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Article

Navigating Regional Security Complexities: An Investigation into the Challenges of ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

Abstract: *This paper examines the obstacles faced by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in upholding collective security in the context of intricate regional threats. ECOWAS, as a regional security entity, has been instrumental in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and crisis management throughout West Africa. Nonetheless, its security measures have considerable challenges, including as institutional deficiencies, political disparities, resource limitations, and external geopolitical factors. Adopting the regional security complex theory, the study underscores that structural inefficiencies,*

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inconsistent execution of security measures, and constrained financial and logistical resources diminish ECOWAS' operational efficacy. The disparity in national interests among member nations frequently leads to disjointed responses to security crises, undermining the organization's capacity for decisive action. The paper analyses the influence of external geopolitical factors, including the participation of foreign powers like France, the United States, Russia, and China, whose strategic interests occasionally clash with ECOWAS' regional security objectives. The escalation of terrorism, insurgency, and transnational organised crime intensifies instability, as illicit arms trafficking and inadequate border controls heighten security risks. The paper conclude that for ECOWAS to augment its collective security measures, institutional re-

forms, enhanced intra-regional collaboration, and diminished reliance on external entities are needed. Fortifying financial autonomy, augmenting intelligence-sharing, and cultivating more self-sufficient security frameworks will be essential for enduring stability. By tackling these structural and geopolitical problems, ECOWAS can enhance its resilience and efficacy in navigating the evolving security situation of West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS; Regional Security; Complexities; Mechanisms; Collective Security

1. Introduction

The matter of security and peace has emerged as a persistent and crucial topic in international politics as countries endeavour to uphold and advance peace at sub-regional, regional, and global levels. Nevertheless, in light of the prevailing global security concerns, collective security has become essential for mitigating security threats and promoting peace and stability across various areas and globally. The sub-regional and regional associations provides states a better security than their individualised states because the fight against insurgency and other types of conflicts and violence cannot be resolved properly when they act on their own.

The need of Collective Security has led countries to collectively merge their intelligence on security and form coalitions to discourage any aggressor. According to Kofi A. Annan (1999), this is our world, where no particular person, and no particular nation is alone. This argument has taken a fundamental ground in the formation of international bodies as the need to peace in the global system continues to be the norm. Pre-colonial West African boundaries were demarcated in terms of different cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. The African continent was colonised by Europeans who partitioned the territories without regard for the common affinity among Africans (Bolt, 2013). The arbitrary demarcation of African territory resulted in the convergence of individuals with varied cultures, faiths, and languages inside a specified limit known as a country. This description renders internal disputes unavoidable and necessitates a collaborative security approach to preserve peace in the sub-region.

Following independence, the majority of newly established nations in West Africa struggled to devise policies conducive to the peaceful coexistence of many cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Multiple elements that could precipitate crises pertain to the unification of nations as pragmatic alliances, which naturally contain the potential for the dissolution of the newly formed states. The West African sub-region underwent a succession of conflicts and calamities, including the civil wars in Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, with disasters in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire (Akindoyin, 2024a). The wars and the disasters highlighted the need to have collective security in the sub-region. Collective Security thus became pertinent in solving transnational security issues that were beyond the abilities of individual states.

Akindoyin and Akuche (2023) assert that the principle of collective security posits that the security dilemmas faced by states are most effectively addressed not via national self-reliance and power balancing, but through the establishment of mutual commitments, wherein each nation pledges to collaborate in collective actions against entities that threaten the territorial integrity or political sovereignty of others. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 introduced the concept of Collective Security, resulting in the Treaty of Westphalia and the creation of a collaborative security framework to conclude the conflict among European nations (Gross, 1948). This security management confirmed that each state acknowledged the collective responsibility for the security of every nation. The concern denotes the desire to have a unified response to threats and breaches to peace, the goal being to end the war in Europe. The League of Nations (LoN) later adopted the idea to be among its main objectives.

