entails allied countries committing to assist each other in the event of external aggression or terrorism, and to the vigorous defense of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-

interference in internal matters. This reflects a resurgence of realist-style partnerships in Africa that is reminiscent of the Cold War-era thinking in which, alongside power projection and strategic autonomy, matters of democratic governance or normative matters were of secondary importance (Bach, 2024).

Playing more into symbolism, the AES speaks on behalf of counter-hegemonic forces in relation to the regional order. It tries to set aside the prevailing liberal orthodoxy subsisting within African regionalism that posits economic interdependence, institutional harmonization, and democracy as preconditions for integration (Hartzenberg, 2011; Adetula, 2021). The AES, however, turns that on its head and asserts that political alignment and even common security interests under autocratic regimes can serve as the foundational drivers of regional integration. Such attempts to turn the logic of integration on its head reveal deep struggles regarding who determines the normative agenda in West Africa. ECOWAS and its Western partners, or local regimes acting in response to what they perceive as indigenous security imperatives and political sovereignty (Charbonneau, 2017; Iragi Ntwali, 2025).

Geopolitical considerations also contributed to the creation of the AES. Capable of being a formal signatory of charter, the states want to institutionalize their alliance to create a new center of regional legitimacy instead of cooperating informally. Following ECOWAS's threat of military action in Niger and increasing Russian influence in the Sahel, external partnerships, which change their focus from ideology to counterterrorism, arms transfers, and infrastructure development, become attracted, leading to the alliance becoming an instigator of a strategic realignment, (Hlase, 2025 Nsaibia, 2024).

In summary, the AES is an outcome of both structural gap and ideological divide. It addresses a situation in which the security, regime protection, and sovereignty needs have overridden the wishes of democratic integration. The strengthening of AES alliances marks a significant change in the direction of African regionalism rounded on African regional security and cooperation. In this case, the AES showcases militarized cooperation and collective self-defense, autonomy, and some form of African restructuring that focuses on internal and external African regional security pressures. This change marks a shift in African regionalism because the focus is no longer cooperation and economic development but strategic defense and internal cooperation to reduce both African and external threats to the region.

Institutional Mechanism and Strategic Priorities of AES

In the AES, the council of African Heads of state, which consists of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is the apex decision-making body. This also completes the AES, which has the authoritarian nature of its member regimes. Their urgent formation also marked them as deliberately timber, which means strong and eager to create an alliance center. The lack of sufficient expertise and resources means that this council is greatly supported by scheduled meetings of defense and foreign ministers. These ministers oversee the implementation of decisions with supervision, thus abiding by the operational directives provided to them. This is a tall and narrow model that reflects AES's preference for centralized efficiency and elite solidarity rather than the broad-based institutional participation exemplified by ECOWAS and the African Union (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, 2023).

The Charter of Liptako-Gourma is especially notable in defining the Joint Force Command and assigning it the responsibility to lead the military campaign against terrorism, armed rebellion, as well as transnational crimes (Art. 4). This is the central structure of AES cooperation that is built on the shared insecurity of its members. The Charter defines the responsibilities of the Joint Force to include joint planning, intelligence sharing, and operational assistance (Arts. 4-7), which reflects the understanding that the combined forces of jihadist insurgencies and criminal networks cannot be contained by one state (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, 2023).

The AES, in contrast to the G5 Sahel Joint Force that was donor-driven and dependent on financing from France and the EU (Charbonneau, 2017), indicates a move towards strategic autonomy. In his study on the new scramble for Africa, Hlase (2025) makes the case that countries have underscored financing from their national budgets alongside the active search for partnerships outside the West, notably with Turkey and Russia, for arms, training, and diplomatic support (Sandnes, (2023). These institutional frameworks also represent a direct opposition to the frameworks of ECOWAS and the AU, which are anchored on the ideas of democracy, constitutional order, and civilian control of the military. ECOWAS's 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good

Governance established a zero-tolerance policy for unconstitutional changes in government and reinforced the military's subservience to civilian rule (ECOWAS, 2001). Reflecting on the withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS, Aboagye (2025) in a contrary analysis, argues that the AES's institutional framework legitimizes military stewardship as the protector of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This stark normative clash highlights the growing divide between two models of regionalism: one based on liberal democratic values, and the other on authoritarian solidarity and regime protectionism.

