



## **Qualitative Analysis of the Implications of the Withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from Ecowas on Nigerian Economy**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined the implications of the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and assessed the economic consequences for Nigeria and its citizens. The collective withdrawal of these three countries, driven by political tensions with ECOWAS, sanctions imposed on military juntas, and the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), represents an unprecedented challenge to regional integration in West Africa. As the largest economy and a founding member of ECOWAS, Nigeria stands at the center of the crisis, necessitating the qualitative investigation into its potential impact. This study therefore explored the implications of their withdrawal from ECOWA on Nigeria economy. The research adopted a qualitative methodological approach based primarily on secondary data, including formal publications, ECOWAS communiqués, policy briefs, media reports, international institutional documents and key informant interviews as well as content analysis which enabled a systematic interpretation of themes related to economic implications. The study anchored on Realist theory, which explains the pursuit of national interest and sovereignty, and Regional integration theory, which highlights the role of cooperation and interdependence in enhancing regional stability. The findings revealed that the*



*withdrawal of the three Sahel states has significant economic implications for Nigeria. The exit of Niger Republic—Nigeria’s major northern neighbor has disrupted cross-border trade flows, increased transaction costs, worsened food insecurity, and undermined the livelihoods of border communities that depend heavily on informal and formal transnational commerce. The restrictions on the free movement of goods and persons have further compounded economic hardship for citizens that were engaging in agriculture, livestock trade, and small-scale business. The study concluded that the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso poses a substantial threat to the stability and economic prosperity of Nigeria and undermines decades of regional integration efforts. It recommended that Nigeria should intensify diplomatic engagement with the withdrawing states, strengthen border security systems, diversify regional economic partnerships, and implement social protection measures for affected border populations.*

**Keywords:** *Regional Integration, Nigerian Economy. ECOWAS, and Sahel States.*

## **Introduction**

Regional integration remains a crucial strategy for achieving economic growth and development in Africa. The formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 was a landmark step towards fostering greater socio-political and economic cooperation among its fifteen West African member states. As a sub-regional organization, ECOWAS was designed to promote the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital, enhance intra-regional trade, and strengthen the collective response to security threats and political instability (Adebajo, 2020). Nigeria, due to its population size, military capacity, and economic strength, has historically played a leading role in ECOWAS. It has been a major contributor to ECOWAS peacekeeping operations and an advocate for regional integration. For instance, Nigeria remains central in ECOWAS’s security architecture especially in addressing terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. Through the leadership in ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) and coordination with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Nigeria continues to support regional security.



However, in recent years, ECOWAS has faced increasing political fragmentation and crises of legitimacy, particularly in relation to the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel region. Between 2020 and 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger experienced military takeovers that disrupted democratic governance and challenged ECOWAS treaty. ECOWAS responded with economic sanctions and political pressure, leading to worsening relations in the region. In January 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their official withdrawal from ECOWAS and subsequently formed a parallel alliance; the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), anchored on the principle of sovereignty and resistance to external interference (Bello, 2024). The Juntas claimed that ECOWAS no longer represented their security and political interests, particularly regarding the fight against terrorism (Balima, 2024). The Juntas accused ECOWAS of been under the influence of France and other Western nations, particularly in handling the Sahel crises. The Juntas further argued that ECOWAS no longer represented African sovereignty but rather western geopolitical interests. (Amani, 2024)

This unprecedented withdrawal by three member States simultaneously marks a turning point in the history of ECOWAS and raises serious concerns about the future of regional integration in West Africa. For Nigeria, the implications are particularly acute. These countries are not only Nigeria's neighbours but also vital partners in trade, security, and infrastructural cooperation. Nigeria shares long porous borders with both Niger and Burkina Faso, through which extensive informal trade and human movement occur. These four countries are critical to trans-Saharan trade routes and energy cooperation projects, including electricity interconnections and oil pipeline infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). A breakdown in these relations can significantly affect Nigeria's economic development, regional trade flows, and strategic influence in the sub-region. From an economic standpoint, Nigeria has benefited from ECOWAS frameworks such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. These instruments have facilitated cross-border commerce, employment opportunities for Nigerian traders and professionals, and expanded markets for Nigerian exports. With the exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Nigeria's access to these markets is under threat, with potential



disruptions in trade logistics, rising costs of goods, and reduced revenue from exports (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This could also undermine the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) within West Africa.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The recent withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January, 2024 represents a major rupture in the trajectory of regional integration in West Africa. This geopolitical shift raises critical questions regarding the stability and functionality of ECOWAS and its implications for Nigeria, the largest economy and most populous member state. The withdrawal occurred in the wake of successive military coups in the Sahel region, deteriorating relations between the military juntas and ECOWAS leadership, and widespread dissatisfaction with perceived external interference, particularly from France and other Western powers. The formation of a new alliance, that is the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by the breakaway countries marks a clear departure from the collective ethos of regional cooperation and directly challenges ECOWAS's authority and influence in the region (Bello, 2024). Niger is a key transit route for goods from northern Nigeria and a partner in energy cooperation projects, including electricity transmission and proposed oil pipelines (World Bank, 2023). Burkina Faso and Mali are part of regional trade routes under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which facilitates duty-free access to markets across the region. Their departure threatens to destabilize the socio-economic and political arrangements, increase transaction costs, and reduce market access for Nigerian goods, especially in the agricultural and manufactured sectors (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

### **Objectives of Study**

The objectives of the study is to critically assess the economic implications of the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS on Nigeria's economy and to explore policy options for mitigating the impact and enhancing Nigeria's regional economic resilience.



