



## The Cold War Resurgence: A Discourse on the Rivalry between ECOWAS and AES in West Africa

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### Abstract

The Cold War, a descriptive of 45year (1945-1990) of ideological rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union, as well as their competing coalitions, which sought to contain each other's expansion and gain worldwide predominance has constituted one of the most notable events and a discourse topic in International Relations. Scholars have indicated the emergence of economic interdependence of states, the increasing need of societal security, environmental security, human security, the rise of capitalism and the role of non-states actors expounded within the various strands of liberal theory to have marked the end of realist/military construct of world politics that gained prominence during the Cold War. However, this research argues on the possible continuation of the old Cold War in the present contemporary era using the recent unfolding rivalry within the West African region as a case study. Recently, the Sahel region in West Africa has been confronted with political instability and security challenges, marked by the rise of insurgent movements, military coups and deteriorating state governance. The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was created in September 2023 by the three military juntas of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as a counterweight to ECOWAS and the postcolonial influence of France and other Western allies. With the adoption of qualitative research method, depending mainly on secondary sources, this research examines the possibility of the Cold War resurgence between the two opposing blocs in West Africa (ECOWAS and AES), the prospect of the region becoming a proxy battleground through the involvements of opposing international allies (western and anti-western allies).

**Keywords:** AES, Cold War, ECOWAS, Liberalism, Realism, West Africa.

### 1. Introduction

The end of World War II ushered in another significant era in the world known as the Cold War, a period characterized by geopolitical realignment and the formation of two dominant superpowers: the United States and Soviet Union. This bipolar era was basically defined by ideological clash/division between communism and capitalism, which resulted to a series of proxy conflicts, military alliances, and intense political rivalries. The formation of NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955 solidified the position of the two superpowers and constituted the advent of a prolonged struggle for global influence (Majhi, 2024). "The Cold War was an era of the realist/neorealist construct of international relations whereby the traditional national security agenda of Western democracies was to provide military response to a broad spectrum of military and ideological challenges emanating from the Soviet Union and the militarization of national and regional security policies was the main priority that constituted the prime task of states' armed forces" (Oluyemi 2021). Following the end of the Cold War, there was a radical shift in international order, transitioning from a bipolar structure to a more intricate and interdependent global system. The ideological rivalry that characterized the Cold War era was replaced with a renewed focus on issues such as; human rights, economic development, and transnational security threats (Majhi, 2024). Different scholars in the literature have emphasized on the declination of the ideological conflicts of the Cold War and the military/realist construct of world politics at the aftermath of the Cold War (Fukuyama 1989, 1992; Lin 2011; Buzan et al., 1998). However, this research intends to shed light into the prospect of the Cold War resurgence in the present contemporary era.

Noteworthy, the rivalry between the United States and Russia has continued at the aftermath of the Cold War, which has been demonstrated through the proxy war and referred to as the continuation of the old Cold war or a New Cold War (Rubab, Ali & Arif, 2024). The power structure has shifted from the old Cold War bipolar to a multipolar with the emergence of superpowers such as; China, Russia along with the United States thereby the United States is presently fighting the war on two fronts; fighting Russia through the proxy war in Ukraine and Syria and through its involvement in Asia since Obama Administration started to focus on the containment of China (Gaido, 2023). The rapprochement of China and Russia that reflected in their engagement in security collaboration leading to the strengthening of Sino-Russian bond has rejuvenated the anti-US interest of Russia in terms of the demand for a multipolar world, which converge with the interest of China as well (Bossuyt & Kaczmarek, 2021). The research is predicated on the fact that, the world is still divided into two as indicated during the Cold War; the Western allies under the leadership of the United States against the collaboration of anti-

western superpowers such as; China and Russia together with the rising powers like Iran and Turkey. The two blocs have restrained from engaging in direct physical/military confrontations but they have locked their horns in discordance, formulating policies focused on mangling and incapacitating others. The conditions of international/national security or insecurity of states, peace/conflicts and stability/instability of developing and underdeveloped states are determined in respect to their collaborations with one bloc (western bloc) against the other bloc (anti-western bloc). This epitomizes the consequential outcomes of opposing international involvements in Syrian conflict, middle-east conflicts, and conflicts in Ukraine and African countries.