Besides its military focus, the AES Charter provides for the coordination of foreign policy and diplomatic support, thus broadening support beyond fighting issues. He further argues that this also covers collective stances towards external actors, especially the rejection of ECOWAS sanctions, the critique of Western military interventions, and the advocacy for multipolarity in international relations. For the AES regimes, the coordination of foreign policy serves as an extension of their survival needs, protecting them from diplomatic isolation and enabling them to be heard more strongly on continental and global platforms (Aboagye, 2025).

The operational reality poses challenges to the AES's goals. Insecurity in the Sahel continues to be a problem, despite AES's efforts. The activities of the UN Security Council (2025) continue to report increased jihadist activities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, with signs of violence extending to coastal states like Benin and Togo. This indicates that although the need for security interdependence has been

Acknowledged and institutionalized, it is still not being dealt with in an effective manner (Security Council Report, 2025). The ongoing cross-border insurgencies show the difference between what AES says and what it can do. The AES is still mainly military and not very inclusive, with very little structure other than the executive councils and the Joint Force Command. Contrary to ECOWAS, there are no structures for parliamentary oversight, civilian participation, or economic and social development. In comparison to Region Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the AES shows a perfect example of interdependent security closely located countries form a cluster because their threats are joined and cannot be separated (Amable, 2022). Though, as per RSCT, it is doubtful such groupings evolve into deeper integration if they have no institutional depth, no legitimacy, and no socio-economic linkages. With its present structure, the AES may be able to provide a framework to ensure short-term survival and regime protection. However, the minimalist institutionalism is more likely to obscure the achievement of long-term security gains, or the broadening of cooperation into non-security areas. In this respect, the AES exemplifies the pros and cons of security-focused integration: it takes care of pressing gaps but continues to be vulnerable and is likely to collapse in the absence of simultaneous governance and development initiatives.

Theoretical Implications and Prospects for Security-Led Integration

The AES's establishment significantly demands its own largely unaddressed theoretical framework within which to understand regionalism's trajectory in Africa. Liberal intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism, and regional institutionalism, which are the leading paradigms, either link integration to economic interdependence and/or democratic agreement or, less often, to spillovers. In sharp contrast, the AES proposes a framework grounded on collective insecurities, regime fragility, and geopolitical opposition, themes that are at odds with the core premises of integration and grouping.

The AES, therefore, is unlike other notable regional organizations in Africa such as the SADC, EAC, or the AMU, which derive their legitimacy from common economic objectives, cultural ties, or post-colonial unity, because it is primarily a response to security challenges. In the very formation of the AES, we find processes that focus less on formal long-term developmental goals and more on short-term survival and mutual military regime defense. This brings us to a central question in theory: can robust regionalism develop on a base of exclusionary, unstable, and militarized rule?

AES matches little with classical integration theories, especially neo-functionalism. Neo-functionalism would expect trade cooperation to be 'spilled over' and integrated further (Haas, 1958), as explained earlier. But the AES contradicts that: integration does not start with technical cooperation, but with military and security coordination. There is no sign, not even a rumor, of economic, infrastructural, or cultural integration being

planned. The alliance's militarized, security-first posture is a stark divergence from and challenge to classical integration theory, as critics of AES sometimes remark.

Moreover, the AES clouds the normative model of the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS initiatives of regional cooperation, which are based on democratic governance, human rights, and constitutional order. The AES openly subverts this framework, and in doing so, institutionalizes solidarity among military-led regimes and rejects the liberal conditionalities imposed by ECOWAS and its Western partners. In this sense, a type of authoritarian regionalism appears to exist, a concept which is scarcely developed within African political theory but is growing in importance with the decline of democracy and the shifting of elites continent-wide.

This kind of alliance also brings into focus whether security-driven integration is scalable and sustainable. According to Konert (2024) the initial cohesion of the AES, driven by common threats and diplomatic isolation, is unlikely to last, especially since there are even greater internal contradictions waiting to be exposed. The absence of strong, inclusive institutions; minimalist economic cooperation; a fragile state apparatus; future transitions to civilian rule, with all the uncertainties, represent structural blocks to robust institutionalization (Acemoglu & Robinson 2023: Seyoum, 2024). In the works of Gerőcs, (2025), he argues that, the AES might simply become a short-lived coalition and might rely squarely on the personalistic leadership of its military leaders without a dispute resolution mechanism, resource sharing framework, or means to achieve popular legitimacy.