## **Research Methods**

A combination of content analysis and semi- structural interviews was used to gather data. Content analysis enabled the systematic examination of official documents, media reports, ECOWAS communiqués and policy papers while interviews provided first hands insights from experts, scholars, ECOWAS staffs and journalists. For the content analysis, a documentary sample consisting of about 20 documents were analyzed. These documents include the ECOWAS official statements and communiqués (2020 -2025), National government press releases of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, Reports from AU, UN and regional think tanks (eg, ISS, WACSI), academic journal articles and policy briefs and major media publications and editorials. The interviews conducted was aimed to capture nuanced opinions and lived experiences surrounding the withdrawal and responses analysed using thematic analysis, where recurring themes and patterns related to trade disruption, border security and investment shifts are identified and categorized. The respondents were strategically selected because of their professional experiences and informed perspectives on West African regional integration and the political dynamics surrounding recent developments in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The interviews focused on understanding the implications of the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, with particular attention to the economic consequences of this unprecedented regional shift. The respondents include an international relations specialist (R1), a professor in international relation (R2) four senior academics in international relations (R3, R4 and R5), a journalist with over a decade of experience in political reporting (R6), an ECOWAS,s official (R7), and a foreign affairs official (R8). Their perspectives provided a multidimensional and nuanced understanding of the withdrawal and its implications for West Africa

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical frameworks viz. regional integration theory and hegemonic stability theory, both of which provide insight into the dynamics of



cooperation, conflict, and economic interdependence within regional organizations such as ECOWAS.

*a. Regional Integration Theory*

Regional integration theory posits that States voluntarily enter cooperative arrangements to maximize mutual gains in trade, security, and development. Early theorists like Haas (1958) viewed integration as a gradual process, facilitated by the transfer of loyalty from national institutions to regional bodies, a process known as "functional spillover." The theory emphasizes that cooperation in one sector (e.g., trade) often leads to further cooperation in other sectors (e.g., security, infrastructure). This theory posits that countries voluntarily pool resources and sovereignty to achieve shared economic, political, or security objectives. According to Haas (1958), integration evolves through stages, from economic cooperation to political unification, driven by institutional mechanisms and elite commitment. ECOWAS reflects this theory through its institutional arrangements for economic integration and political cooperation. However, the theory also acknowledges that failure of trust, unequal benefits, and external pressures can reverse integration processes (Rosamond, 2000).

In the context of ECOWAS, this theory explains how member States have historically aligned policies and pooled sovereignty to achieve regional objectives, such as the establishment of a customs union, free movement protocol, and regional conflict management. However, the theory also suggests that failure to deliver concrete economic and political benefits may lead to disillusionment and eventual disintegration, as currently witnessed in the exits of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

*b. Hegemonic Stability Theory*

Hegemonic stability theory, developed by Kindleberger (1973) and later expanded by Keohane (1984), argues that a stable international or regional order is often sustained by a single dominant



power (hegemony) that provides public goods such as security, economic stability, and institutional leadership. In West Africa, Nigeria plays this hegemonic role by financing ECOWAS operations, deploying troops for peace enforcement, and championing democracy promotion. Proposed by Kindleberger (1973), this theory argues that a dominant power is necessary to stabilize international or regional systems. Nigeria, as the most populous and economically dominant in West African state, plays a hegemonic role in ECOWAS. The theory is relevant in understanding how Nigeria's leadership, whether inclusive or domineering, affects the cohesion of ECOWAS. Withdrawal of member States can be interpreted as a reaction to perceived hegemonic excesses or ineffective leadership. However, the theory also warns that hegemonic power can provoke resentment if it is perceived as self-serving or coercive. The backlash against Nigeria's perceived leadership by the military juntas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso validates this point. Hegemonic leadership must be seen as legitimate and beneficial to all members, otherwise, it risks collapse (Keohane, 1984). In the ECOWAS context, Nigeria's hegemony is challenged by a mix of internal weaknesses such as insecurity, corruption, and economic volatility, and external pushbacks from dissatisfied member states. The erosion of Nigeria's hegemonic legitimacy can thus explain the current fragmentation in the regional bloc.

Jointly, these two theories offer a useful lens for analyzing both the centripetal forces that historically bound ECOWAS and the centrifugal forces now tearing it apart. Regional integration theory contextualizes the original rationale for economic and political cooperation, while hegemonic stability theory helps explain the leadership tensions, power imbalances, and institutional fragilities that have culminated in the withdrawal of key States. Together, these theories help explain both the centripetal and centrifugal forces affecting regional blocs like ECOWAS and the implications for Nigeria's economic and diplomatic strategy. Using these frameworks, this study investigates how Nigeria's leadership role, economic dependence on regional cooperation, and political alignment with ECOWAS norms influence the extent and nature of the economic fallout from the current crisis.