Contrary to the submissions of prominent scholars on the declination of militarism (realism) at the aftermath of the Cold War, the military influences in African civilian governments and the recent resurgence of military coups in West Africa in a contagion dimension threatening the survival of democracy in the region have been described as the continuity of military/realist predominance of the Cold War in the present political reality of Africa. Recently, the Sahel region in West Africa has been confronted with political instability and security challenges, marked by the rise of insurgent movements, military coups and deteriorating state governance (Haruna, 2024). Since 2020, Mali's colonel Assimi Goïta deposed two governments in a space of nine months as the army rejected a pro-France counterinsurgency approach; Guinea's presidential guard overthrew Alpha Conde in September 2021 in response to public anger over his third term bid; Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022 as public patience over insecurity worsened; while Niger deposed its pro-western leader in July 2023, citing the inadequate response of France to the militant violence in the country (Ochieng, 2024). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975, with the primary assignment of fostering economic integration among West African states and following the revision of the ECOWAS Treaty in 1993 and the adoption in 2001 of its supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance, the promotion of democracy has become a critical area of concern together with the role of peacekeeping and conflict resolution (Acho, 2024; Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024).

It has become a notable challenge for ECOWAS to ensure that member states comply with democratic norms, especially over the past four years, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger have all experienced democratic reversals. The regional organization has responded with the imposition of sanctions with the hope that coup leaders will hurriedly reverse to democratic rule. Consequently, at the end of January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS in favour of a new Alliance of Sahelian States (AES). They accused ECOWAS of operating under the influence of foreign powers, betraying the founding principles of the integration and imposing illegal sanctions (Acho, 2024). The corporality of Alliance of Sahelian States (military authoritarian governments) against the ECOWAS (democratic governments) coupled with the involvements of Russia, China, Iran and Turkey (anti-western allies) as international allies to AES countries pitted against the support of western powerful states for ECOWAS has gained the attention of this research. This is described as the division of West African region between the western bloc and anti-western bloc, depicting the ideological, proxy conflicts of the old Cold War and consequently illustrating the resurgence of a New Cold War in West Africa. This research argues that, the West African region is on the brink of protracted conflicts as a battleground of proxy war among the foreign powers.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Liberalism in a Realist World**

Realism and liberalism are arguably the two most long established and theoretically rivaling international relations theories. According to Ikenberry (2009) *"liberal international ideas can be traced to Britain and nineteenth century Anglo-American liberals, and realist theory can be traced to the European experience and German academic refugees of the 1930s. The philosophical roots of realism and liberalism are sunk deep in the ancient and Enlightenment West."* The debate of world politics during the Cold War and its aftermath might be incomplete without referencing the theoretical argument of realism during the Cold War and the predominance of liberal international order at its aftermath. It is a collective argument of many scholars that, the world of realism has come to an end at end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and end of ideological rivalry between the liberal bloc of United States and Communist Bloc of USSR. On the contrary, this research argues that, the realist/military construct of world politics has come to stay considering the various events unfolding in the contemporary era. It can be arguably suggested that, it is a world of realism with the functionalism of liberalism. *"Realism emphasizes the constraints on politics imposed by human selfishness ('egoism') and the absence of international government ('anarchy'), which require 'the primacy in all political life of power and security'"* (Gilpin 1986). The significance of the military capability of state emphasized by the realist/neorealist theory has continued to define the relevance of this theory in the present contemporary era. Saleh (2010) explains the significance of military power in the realist construct national security as a tool used by states to demonstrate their strengths, to maintain territorial integrity, to ensure domestic or internal security, to acquire international recognition, to fight against every threat, to carry out diplomatic negotiations, to gain economic advantages, to secure geopolitical boundaries and for political propaganda (cited by Oluyemi 2020). Stephen Walt (1991) defines the realist construct of national security as *"the studies of the threat, use, and control of military force."* Booth (2005) defines the realist conception of national security as the military security of states against the military capability of another state. The influence of military in democratic government such as; the undemocratic practices of civilian political leaders, military interventions in civilian governments, the composition of civilian governments by ex-military officials, the prioritization of military response to both internal and external perceived threats, the massive investment in military ammunitions and state armed forces, the evaluation of state' power and international recognition from military capability and the persistent need for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to ensure the national security of states can only be theoretically justified from the realist construct of world politics. These predominantly constituted the defining features of world politics during the Cold War, which have also continued to define the national and international policies of states at its aftermath. Any attempt to study the resurgence of the Cold War in the present contemporary era is likely going to examine the predominance of the ongoing military/realist policies of states against other states or non-state actors; military interventions in civilian governments and various military influences on civilian governments or military practices of democratic political actors.

The end of the Cold War and the demise of Soviet Communism at the beginning of 1990s enhanced the influence of liberal theories of international relations. Fukuyama argued in the early 1990s that, the end of the Soviet Union illustrated that liberal democracy will no longer have serious ideological competitor thereby it was 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government' (Fukuyama, 1992).