However, dismissing the AES as a fleeting coalition might be premature. The alliance, from its symbolic aspect, has started to shift the political geography of West Africa by signaling the shift of alliances and the legitimacy of ECOWAS's regional authority. This creates consequences not only for West African diplomacy but also regarding the broader issues of sovereignty, legitimacy, and resistance in international relations. The AES can be viewed as a violation of the prevailing regional conventions and simultaneously as a test for different forms of regional cooperation emerging from conflict and crisis.

In theory, the AES provides a unique opportunity that allows us to analyze conflict and competing regime types over regional integration (Osuchuku, 2024). Consequently, it challenges the traditional narrative that democratic convergence and interdependence are the only core foundational logic for the construction of regional blocks. In conflict-affected and fragile areas such as the Sahel, integration may be dominated by security imperatives, even to the extent of eclipsing conventional integration logic. This creates further questions: Would these formations be able to generate internal political legitimacy over time? Is there a possibility for security alliances to give rise to economic and development cooperation? Alternatively, is it the lack of institutional depth and normative coherence that restrains their scope and utility?

This case study shows the paradox presented by the AES in Africa Today. The AES exemplifies the reactive nature of African integrations, as it is born out of exclusion and repression. It also exemplifies the constructive nature, as it represents the attempt to take back sovereignty in a bold manner in a region dominated by outside actors and normative blueprints. The theoretical implications of the AES's longevity are immense. The AES cannot be viewed as just a political anomaly; rather, it is a phenomenon that warrants serious attention as it compels one to rethink the Southern frameworks, incentives, and purpose of interregional collaborations in this century.

The future trajectory of the AES: A Potential Spill Over or a Crises bound Reality? A Paradigm for a new study

The AES is a paradigm-building case of regionalism from a security standpoint, which has far reaching policy implication for the West African Sub-continent and the wider African integration. AES leaders have framed jihadist insurgencies, ECOWAS sanctions, and foreign influence as existential threats that demand extraordinary measures from a securitization perspective as Konert (2024) establish in his analyses for coexistence between the AES and the ECOWAS. This kind of discursive construction as also advanced by Oluyemi (2025) in his own term "the cold war resurgence" legitimizes military rule and frames AES as an alternative normative order in the politics of west Africa. At the same time, in the theoretical perspective of dependency theorists explain why

the AES resists donor-driven models like the G5 Sahel and seeks to lessen dependence on Western donors while diversifying partnerships with Russia and Turkey (Sandor & Berlingozzi 2025: Sike, 2025).

For ECOWAS and the African Union, AES is both the challenge and the warning (Omeji, 2025). This questions

governance-based integration for its legitimacy and risks institutional deepening at the African regionalism level. Yet, it also signals that solutions that emphasize security are demanded in fragile zones, where economic interdependence is doubtful without at least a modicum of stability. In the futuristic reality of the AES, several trajectories is estimated based on the current trajectory, each with distinct consequences on the discourse of African integration, continental governance, and international relations at large.

A more optimistic scenario advance that the AES would gradually grow into a bigger framework beyond its immediate security objective. In the long run, much as NATO began as a military alliance (article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) and then moved toward accommodating some political consultation and even limited economic cooperation (Johnson, 2017: Branikas, 2004: Rubinson, 2024: Pundziūtė-Gallois, 2025), the AES has a possibility to develop some avenues for joint infrastructure projects, economic cooperation, and political coordination. Under this wider interpretation, AES members may be forced to come up with their own subregional economic and development agenda as the Sahel continues to remain excluded in continental trade initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Osuchukwu, 2024). Thus, the AES may transit from being a mere “defensive shield” to an intervention organization addressing the structural impediments of insecurity, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and shaky state institutions. The realization of this path could serve as a model of how crisis-led cooperation can evolve into a fuller-blown form of regionalism in fragile contexts.