## Conceptual Analysis

The study explores key concepts underpinning the research on the concept of economy and the concept of economic development

### *(a). Concept of Economy*

The term “economy” refers to the system or structure through which a country or region manages its resources, production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. It encompasses all activities involving the use of scarce resources to satisfy human wants and needs. An economy may be local, national, regional, or global in scope, and it operates through the interaction of various agents such as individuals, businesses, governments, and international institutions. According to Adam Smith (1776), economy is a system governed by natural laws, particularly the “invisible hand” of the market. He emphasized free markets, division of labour and self-interest as the drivers of economic prosperity. According to Walker (2025) economics is the body of knowledge which relates to wealth. The word "economy" can be traced back to the Greek words *oikonomia* i.e. "one who manages a household" a composite word derived from *oikos* "house" and *νόμος* "manage. The first recorded sense of the word "economy" is in the phrase "the management of economic affairs", found in a work possibly composed in a monastery in 1440. "Economy" is later recorded in more general senses, including "thrift" and "administration". The most frequently used, denoting "the economic system of a country or an area", seems not to have developed until the 19th or 20th century. According to him, an economy consists of the economic system in a certain region, comprising the production, distribution or trade, and consumption of limited goods and services in that region or country. In other words, an economy is the total sum of product and service transactions of value between two economic agents in a region, be it individuals, organizations or states. Transactions only occur when both parties agree to the value or price of the transacted good, commonly expressed in a certain currency.



According to Will(2014), an economy is a complex system of consumers, businesses, and governments that produce, consume, and distribute goods and service, combining to fulfill the needs of those living and operating within it. An economy is a system within a region, composed of individuals, businesses, and governments that produce and sell goods and services. Also, economic is a science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses (Robbins 2012). From the view of Thomas (2000), economic is viewed as population growth. Population growth geometrically while food production grows arithmetically. This imbalance, would lead to poverty and famine unless checked by factors like war, disease or restraint. The theory states that the supply of food cannot keep up with the growth of the human population, inevitably resulting in disease, famine, war and calamity. However, from the perspective of Ricardo (1823), it was argued that even if a country is less efficient in producing all goods compared to another country, it should specialize in producing the good in which it has the least inefficiency or greatest relative advantage so as to it leads to mutual beneficial trade. Ricardo like many classical economists argued that the value of goods is determined by the labour required to produce them. On the other hand, Karl Marx(1867) sees economy has been shaped by class struggle between capitalists and workers. According to Karl, capitalism leads to exploitation, and a socialist economy is necessary to ensure equality and fair distribution. In sum, economy can be describes as production and as the source of demand. When goods are produced, income is generated that will eventually be spent on goods.

## *2. Concept of Economic Development*

Economic development is a subset of the broader concept of development. It refers specifically to the sustained, concerted actions of policymakers and communities that promote the standard of living and economic wealth of a specific area. Unlike mere economic growth, which refers to an increase in national output or income, economic development includes qualitative improvements in productivity, technology, living conditions, infrastructure, and employment



opportunities (Todaro and Smith, 2015). According to Schumpeter (1934), economic development is driven by innovation, entrepreneurship, and structural transformation, particularly through industrialization, technological progress, and modernization of production systems. Economic development is not merely an increase in wealth, but a transformation of the economic structure of society, leading to improved welfare.

In the Nigerian context, economic development is central to national planning and regional cooperation. Regional economic blocs like ECOWAS serve as platforms for promoting economic development through trade liberalization, regional infrastructure, labor mobility, and shared policy frameworks (Akinyemi, 2022). Therefore, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS could significantly affect Nigeria's economic development trajectory by weakening regional integration, trade, and collective investment mechanisms. The implications may include reduced trade volumes, supply chain disruptions, insecurity in transnational corridors, and a decrease in foreign investment confidence, all of which are critical to sustainable economic development. Additionally, Nigeria's position as a regional economic leader may be undermined, thereby slowing its developmental progress (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). Daron and James (2012) defined economic development as depends on inclusive institutions systems that allow broad participation, upon property rights, and prevent elite capture. Economic development is not purely an economic phenomenon, but rather a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of absolute poverty.

Michael and Stephen(2009) itemized some key elements of economic development which ranges from income and growth – sustained increased in per capital income; reduction of poverty – improving the living standard of the poor; human development - expanding access to health, education and employment; structural and social reforms – transforming the economy from agriculture- based to industry and services; and institutional and social reforms –



establishing fair and efficient institutions and reducing inequality. They emphasized that economic development is not just about income growth but also about improving the quality of life through better education, health, freedom, and dignity. Economic development can also be defined as efforts that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and/or retaining jobs and supporting or growing incomes. It is a sustained community effort to improve both the local economy and the quality of life by building area's capacity to adapt to economic change (Loveridge and Morse 2016).