This is an argument that was strengthened by the wave of democratic transition in Africa, East Asia and Latin America. Fukuyama argued that "the end of the Cold War represented the triumph of the ideal state and a particular form of political economy, which is 'liberal capitalism' that cannot be improved upon: there can be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions" (Fukuyama 1992). *"The projection of liberal-democratic principles to the international realm is said to provide the best prospect for a peaceful world order because 'a world made up of liberal democracies ... should have much less incentive for war, since all nations would reciprocally recognize one another's legitimacy'"* (Fukuyama 1992). Liberalism rejects the realist postulation that power politics is the only outcome of world politics by emphasizing on the promotion of international cooperation through economic interdependence of states and non-state actors, democracy and international institutions. International trade has increasingly established interconnectedness of state and non-state actors, so that they are less likely to go to war. Democratic peace theory emphasizes that democratic governments cannot wage war against each other thereby democracy becomes an instrument of establishing peaceful relations among states. Liberalism also emphasizes on the role of international institutions to resolve international conflicts without violence and to maintain international order among states (Chen, et al., 2021). While this research has recognized the operationalization of various strands of liberalism in the present contemporary era, the failure of liberalism to predict and address the outbreak of war on terrorism, various armed conflicts in Africa, Russia invasion of Ukraine, the outbreak of conflicts in the middle-east, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, the rise of China and Russia as competing superpowers and the resurgence of military coups in Africa after the wave of democratization that swept through the continent from 1990s, which are theoretically explainable through the realist construct of world politics has rationalized the core argument of this research that, liberalism is existing in a realist world.

### **3. Summarizing the Cold War Events**

The end of World War II in 1945 failed to return normalcy to the world as it resulted into a new lengthy struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The devastated consequences of Second World War on the major European powers that had been at the forefront of the international stage in the 1930s set the scene for the emergence of two new global superpowers, a bipolar world. The United States and USSR gradually built up their own zones of influence, dividing the world into two opposing camps. The Cold War was therefore not exclusively a direct military confrontations between the US and the USSR but a global conflict that affected many countries, particularly the continent of Europe. Europe, divided into two blocs, became one of the main theatres of the war. The ideological clashes between capitalism and communism defined this era, resulting in a series of proxy conflicts, military alliances, and intense political rivalries. The establishment of NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955 solidified the divisions within Europe and marked the beginning of a prolonged struggle for global influence. In Western Europe, the European integration process began with the support of the United States, while countries of Eastern Europe became satellites of the USSR. From 1947 onwards, the two adversaries, employing all the resources at their disposal for intimidation and subversion, clashed in a lengthy strategic and ideological conflict punctuated by crises of varying intensity. The U.S. and Soviet Union engaged in a series of arms races, leading to the accumulation of nuclear arsenals and heightened tensions. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) exemplified efforts to curb the escalation of arms, though these measures were often accompanied by continued military posturing and competition. In addition, the Cold War shaped regional dynamics across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as both superpowers sought to expand their spheres of influence. The establishment of client states, characterized by ideological alignment and military support, became a hallmark of the Cold War politics. For instance, the Soviet Union provided military aid to various liberation movements in Africa, while the U.S. supported anti-communist regimes, often leading to prolonged conflicts and humanitarian crises. The Cold War finally came to an end in 1989 with the fall of Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Majhi, 2024).

### **4. Contemporary Trends of Military Resurgence in the Sahel Region**

This region has been identified with disastrous social, political and economic challenges that are ascribed to as consequential outcomes of the remissness of political leaders to implement democratic principles, which created an enabling environment for the resurgence of military coups. The term military resurgence has been used by scholars to explain the renewed emphasis on military power in Africa, particularly in the context of the resurgence of conflict and instability on the continent (Nyovani, 2021). It is defined according to Odigbo, Ezekwelu & Okeke, (2023) as the audacious re-emergence of military incursions and the preposterous dismantling of democratically elected civilian government. It is also described as a militarization of political system (Hedges, 2021). Military resurgence is defined as a coercive military organization that enforces rigid regulations intended to force the populace's docility and obedience through the issuance of harsh laws, decrees, edicts, martial laws, and pronouncements (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2023). It is a forceful contravention of democratic principles and mostly the consequential outcome of democratic failure. Levan (2015) argued that, the socio-economic malaise of African states are traceable to their endemic political problems. The enabling factors for the military resurgence in the Sahel region generally defined as triggers of coup by scholars can be attributed to "a syndrome of developmental strains and stresses in African political systems (Decalo, 1973; Powel, 2012).