Conversely, in a more pessimistic approach: the AES also has the tendency of remaining a highly ad hoc coalition, with its internal cohesion depending mostly on interests of regime survival and opposition to ECOWAS and Western influence which Konert (2025) considered in his analysis. In that case, an unstable alliance would be subject to its continued cohesion being undermined by political changes, be they by democratic openings, internal leadership struggles, or external interventions, to the advantage of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Along the same path, the state of the AES will become vulnerable to collapse due to its lack of institutional depth which Adefisoye, & Titus (2025) considered the their “The Emergence Of AES States: A Positive Development In Tackling Insecurity In The Sahel?”, its tying-in militarized cooperation, and the absence of strong civilian, economic, or social features. Rather than paving a new way for African regionalism, it may be remembered as a fleeting alliance that deepened regional fragmentation and failed to address the very security crises of the Sahel.

Between these poles is a more hybrid trajectory present the AES does not collapse to the narrow structure of a security pact, nor does it evolve fully into a broad integration framework. Rather, it may turn into a exhausted narrow-style security pact that gets used for coordinating counterterrorism operations and diplomatic solidarity, but that is very limited in scope. In this case, AES would then represent a semi-permanent parallel track of integration in Africa, challenging ECOWAS and the AU yet without fully displacing either. Such a scenario would add to Africa's current level of institutional fragmentation and raise weighty questions about the coherence of the continental integration agenda under the AU's Agenda 2063.

The varied divergent trajectories thus emphasize the need for sustained rigorous academic and policy attention. AES presents some great preeminent theoretical and policy questions: Can a security-first pact maintain itself past immediate crises? Can it slowly build a pathway to economic or political integration, or will it stay a fragile coalition of convenience? And, in the long run, what effects will the coexistence or competition with ECOWAS and the AU have on it? Addressing these questions must be the fruit of a good comparative research drawing from different disciplines such as political science, security studies, and development economics. Longitudinal research studies of institutional change in the Sahel, coupled with comparative analyses between other security-led organizations such as NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), would be very enlightening.

For scholars as well as policymakers alike, the AES brings a new empirical case and opportunity to rethink the channels, limits, and possibilities for African regionalism in the 21st century. Its future track of evolution will

bear heavily upon the dynamic between sovereignty and supranationalism or a confederation, the resilience of regional organizations in fragile settings, and the building of stable governance frameworks in Africa's most unstable zones. Hence, a research paradigm more focused on the AES is an urgent and necessary one questioning whether security-first regionalism can become a lasting paradigm in in its normative framework or whether it

will remain an exception born out of crisis in its logical conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The central argument of this paper has focused on the emergence of African security-led integration, taking the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as an empirical example, and its implications for regionalism and security cooperation in Africa. The analysis shows that AES, formalized through the Liptako-Gourma Charter (2023), embodies the signature of military regimes and their stakeholders, which is their opposition to the liberal-democratic integration paradigm promoted by ECOWAS and the African Union. The AES is the result of the logic of military regimes, cross-border insurgencies, and sanctions-induced isolation and represents a regional security complex where security, survival, sovereignty, and regime protection dominate and where there is no meaningful concern for market integration or governance convergence (Lenz, & Söderbaum, 2025.

By analysing the AES through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the article sheds light on both its analytical value and its limitations. RSCT can explain the formation of state groupings under shared threat perceptions, but it provides little insight regarding the likelihood of greater institutional deepening or the normative trajectories of such alliances. The AES serves as a real-world case study for crisis regionalism, as it demonstrates how a regional block can mobilize short-term solidarity and an operational framework for joint defense, but its deficiencies in inclusivity, institutional depth, and economic integration cast a shadow over its long-term prospects.

From an empirical point of view, the AES highlights the need to acknowledge alternative, context-specific models of regional cooperation in fragile regions. From a theoretical perspective, the AES serves as an example that challenges the dominant integration theory, especially neofunctionalism, by showing that regionalism can be initiated by the high politics of security rather than the low politics of the economy. The AES's fate will be shaped by whether it continues to be an ad hoc coalition of military regimes or transforms into a more institutionalized regional bloc. In either case, it compels scholars and policymakers to rethink the concept and routes of integration amid Africa's unstable security context.

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