### **Thematic Literature Review**

Thematic literature review addresses empirical evidence and scholarly studies on two themes relating to the economic implications of member withdrawals from ECOWAS; and the challenges facing Nigeria in the wake of the crisis.

#### ***(a) Theme 1: Implications of the Withdrawal of Three Member States from ECOWAS***

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents one of the most significant political and institutional shocks to West African regionalism since the bloc's establishment in 1975. The implications are multidimensional, with consequences for regional security, economic integration, diplomatic cohesion, legal norms, humanitarian conditions, and the future of collective governance. Scholars and policy analysts generally identify two broad categories of implications and these are security, economic and trade disruptions; erosion of regional legitimacy and institutional authority as well as the humanitarian and socio-political consequences. This review synthesizes major empirical findings across these two domains.

First, a principal implication of the withdrawal is the weakening of ECOWAS's regional security architecture. ECOWAS had relied heavily on the geographic positioning and military manpower of the three Sahelian states for counter-terrorism operations, particularly against jihadist insurgencies and transnational criminal networks (IISS, 2024). The exit of these States has created a security vacuum, enabling militant groups to expand mobility across porous borders



(The Guardian, 2025). Studies indicate that past interventions such as ECOMOG and regional standby forces demonstrated ECOWAS's comparative advantage in coordinating multilateral responses (Ojo, 1980; and Crisis Group, 2023). The loss of three frontline States reduces intelligence-sharing, coordinated patrols, and burden-sharing in regional operations. More critically, the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which prioritises mutual defence outside ECOWAS structures, creates parallel and potentially competing security frameworks, further undermining integration (Al Jazeera, 2024). Empirical analysis shows that competing alliances risk fragmenting West Africa into security blocs, making unified regional responses to terrorism more difficult (Amanifrica-ET, 2025). This fragmentation also complicates Nigeria's leadership role, as Abuja must navigate parallel military coalitions rather than a unified ECOWAS security mechanism (Solaru, 2025).

Secondly, the withdrawals poses significant economic consequences for the region. ECOWAS operates a common external tariff, a free movement protocol, and a trade liberalisation scheme that facilitate cross-border commerce. Exiting States risk losing preferential access to regional markets and may face new tariff and administrative barriers (CDD West Africa, 2023). Economic reports show that Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger depend heavily on coastal ECOWAS member states such as Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria, for port access, energy supplies, and trade corridors (Reuters, 2024). Withdrawal therefore increases logistical costs, slows inter-state commerce, and threatens long-standing trade routes. Analysts further notes the potential increases in transport tariffs, customs delays, and informal taxation along borders (Crisis Group, 2023). Furthermore, millions of ECOWAS citizens residing in the three Sahelian states risk losing mobility rights, including visa-free movement, employment opportunities, and residency privileges. This creates uncertainty for migrant workers and cross-border communities whose livelihoods depend on regional labour mobility (Human Right Watch, 2024).

Thirdly, the withdrawal has critical implications for the legitimacy of ECOWAS as a regional organisation. Scholars suggest that losing three members especially during a period of multiple



coups, signals declining confidence in ECOWAS governance mechanisms, particularly its sanctions regime and democracy protocol (IISS, 2024). This weakens ECOWAS's image as an effective promoter of constitutional order. Institutionally, ECOWAS's normative influence is weakened by the challenge to its authority. If member States feel free to exit in response to sanctions or adverse decisions, ECOWAS's ability to enforce compliance with democratic norms becomes significantly constrained (EJIL-:Talk, 2024). This sets a dangerous precedent for future situations of unconstitutional change. The withdrawals also reduce the bloc's voting strength and internal balance, especially between Anglophone and Francophone members. Analysts warn that this could shift geopolitical influences and reduce the organisation's bargaining power with the African Union, European Union, and international donors (Amanifrica-ET, 2025).

Lastly, humanitarian impacts are immediate and severe. Sanctions before the withdrawal had already harmed livelihoods, disrupted commerce, and restricted essential supplies (Crisis Group, 2023). Withdrawal deepens these hardships by further isolating already fragile economies. Empirical evidence suggests heightened risks of food insecurity due to disrupted supply chains and reduced aid coordination (HRW, 2024). Socially, the withdrawal may accelerate anti-regionalist sentiment, reinforcing political narratives that portray regional bodies as instruments of external interference. This undermines public trust in multilateral governance and may embolden other States with domestic political crises to resist ECOWAS mediation. Politically, the move strengthens the ruling juntas domestically, as withdrawal is used to consolidate nationalist legitimacy. However, in the long term, the absence of regional oversight may entrench authoritarian governance and weaken the prospects for democratic transitions (CDD West Africa, 2023).

In sum, the withdrawals of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger carry far-reaching implications for ECOWAS and the entire West African region. They weaken collective security mechanisms, disrupt economic integration, undermine institutional legitimacy, and impose humanitarian and political costs. The crisis demonstrates that ECOWAS must reconsider its enforcement strategies,



strengthen inclusive diplomatic engagement, and rebuild trust with member states. Without reforms addressing the grievances that led to the withdrawal, West African regionalism risks deeper fragmentation with long-term consequences for stability, development, and governance.