Decalo, (1973) stated the triggers of coups in Africa as; authoritarian or autocratic political leaders, high level of executive corruption, daunting economic challenges, governmental inefficiency, inept public officers, low level of political institutionalization, military praetorianism, crisis of legitimacy arising from leadership elections, threat to the army's professional interest and integrity, inter-elite rivalry and discrepancy between the governmental policies and military perception of national interest together with the cutting of military budget or delinquency of its welfare by civilian governments (cited by Oluyemi 2024). Odigbo, Ezekwelu & Okeke (2023) also stated the triggers of coups as the abysmal performance of constitutional government and leadership gaps in nations like; Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso and other states in Africa leading to corruption, the disconnect between the rulers and citizens, injustice, lack of freedom, the failure of the state to judiciously perform her constitutional responsibilities, unmet expectations of the people coupled with unbearable insecurity that emanated as result of the emergence of rebels and terrorist groups in nations like; Mali, Burkina-Faso, Niger, Guinea and Chad and these generally led to the resurgence of military coups in the West African states. These stated triggers of coup can be generally identified as the failure of political leaders to ensure an adequate entrenchment and implementation of a



consolidated democracy, which has also questioned the credibility of embracing democratic values in these African states and fundamentally put democracy in competition with the military system of government in the West African region.

Mali has historically experienced a successful democratic transition in West Africa but had a setback in 2012 when president, Amadou Toumani Touré, was ousted by a military junta, marking a significant resurgence of military in a country with a decent history of democracy for over a decade (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). The presidential elections of 2013 saw Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's ascension as the president of the country whose administration was described by experts as one of the worst experiences in 60 years of political history of the country (Morgan, 2020). Keita's administration was characterized with high level of corruption and nepotism; threatening insecurity to the extent that, the zone of jihadist activity expanded from the northern region of Mali to the center of the republic and by 2020, the government was only controlling one-third of the country coupled with the diversification of economy, which depended on export of raw materials by more than 80% (Wroblewska, 2015). Schultes (2022) argued that, integrity of elections and political pluralism have depreciated in Mali whereby political pluralism and freedom of assembly are functioning at the lowest level from the past ten years. The outcome of legislative flawed elections in 2020, which saw the result of 31 legislative seats overturned in favour of President Keita that precipitated to the public protests against the President are described as triggers of the military coup in 2020 (Oluyemi, 2024). Under the leadership of Colonel Assimi Goïta, the Malian military took advantage of public dissatisfaction with the parliamentary election that was reportedly manipulated and the inability of government to ensure the restoration of order and protection of the civilian population from constant attacks by violent local armed groups and Islamic extremists to cease the civilian administration. The military intervention that was publicly celebrated by many Malian citizens immediately dissolved Keita's government and instituted an interim government of President Ndaw. Subsequently, Mali's military arrested the interim civilian President Ndaw and prime minister in May 2021, approximately nine months after August 2020 coup with the claim that, the cabinet formed by the civilian leaders has violated the terms of Mali's transition charter and installed himself as president of Mali (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). ECOWAS responded to the 2020 coup in Mali by suspending the membership of the country as well as imposing economic sanctions targeted at some individual military elites, highlighting the importance of the regional body at upholding the principles of democracy (Taruvinga, 2023). The Coup contravened the norms and principles that underpinned the 2001 ECOWAS protocols on democracy and good governance, which strongly condemned military intervention (Edu-Afful, 2021).

Niger is known to have historical records of military interventions, five times in fifty years of post-independence period the country. Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountche led a military coup in April 1974 that ended Hamani Diori's 14-year term as president, put the country's constitution on hold, and got rid of the National Assembly (Elischer, 2018). The military planned another coup in 1996 to remove President Mahamane Ousmane and Prime Minister Hama Amadou in January. Mbara (2022) explained that, Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, who was in charge of the military took over as the military head of the country with the claim that the coup was meant to start over instead of ending multiparty democracy. In April 1999, Mainassara was assassinated by group of soldiers who were against his government in a surprise attack at Niamey airport, which marked the beginning of the third coup in the country. Before the advent of another presidential election and the restoration of civilian government in 2000, Daouda Malam Wanke, who was in charge of the presidential guard, took over. The conducted election saw Mamadou Tandja beating Mahamadou Issoufou, who had been prime minister, in the popular vote to become president of Niger. Tandja and his deputy ministers were caught in 2010 by a group of military soldiers calling themselves the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSDR) under the leadership of General Salou Djibo. This military dissolved all state bodies after the constitution was put on hold (Obinna & Semudara, 2024). On the morning of July 16, 2023, Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum was incarcerated by the presidential guard under the direction of General Omar Tchiani. The presidential office initially described it as an "anti-republican mood" on social media by the military elite, which eventually became a coup when a ten-member group of high-ranking military officers appeared on the national television and declared they had deposed the government citing the continued deterioration of the security situation in the country as well as inadequate economic and social governance as reasons for the military takeover (Tschörner, 2023). Noteworthy, the military had played a significant role in shaping the country's political history since Niger's independence from France, the colonial power in 1960. It is also noted that military interventions in the country have historically occurred as a result of domestic political crises whereby in 2010, the military ceased the political power from the then-President Mamadou Tandja when he attempted to unlawfully extend his assigned constitutional term in office for the third time and coup paved the way for the beginning of new democratic government. However, the threat of military coups lingered following the election of Mahamadou Issoufou (2011) and Niger's first democratic change of government in 2021, which saw Issoufou's long-time party colleague Mohamed Bazoum assume the presidency (Oluyemi, 2024). Many Nigeriens celebrated the military invasion in similarity to the public celebration of coups in Mali and Burkina Faso due to the failure of democratically elected political leaders. In addition, French embassy and the headquarters of the ruling PNDS-Tarayya party were attacked by the people signifying people's frustration with democracy. Abdourahmane Idrissa is a political scientist in the country who described the coup to not only mark the violent end of democracy but also reflected the failure of democracy in the country (Tschörner, 2023).

Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022 as part of a wave of military resurgence in Western African states. The failure of democratic political leaders and the spread of violence by insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), various abuses by state security forces and militias appear to have fueled the military takeover in the country. According to Schultes (2022) the integrity of elections and civil society space have been severely deteriorated in Burkina Faso whereby all related rights indicators scored lower since 2019 than 2010. There is restriction to freedom of expression and digital rights and different strata of the society are largely unable to enjoy equality of civil liberties coupled with the worsened security condition as a result of the prevalence of armed conflicts and violence against civilians by non-state actors in the country. The deteriorated insecurity and the inability of government to contain armed extremist groups are described as triggers of the military coup in 2022 (Oluyemi, 2024). Burkina Faso has a long history of military mutinies, coups, and social unrest, though the country was relatively described stable during the former authoritarian leader Blaise Compaoré, who came to power via 1987 coup. Compaoré was ousted in a popular uprising in 2014 while trying to bypass his constitutional term limits, which saw the civilian politician Roch Marc Christian Kaboré coming to power through the elections

of 2015, after a failed coup attempt against the civilian-led transitional government by officers associated with Compaoré. Kaboré became the first elected president since the post-independence era of the country. He faced with popular demand of the people for security amid growing insurgent threats, along with job creation, governance reforms, and accountability. He managed to expand the state-sponsored militias and “volunteer” fighters that human rights groups have accused of abuses. He was reelected in 2020 in an election described by local civil society observers as free and fair but initially rejected by opposition leaders who claimed it was fraud because critical insecurity disallowed voting in several areas of the country. On January 24, 2022 Kabore's government was ousted by the military coup under the leadership of Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba who became military-led Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration MPSR that replaced the government (Akubueze, 2024). Kabore's government was accused to have failed to contain the situation of insurgency by jihadist groups in the north (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

## **5. The Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)**

In the wake of coups in the West African region, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the three Sahelian countries under the regime of military authoritarian leaders formed the Alliance of Sahel States on September 16, 2023 with the aim of strengthening cooperation among the three nations and addressing security challenges posed by insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates operating in the Sahel (Haruna, 2024). At the beginning of 2024, the alliance sent ECOWAS (the West Africa's main political union of 15 countries) a formal notice of their withdrawal from the bloc. The argumentative reasons provided by the collectiveness of these three countries for their withdrawal include; (1) the described “illegal, illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible sanctions” imposed on them by ECOWAS for truncating their democracies; (2) the failure of ECOWAS to provide adequate assistance to them in their existential fight against terrorism and insecurity; (3) the deviation of ECOWAS from its founding principles and subjugated under the control of foreign powers, a move that would limit opportunities for their citizens to seek justice for human rights violations (Acho, 2024). The alliance was created as an indication of opposition to the several challenges facing the region and most particularly international collaborations. For instance, the once highly regarded G5 Sahel Joint Force has been on the verge of disintegration as a result of the withdrawal of Mali in 2022 and many events and decisions have impeded cooperation with foreign powers in the region. This includes the denouncement by these three countries against many defence agreements with Paris leading to the withdrawal of French troops from these countries considering the fact that, France had coordinated both regional and international initiatives to fight against violent extremism and insecurity in the Sahel (Haruna, 2024).