***b. Theme 2: Challenges Facing Nigeria in the Wake of the Withdrawal Crisis from ECOWAS***

Nigeria, as the largest political, economic, and military power in West Africa, faces substantial challenges following the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The exit of these three Sahelian states not only destabilizes regional governance but also affects Nigeria's security, economy, diplomacy, and domestic politics. The study identified key challenges in four broad thematic areas viz: heightened security threats along Nigeria's northern borders; economic and trade disruptions; weakening of Nigeria's regional leadership and diplomatic influence; and political legitimacy and institutional pressure on Nigeria's government and ECOWAS leadership. These challenges are interconnected and have direct implications for Nigeria's national interest and economic wellbeing especially, the Northern States bordering the three nations.

First and foremost, a major challenge for Nigeria is the increased security risk along its northern borders, especially given the proximity of Niger—a former ECOWAS ally, to Nigeria's critical security environment. Studies show that Niger has historically served as a buffer state that helped Nigeria counter the movement of jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups (IISS, 2024). With Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS and its reduced security cooperation with Abuja, Nigeria now faces a higher likelihood of increased cross-border insurgency infiltration; arms trafficking; illegal mining activities; and unregulated movement of fighters (Crisis Group, 2023, and The Guardian, 2025). The collapse of coordinated joint border patrols and intelligence sharing, previously facilitated under ECOWAS and the Multinational Security Cooperation Framework, exposes Nigeria's northern flank to significant vulnerabilities (Amanifrica-ET, 2025). Analysts further warns that extremist groups may exploit political fragmentation to expand into ungoverned spaces (HRW, 2024). Additionally, the formation of



the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a military pact between the withdrawing states, may create a parallel security bloc that excludes Nigeria and weakens regional counterterrorism mechanisms (Al Jazeera, 2024). This reduces Nigeria's ability to influence collective security arrangements in the Sahel.

Equally, the withdrawal of the three members poses major economic and trade challenges for Nigeria. Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali depend on Nigerian markets for petroleum products, manufactured goods, food supplies, and cross-border commercial exchange. Disruptions to these trade routes affect petroleum exports, agricultural products, the informal cross-border market, and inter-state transportation flows (CDD West Africa, 2023). The political breakdown in the Sahel may force Nigeria to create bilateral trade alternatives, recalibrate customs operations, and manage congested or closed border posts. The decline in regulated trade raises the risk of smuggling, fuel diversion, and black-market commerce, all of which may hurt Nigeria's economy.

In addition, the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, which guaranteed movement of persons, labour, and services, is now weakened in the Sahel region. Nigeria faces the potential return of thousands of migrant workers and traders who may lose residency rights in the withdrawing States (Solaru, 2025). This could increase unemployment and pressure on local economies in northern Nigerian border communities.

Furthermore, Nigeria has traditionally played a leadership role in ECOWAS, contributing the largest financial share, peacekeeping manpower, and diplomatic influence (Ojo, 1980; IISS, 2024). The withdrawal crisis presents a direct challenge to Nigeria's regional hegemony. First, the departure of three States reduces the size and coherence of ECOWAS, weakening the bloc's global bargaining power and diminishing Nigeria's strategic platform in Africa and international diplomacy (Amanifrica-ET, 2025). With a fractured ECOWAS, Nigeria's ability to influence continental policies through the African Union or African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is significantly reduced.



Second, Nigeria's leadership is now contested by emerging geopolitical blocs, especially as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are forging security alliances with non-Western actors, including Russia (Al Jazeera, 2024). This may create competing spheres of influence in West Africa, thereby limiting Nigeria's diplomatic reach.

Third, critics have argued that ECOWAS sanctions, heavily supported by Nigeria, contributed to the withdrawal crisis (Crisis Group, 2023). This perception may undermine Nigeria's moral authority, especially in advocating for democracy and constitutional order in the region.

At the home front, the withdrawal crisis also generates internal political and institutional challenges for Nigeria. Domestically, the government faces pressure to reconsider ECOWAS's governance instruments particularly sanctions, democracy protocols, and intervention mandates. Some scholars further note that Nigeria must now balance between protecting regional norms and avoiding further fragmentation (EJIL:-Talk!, 2024). Nigeria's domestic political actors, civil society groups, and northern communities have criticised ECOWAS's approach as heavy-handed, arguing that sanctions especially the border closure with Niger, hurt civilians more than juntas (HRW, 2024). These criticisms heighten political tensions within Nigeria and reduce public confidence in regional diplomacy.

Institutionally, the crisis forces Nigeria to rethink its financial commitments to ECOWAS, as the withdrawal of members disrupts shared financial responsibilities, programme budgets, and operational planning (CDD West Africa, 2023). Nigeria risks bearing a larger financial burden if ECOWAS becomes smaller and weaker. Finally, there is a risk of regional contagion, the success of military juntas in resisting ECOWAS pressure may embolden anti-democratic actors in other states, potentially influencing domestic political behaviour across the region, including Nigeria's northern neighbours (IISS, 2024).

In summary, Nigeria faces significant multidimensional challenges stemming from the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS. These challenges include



heightened border insecurity, economic disruptions, weakened regional leadership, and domestic political pressures. As West Africa's anchor State, Nigeria must respond strategically by strengthening bilateral diplomacy, recalibrating ECOWAS enforcement mechanisms, and promoting inclusive security and economic frameworks that rebuild trust across the region. Failure to adapt risks deeper fragmentation of West African regionalism and long-term consequences for Nigeria's national security and economic stability.

### **Analysis, Findings and Discussion**

The study analysis revolves round the Respondent's perspectives on the withdrawal of the States from ECOWAS as well as its economic consequences and implications on Nigeria economy as follows;

#### ***1. Analyzing the Respondent's Perspectives on the Withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS***

Across the interviews, Respondents demonstrated a strong and convergent understanding of the nature and meaning of the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS. While they differed in emphasis, all Respondents recognized the withdrawal as a chain of political reactions rooted in tensions between the three military governments and the regional organization. First, Respondent no 1 (the international relations specialist) offered a structured explanation of the timeline, noting that "on 28 January 2024, the military juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso announced their intention to quit ECOWAS," and that their formal exit was acknowledged a year later. He also emphasized that during this period, the States "deepened coordination via the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)," establishing a new regional identity that signaled a deliberate realignment. The Respondents highlighted that the withdrawal did not come as a spontaneous decision but emerged as a result of prolonged friction.

Explaining further, Respondent 2 (a Professor in international relations) stated, "to me, it is born out of grievances," and further elaborated that the three states believed ECOWAS "is not servicing their interest in the way they expected." The narrative suggests that dissatisfaction had



accumulated over time and that the withdrawal was the culmination of a multi-layered dispute involving governance, security, and regional expectations.

However, Respondent 6 (a Journalist) offered another dimension by linking the withdrawal to the internal ideological orientation of the military regimes. According to the Respondent, the three States “believed they are bedeviled with underdevelopment and of the stand that democracy is not a good instrument for them to channel and harness development.” The Respondent’s interpretation suggests that the withdrawal was also a rejection of the democratic governance model promoted by ECOWAS, as the three States appeared to prefer a political structure anchored in militarized nationalism.

Equally, Respondent 3 framed the issue more squarely within political tensions and submitted that the withdrawal occurred “mainly due to political tensions within the bloc, especially over the sanctions and pressure to return to civilian rule.” The Respondent insisted that the three states perceived ECOWAS as interfering in their internal governance and that this perception fueled the exit. Similarly, Respondent 8 (the foreign affairs official) emphasized that the withdrawal had been predictable given that the three states “formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to counter external threats.” From the respondent perspective, the withdrawal was a logical extension of the security partnership they had already established, especially because they saw ECOWAS’ emphasis on democratic governance as a threat to their military supremacy. Complementing this submission, Respondent no 3 (a senior lecturer of international relations) added that “ECOWAS is guided on a convention on democracy and good governance, which it insists that within the sub-region, all the States must operate under civilian government and those countries that were military governed were asked to return the government to the civilian or be sanctioned and they are not ready to return to civilian rule. They therefore opted out.

Across these responses, the underlying message is clear and this centred on the fact that the withdrawal was driven by a complex interplay of political grievances, sovereign concerns, security anxieties, and ideological divergences. All Respondents consistently framed the withdrawal as a historically meaningful departure that challenges the foundations of West African regionalism.



## ***2. Assessing the Economic Consequences of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso's withdrawal from ECOWAS***

All the Respondents highlighted far-reaching economic consequences of the withdrawal on regional integration, economic cooperation, diplomatic relations, and Nigeria's national interest. These economic consequences were consistently described as severe and multidimensional. Firstly, respondent no1(international relations specialist) argued that the withdrawal "fractured ECOWAS norms on free movement, trade facilitation, and crisis management, adding that it complicated customs operations, external tariff frameworks, and regional security coordination. The respondent's views reflected an understanding that ECOWAS is built on institutional linkages that become strained when key members exit.

Secondly, in another views, Respondent 4( a senior lecturer in international relations) provided vivid examples of how cooperation is now threatened the sub-regional. The respondent argued that the exit affects resource flows, noting that the withdrawing States have resources "useful to the African" community but which ECOWAS can no longer access as before. The Respondent also described how political integration suffers when "one of us is more or less moving away," emphasizing the symbolic and psychological dimensions of the withdrawal.

Furthermore, Respondent 6 (a journalist ) offered a practical example by highlighting the fate of the trans-sahara gas project. The respondent stated that Nigeria's plan to diversify its economy "cannot be actualized due to the Niger situation, explaining further that the pipeline must pass through Niger. The Respondent added that Nigeria had projected to generate substantial revenue but that "the administration is unable to actualize" this due to political tensions in the sub-region. Additionally, Respondent 5 (Senior lecturer of international relations) also reinforced that economic cooperation will be significantly affected because cross-border movement may now encounter restrictions, thereby increasing transaction costs. The Respondent emphasized that Nigeria might face new financial burdens related to border security and diplomacy.