ECOWAS in its response has viewed the sanctions as a necessary measure despite the expressed grievances by these three countries, founded on its mandate to uphold democratic governance as outlined in the 2011 Supplementary Act A/SP.2/08/11 A/SP.2/08/11, which allows the bloc to take action against member states that fail to meet their obligations. These three countries have formed part of the transitional military governments in the West African region after Mali experienced two coups (August 2020 and May 2021), Burkina Faso also had two (January and September 2022) and Niger had one in July 2023. These coups are considered as a contravention of the ECOWAS fundamental principles of promoting democracy, peace and security as defined in the revised 1993 ECOWAS Treaty and the 2001 Supplementary protocol on constitutional convergence principles. Colonel Assimi Goïta, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, and General Abdourahamane Tiani, the military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, respectively, who all ascended to power through military coups between 2020 and 2023, met in Niamey, the capital of Niger on July 6, 2024 for the first Confederation of the Sahel States (AES). These leaders emphasized that their goal is to ensure the transformation of the alliance formed in September 2023 into a confederation of three states with a focus on mutual protection and economic collaboration. The conference that strategically took place a day before ECOWAS Head of States Summit in Abuja, Nigeria has been described as a coincidental or planned timing to demonstrate the intention of these leaders to assert AES as an independent entity from ECOWAS. The meeting culminated in the signing of four documents that adopted a Treaty establishing a confederation, the Confederation of Sahel States (CES), or *Confédération des États du Sahel* to mark their official divorce from ECOWAS. They also formally agreed to adopt the acronym AES and be headed by Malian military leader in its first year (Acho, 2024).

## **6. ECOWAS and its Response to Coups in West Africa**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on May 28, 1975, through the signing of the Treaty of Lagos by 15 West African countries (Israel, 2020). The regional organization was created with the primary objectives of promoting the economic integration and cooperation among its member states in West Africa. The Treaty of Lagos is regarded as the foundational document for ECOWAS, outlining the objectives, principles, and institutional framework of the regional organization. The organization over the years has pursued economic integration through various initiatives such as; the establishment of a regional common market, which is an effort made to reduce trade barriers, harmonize economic policies, and create a more conducive environment for commerce and investment (Aide & Luka, 2022). ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is another initiative implemented by the organization to facilitate intra-regional trade and economic cooperation. ECOWAS has also actively engaged in peacekeeping efforts and conflict resolution within the region, which has contributed to the stability and security in West Africa, promoting the organization's objectives of peace and cooperation. ECOWAS has also been instrumental at ensuring the promotion of democratic governance, mediating political crises, promoting free and fair elections, and upholding democratic principles among member states (Musa, 2024).

The norms and values of ECOWAS emphasize the promotion of democratic practices thereby military coups and military governments are considered unconstitutional. Consequently, ECOWAS immediately released official statements to outrightly condemn the coup in the Sahelian region and this public condemnation is intended as a form of diplomatic pressure aimed at delegitimizing military regimes and emphasizing the commitment of the regional organization to democratic values (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). Any government that is not elected to power is not recognized by the regional organization and as a result, on January 1 2022, ECOWAS suspended Mali and placed a sanction on the country and its military rulers due to the attempt of the military junta to extend the transition period by up to five years (Moderan et al., 2022). This ECOWAS response was to facilitate the isolation



of Mali and weaken its economy while instigating citizens to mount pressure on the government to conduct elections (AKinola & Makombe, 2024). According to Onapajo & Babalola (2024) ECOWAS has imposed a number of sanctions (both economic and diplomatic) against the military juntas in Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso following the refusal of coup leaders to heed the regional body's call for a return to civilian rule or formulate a workable transition plan. The membership of these states were suspended and different economic sanctions have been imposed. For instance, the declaration of trade restrictions, border closures, and the suspension of the Mali from decision-making bodies of the organization after the military invasion in the country. In January 2022, the junta-led regime of Burkina Faso was suspended from ECOWAS. However, ECOWAS was hesitant to adopt the same strict measures in the case of Mali to Burkina Faso and as a result, diplomatic pressure was initially mounted on the military to prioritize a democratic transition and release the ousted civilian leader, Roch Marc Christian Kabore. Upon the intransigence of the military junta, the regional body imposed a travel ban on specific individuals affiliated with the military regime. Following the official announcement of military coup in Niger Republic, members of ECOWAS had an emergency meeting and collectively decided to issue a threat of potential military intervention against the military leaders should they refuse or fail to reinstate constitutional order within the specified timeframe of one week in their countries (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