Finally, Respondent 8 (foreign affair official) provided concrete economic implications such as new visa regimes and tariffs. The respondent noted that "Nigerian citizens will need visas to enter Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso," and that increased tariffs will "affect trade between these



countries and other ECOWAS member States.” The Respondent also stressed that the withdrawal undermines flagship initiatives like the borderless African campaign. Diplomatic relations were portrayed as cautious but ongoing. The respondent therefore predicted that Nigeria adopt “pragmatic bilateralism,” maintaining communication but adjusting expectations.

**3. *An Analysis of the implications of withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS on Nigerian Economy.***

The exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS is seen to hurt the exports of Nigerian goods (Juliet, 2025). The unilateral withdrawal of the countries who were also founding members of ECOWAS in 1975 whittled down the regional’s bloc membership from 15 to 12 member countries. (Onyemekihian, 2025) According to Article 3 of the revised ECOWAS Treaty, one of its main objectives is to promote the region’s economic integration by establishing, a Free Trade Area (FTA) (ECOWAS commission, 2023). The instrument created for this purpose is the ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS), which aims to operationalize FTA. The ETLS mechanism ensures the free movement of originating products without payment of customs duties and taxes of equivalent effect on importation into ECOWAS Member States. Their eventual exit will lead to low export sales in the regional markets and by extension, result in a reduction in foreign exchange revenue generation into Nigeria from the sub regional (Erewa, 2025).

According to Erewa–Meggison (2025), their exit might become tougher for manufacturers because of the already existing high cost of production confronting the manufacturers domestically in Nigeria. Another pressing implication of the exit of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is that the manufacturing exporters doing a higher volume of export to any of the affected economies could resolve a reduction in their manufacturing operations and tax revenue accruable to the government from such companies would be reduced. Trade data shows that cross-border commerce between Nigeria and these Sahelian States amounts to billions of naira annually, especially in agricultural produce and petroleum products (NBS, 2023). Their



withdrawal may lead to tariff barriers, logistical disruptions, and increased smuggling activities along the porous borders (Igue, 2023). Furthermore, it undermines the legitimacy of ECOWAS and weakens Nigeria's diplomatic leverage in the region.

Equally, looking strictly from an economic standpoint, the disruption of regional trade flows is among the most immediate consequences. Nigeria has long-standing trade relations with Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, especially in the informal sector where cross-border trade in livestock, grains, petroleum products, textiles, and manufactured goods sustains millions of livelihoods. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and protocols on free movement facilitated these exchanges without tariffs or excessive border regulations (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). With the exit of these three countries, new trade barriers are likely to be erected, resulting in delays, increased costs, and the potential for tariff retaliation. Empirical studies by Igue (2023) show that over 40% of cross-border trade in northern Nigeria involves Niger and Mali directly or indirectly through transit routes. The loss of seamless access to these markets will inevitably reduce Nigeria's export earnings and threaten regional value chains.

In addition, border closures and the breakdown of regional transportation infrastructure agreements could severely affect logistics and commerce. For instance, planned ECOWAS transnational corridors such as the Lagos-Dakar Highway and Trans-Sahelian road networks may now face renegotiation or stalling if member participation becomes selective. Nigeria's investment in such infrastructure may yield suboptimal returns in the absence of full regional integration (Asante, 2023).

Furthermore, the withdrawal could strain multilateral partnerships and donor relations. Many international development agencies and financial institutions support ECOWAS programs through Nigerian leadership. A fragmented ECOWAS may discourage future donor funding or lead to the reconfiguration of development assistance frameworks, potentially excluding Nigeria from some strategic initiatives (Murithi, 2017).



In sum, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS has profound and far-reaching economic consequences for Nigeria. Economically, it threatens vital trade corridors and regional projects. From a security standpoint, it risks destabilizing Nigeria's northern flank. Diplomatically, it challenges Nigeria's leadership and the credibility of ECOWAS. If not addressed strategically, these implications may significantly undermine Nigeria's national economic development agenda and regional influence.

### **Key findings**

The key findings indicate that the withdrawal, which became effective in January 2025 after a one-year notification period under Article 91 of ECOWAS treaty, represents both a symbolic and structural rupture in West African regionalism. The three States, governed by military-led administrations, justified their exit by arguing that ECOWAS had deviated from its founding principles of African solidarity, economic cooperation, and mutual security. They contended that the organization had become overly influenced by external actors and intensive to the unique security challenges faced in the Sahel region (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). In response, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have sought to construct an alternative regional framework which is the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) with the intention to enhance mutual defence and promote collective self-reliance. Also, the study finds that while this initiative reflects a growing desire for sovereignty and autonomy from traditional West African structures, it simultaneously has an adverse effect on the continental integration efforts. (Adekunle and Kone, 2024)

To be specific, from an economic standpoint, the withdrawal threatens and disrupt, long-established trade relations and mobility frameworks under the ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS) and the protocol on Free Movement of Persons. The affected states risk losing preferential market access, investment opportunities, and cross- border cooperation mechanisms. Similarly for ECOWAS, the departure of three founding members weakens the bloc's geopolitical reach, reduces its representation in the Sahel and diminishes its collective capacity to manage regional security crises. (Okafor, 2024).



## **Conclusion**

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS marks a critical juncture in the trajectory of West African integration. It reflects the growing disillusionment of certain member States with regional governance structures perceived as ineffective or externally driven. While the decision underscores these States' aspirations for political autonomy and security independence, it also exposes them to considerable economic and diplomatic isolation. For ECOWAS, the secession of these States constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity. It challenges the organization's cohesion, credibility and capacity to enforce collective norm. Yet, it also presents an opportunity for introspection and institutional reform to re-evaluate its approaches to governance, intervention in the face of evolving regional realities. Ultimately, the exit of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS reveals the tension between sovereignty and supranationalism that continues to define African regionalism. The future of West African integration will depend on whether ECOWAS can adapt to these new dynamics by fostering a more flexible, equitable and accommodates the security and developmental needs of all its member states.

For Nigeria, the consequences of the withdrawal were shown to be multi-dimensional. Economically, the study concluded that the exit of Niger; Nigeria's close neighbor, has disrupted cross-border trade, increased transaction costs, heightened food insecurity, and negatively affected the livelihoods of border communities. In fact, long-established networks of informal trade and pastoral movement have been destabilized, worsening socio-economic conditions among citizens who depend heavily on transnational economic activities. Overall, the study concludes that the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is one of the most consequential political developments in West Africa in recent decades. It threatens economic integration, regional security cooperation, and Nigeria's strategic interests. The crisis exposes structural weaknesses within ECOWAS, including enforcement challenges, governance tensions, and limited institutional flexibility in responding to political transition contexts. For Nigeria therefore, the situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity to strengthen its



diplomatic engagement, reinforce border security systems, support ECOWAS reforms, and promote dialogue aimed at restoring regional stability.

## **Recommendation**

Based on the key findings and conclusions of the study, several recommendations are proposed to guide Nigeria, ECOWAS, and relevant stakeholders in addressing the economic consequences of the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from the regional bloc. The study recommend that Nigeria must adopt proactive policy responses to mitigate the impact of the regional fragmentation. These include enhancing bilateral economic and diplomatic engagements with both ECOWAS and non-ECOWAS West African countries, investing in infrastructure that supports intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and reasserting her leadership in regional peace diplomacy to prevent further disintegration.

First, Nigeria should intensify diplomatic engagement with the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to rebuild communication channels and explore possibilities for future cooperation. While the political differences that led to the withdrawal are complex, sustained dialogue can help reduce tensions, restore trust, and prevent the crisis from escalating into wider geopolitical divisions. Nigeria's foreign policy should prioritize reconciliation efforts and constructively engage the exiting States on security, trade, and border management.

Second, the study recommends that ECOWAS undertake comprehensive reforms of its governance, sanctions, and conflict-resolution frameworks. The withdrawal crisis revealed weaknesses in the organization's response mechanisms and raised concerns about the balance between promoting democracy and respecting State sovereignty. ECOWAS should adopt more flexible approaches to political transitions, incorporate context-specific strategies, and strengthen consultation mechanisms that ensure member States feel represented in decision-making processes.



Third, Nigeria must strengthen border security and surveillance infrastructure, particularly along the Nigeria–Niger border. Investments in modern surveillance technologies, joint border posts, and improved military coordination will help reduce the activities of insurgents, traffickers, and criminal networks exploiting the weakened regional security system. Enhancing the operational capacity of the Nigerian Customs Service, Immigration Service, and other security forces stationed along the borders will reduce vulnerabilities created by the withdrawal.

Fourth, to address the economic disruptions caused by reduced cross-border trade, Nigeria should expand economic support and livelihood programs for border communities. This includes developing alternative market systems, improving local agricultural value chains, providing financial support for small traders, and investing in rural infrastructure to cushion the loss of economic opportunities. Special attention should be given to vulnerable groups such as pastoralists, informal traders, women, and youths along Nigeria-Niger border regions.

Fifth, the study recommends that Nigeria diversify its regional and international economic partnerships while working to strengthen intra-African trade agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Reducing overdependence on specific neighboring States will help stabilize Nigeria’s economy and enhance resilience in times of political or regional instability.

Sixth, Nigeria should exert leadership in advocating for an ECOWAS security architecture that remains operational even with changing political landscapes. Building flexible, issue-based coalitions on counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and border control can ensure continuity of essential security cooperation even when political relations are strained. Collaborative engagement with the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), and other regional bodies can also enhance security capabilities.

Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on the human-security needs of citizens, particularly those living in border regions. Nigeria should establish humanitarian assistance



programs, improve access to healthcare and social services, enhance mobility frameworks, and ensure that citizens affected by the crisis are not left in prolonged hardship. Policies that strengthen community-level resilience will help maintain social cohesion.

Finally, the study recommends that ECOWAS prioritize internal unity and inclusiveness in order to prevent future withdrawals. Strengthening institutional legitimacy, promoting dialogue-based solutions to political crises, and ensuring equitable distribution of regional benefits will reduce grievances and enhance commitment to regional integration.

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