## **7. The Cold War Resurgence: ECOWAS vs AES**

The ideological rivalry between the western bloc under the leadership of United States and Soviet Union bloc, which pitted democracy in competition with communism during the Cold War has resurfaced in West Africa. This is the ideological division between military authoritarian juntas of AES pitted against democratic states of ECOWAS constituting one of the fundamental causes conflict within the West African region. The military resurgence in West Africa has generally been described as a consequential outcome of the failure of political leaders to embrace the fundamental principles of democracy in their respective states (Oluyemi, 2024). According to Mbaku (2020) many political leaders in Africa have embraced democratic malpractices such as; Presidents Gnassingbé Eyadema of Togo, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Biya of Cameroon, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Tandja Mamadou of Niger, Idriss Deby of Chad, Omar Bongo of Gabon, and Abdel Fattah el-sisi of Egypt, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. According to Odigbo, Ezekwelu & Okeke (2023), the abysmal performance of constitutional government and leadership gaps in nations like; Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso and other states in Africa leading to corruption, the disconnect between the rulers and citizens, injustice, lack of freedom, the failure of the state to judiciously perform her constitutional responsibilities, unmet expectations of the people coupled with unbearable insecurity that have resulted to the rise of rebels and terrorist groups in nations like Mali and Burkina-Faso are general triggers of the recent resurgence of military coups in the region. The undemocratic practices of civilian governments leading to poor governance and conditions of insecurity fueled the dissatisfaction of citizens whereby military interventions in some of these countries such as; Mali, Guinea, Burkina-Faso, Chad and Sudan were publicly celebrated and welcomed by the citizens (Osariyekemwen & Osariyekemwen, 2021).

Furthermore, the failure of democracy enabled the military arrogated itself as a corrective regime with necessary professionalism to become justifiable alternative to the unenviable leadership deficit confronting the region thereby brought about unfortunate military coups with dire consequences in many West African states (Oluyemi, 2024). In the fight against the spread of military governments in the region, the ECOWAS under the leadership of the Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, threatened to intervene by force after the imposition of several sanctions against the military juntas' of Mali (Assimi Goïta, 2021), Burkina Faso (Ibrahim Traoré, 2022) and Niger (Abdourahamane Tchiani, 2023). Consequently, the three military regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger decided to establish a new regional organization, the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) to defend themselves (Kohnert, 2024). According to Haruna (2024), the formation of the alliance represents a broader shift in regional dynamics, it challenges the hegemony of ECOWAS and it signifies the rise of a new axis of power rooted in military-led government in competition with the traditional norms of democracy championed by ECOWAS in the region. This constitutes the rise of ideological rivalry between military system of government and democracy in West Africa depicting the resurgence of the Cold War ideological division in the region.

Another significant dynamic of the Cold War is the proxy conflicts between the two superpowers (The US and USSR) as demonstrated during the Vietnam War (1955-1975), Korean War (1950-1953), Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and Berlin Wall (1961-1989). This research examines the continuity of the Cold War by dividing the world into two; the western allies and anti-western powers and states in the world have collaborated with international allies based on their system of governments. The military takeovers within the former French colonies of West African states have shifted the international allies of these three military juntas' states whereby the West African region is torn between the western powers and anti-western powers susceptible to the emergence of proxy conflicts among the powerful states using the region as a battleground. The military regimes of AES countries criticize ECOWAS not only for the sanctions imposed on them in the wake of the coups, which were later largely lifted but also for being manipulated by western powers mainly France. Driven by growing resentment against the domination of the former colonial power, France, as well as other Western countries, the juntas cancelled all military agreements with Western powers and expelled the remaining contingents of Western troops, including the UN force MINUSMA, established in 2023 to combat Islamist terrorists in Mali (Karr, 2024). With the growing influence of the current geopolitical developments, including the growing influence of Russia (Kohnert, 2022b), China, Iran and Turkey (Kohnert, 2023a) in these three military authoritarian states, the possibility of proxy war among the superpowers in the West African region is quite alarming. The intransigence of the three military juntas toward the planned political transitions to civilian constitutional rule resulted to the growing rejection of the military juntas by their regional (ECOWAS) and international ties (France and other western allies) (Kohnert, 2024).

The unconstitutional governments of the three countries have shifted their international ties from westerns allies to anti-western allies whereby Moscow has become the primary security guarantor of the AES. There are approximately 2000 Russian soldiers as part of the Wagner Group, renamed to 'Africa Corps' in 2023 in Mali, roughly 200 in Burkina Faso, and at least another 100 in Niger (Czerep & Bryjka, 2024; Karr, 2024). The Russian mercenary troops in Mali have engaged in offensive military operations and those in Burkina Faso and Niger are assigned to train local forces and to ensure the protection of military junta leaders. Additionally, there are many

Russian private and state companies that have signed several agreements, memoranda of understanding with the AES states since September 2023 on civil nuclear cooperation, military-technical cooperation, mining of natural resources, construction of gold refineries and telecommunications (Karr, 2024). According to Acho (2024), the shift of bilateral relationships to international partners whereby the three AES countries expelled anti-jihadist French troops and instead turned towards what they call their 'sincere partners' (Russia, Turkey and Iran), constituting a significant realignment of geopolitical alliances in West African region and Africa in general and this would undermine the effectiveness of regional security of the region. Russia has also reportedly signed agreements on cooperation in areas such as; construction nuclear energy plants, deployment of Russian soldiers and supplying agricultural supplies and produce such as fertilizer and wheat. While Russia has focused more on military cooperation with AES countries, China has been a leading economic partner whereby China has established cooperation with these countries to expand its existing investments, particularly in Mali and Niger (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022; Karr, 2024). Chinese state-owned companies have invested in crude oil, uranium, and solar power projects across the AES (Nyabiage, 2024; Karr, 2024). Turkey is also reportedly described as one of the leading security partner of AES countries whereby the three countries depend on Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and have close personal contacts in the Turkish defence industry (Karr, 2024; Kohnert, 2023a; Armstrong, 2021). The Turkish-funded Syrian mercenaries described to have horrific human rights protection record for many years, have also started operating in Niger and most likely in Burkina Faso in 2024 to ensure the protection of key economic sites where the Turkish government has a stake, such as mines. Iran has also been found active showing interest in the sub-Saharan Africa to strengthen its economic, political and ideological ties in the region. Since the establishment of AES coalition, Iran has shown interest in establishing economic and defence cooperation with these military juntas and it has been speculated by the French and US media that, there are negotiations between Iran and Niger to sell uranium for weapons (Karr, 2024). The existing reality of two opposing blocs in partnership with opposing international allies and ideological division within the West African region are considerable indicators of the prospect for the Cold War resurgence in the region.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

There are notable implications of the withdrawal of Alliance of Sahel States (AES) from ECOWAS considering the fact that, the regional organization has maintained the position of its decision in order to ensure the promotion of democracy in the region. This exit would create complex regional security and economic dynamics in the West African region redefining economic relations and targeted cooperation in the area of security. This exit would potentially affect the West African border security whereby Joint initiatives established by ECOWAS to ensure border security such as; joint patrols and information sharing mechanisms would be affected, potentially exposing neighboring countries like Nigeria to security vulnerabilities (Adogamhe, 2015). This exit would potentially affect and strain diplomatic relations within the region knowingly that, ECOWAS has represented a significant platform for diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution among its member states. According to World Bank (2021), economic stability of West African region could be affected by the potential exit of the AES countries whereby the disruption of cross-border trade agreements and economic initiatives would be a hindrance to the regional economic progress. This exit would also challenge the overall agenda of regional cooperation within ECOWAS member states and also weaken the capacity of the regional organization to deploy effective peacekeeping forces in conflict-prone areas across the region. This exit would also impede ECOWAS coordinated responses to humanitarian crises and also weaken the effectiveness of the regional organization, which rely on the active participation of all member states to function optimally. The survival of these military juntas could become a motivation for other member states to follow the same path, which could eventually lead to the total collapse of the regional organization.

While this research recognizes the various implications of the corporality of two opposing blocs within the West African region, the most conspicuous aspect of these implications has to do with international involvements/allies in the region. Noteworthy, the escalation of ongoing protracted conflicts in the world today has substantial inputs of opposing international allies that have resulted to various complications, complexities and disastrousness of these conflicts. This research is predicated on the argument that, the world is still divided into two opposing blocs; western allies and anti-western allies as similar to the reality of the Cold War. The complexity, protractedness and disastrousness of Syrian conflict, Russia/Ukraine conflict, Israel/Palestinian conflict, and Middle East conflict are traceable to the involvement of opposing international allies in these conflicts. The emergence of ideological rivalry between military authoritarian governments (military regime) and democratic member states of ECOWAS has attracted the involvement of western allies and anti-western allies in the region. The reality of the Cold War ideological rivalry among the two superpowers has resurfaced within the West African region whereby military ideology (realist construct of state) under the support of anti-western allies and liberal democracy (liberalism) under the support of western allies are pitted against each other illustrating the potential resurgence of the Cold War in the region. This research argues that, the West African region is on the brink of mass violent conflicts if adequate precaution is not taken, political leaders of these regional blocs are admonished to eschew from becoming tools of proxy conflicts by their opposing international allies and embrace productive dialogue to address their differences.

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