Although the League of Nations (LON) was dedicated to the cause and its objectives were noble, it was unable to stop the commencement of the World War II. After the war, the United States of America embarked on a partnership-based security system to prevent the occurrence of another world war. The creation of United Nations was as a result of this security arrangement. Article 52 of the UN Charter resulted in the formation of several regional organisations

by the international system, such as the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These organisations were formed with the aim of dealing with the issues of member states in the economic, political, security, humanitarian and environmental aspects. On May 28, 1975, ECOWAS a sub-regional organisation was formed in Africa. The primary objectives of ECOWAS were “to promote cooperation and integration, culminating in the establishment of an economic union in West Africa, to elevate the living standards of its populations, to sustain and enhance economic stability, to foster relations among Member States, and to contribute to the progress and development of the African continent” (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993). ECOWAS was formed out of fifteen member states which comprised of former French, British and Portuguese colonies. Cape Verde followed in 1975 raising the membership to 16 but Mauritania dropped out of the association in 2000. ECOWAS is currently composed of 15 Member States; Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Cape Verde, Ghana, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Togo, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

The incremental progression of ECOWAS towards collective security commenced in 1978 with the ratification of the Protocol on Non-Aggression. Notwithstanding the implementation of the Protocol on Non-Aggression Treaty, civil wars erupted in some West African nations, specifically Liberia in 1989 and Sierra Leone in 1991. In May 1993, the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS amended the Treaty to encompass the preservation of peace, stability, and security within the sub-region, aiming to mitigate violence and promote tranquilly. This move led to establishment of the Collective Security Mechanism, which included the ECOWAS Standby Force, who later replaced the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the Mediation and Security Council and the Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The purpose of ECOWAS at its establishment was to promote economic growth and integration among Member States, in response to the pervasive conflicts and instability in the region. Member States recognised that sustainable peace and security in the sub-region are essential for economic advancement. Consequently, ECOWAS, in achieving its objectives, has to address the prevalence of ethnic conflicts, terrorism, religious extremism, and political instability within the sub-region. This study aims to examine the complexities to collective security among ECOWAS Member States.

1.2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The general aim of the study is to navigate regional security complexities with a keen analysis on ECOWAS. However, the specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms.
- ii. To investigate the complexities confronting ECOWAS collective security mechanisms.

1.3. Research Questions

What are ECOWAS’ collective security strategies, and to what extent has it been successful?

What are the complexities confronting ECOWAS collective security mechanisms?

1.4. Contribution to the Study

The research enhances West African regional security study by conducting a comprehensive analysis of collective security complexities faced by ECOWAS institutions. Research until now investigated ECOWAS peacekeeping operations but this analysis fully examines different institutional and political along with operational constraints that prevent its successful conflict resolution. The investigation showcases the contemporary security developments which have challenged the stability of ECOWAS peace initiatives in recent years.

The primary finding of this research involves investigating the changing responsibilities of ECOWAS regarding collective security under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). This research examines regional and international diplomatic ties which demonstrates obstacles present when executing ECOWAS security directives because of management issues surrounding funds as well as support from member states. The discussion made deeper by this analysis shows how military-centric approaches alone fall short so integrated security approaches incorporating conflict mediation with development programs combined with governance improvement strategies are needed.

This research approach uses practical case examinations to present findings which help policy creation for ECOWAS security operations. The research presents recommendations to enhance the organization's capacity by doing two things: working on institutional reforms and developing better early warning systems for conflicts alongside enhanced participation from the region. This examination adds to regional security governance scholarship and helps policy experts develop superior collective security systems for West Africa.

1.5. Overview of the Research

There are five (5) sections in this research paper. The first part that is the introductory part involves a concise introduction of the research itself, the statement of problem, research objectives and research questions as well as the contribution to study. The second part is the literature review wherein the concepts security, collective security and historical development of the ECOWAS was discussed. The third section involves the methodology to be used in the research and the theoretical framework; the theoretical framework used in the research paper is that of the regional security complexes. The fourth section entails the findings and the fifth section detailed the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Security

From a classical perspective, security denotes the absence of threats to acquired values, meaning that a state or actor is secure when it faces no danger to the things it considers important (Wolfers, 1952). Lippmann (2017) on the other hand defines security as a condition in which a nation does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able to maintain them by victory if challenged. Adeyemi and Akindoyin (2025) define security as the awareness and mindset that individuals in society hold concerning the safeguarding of their lives and possessions. Being security-aware entails recognising the possibility for individuals to intentionally or inadvertently attack, steal, damage, or acquire information that could harm the com-

munity. Nwokwu & Ogayi (2021), defined security as the absence of threats to peace, national cohesion, and the political and socio-economic aims of a nation. Modern literature universally acknowledges that security is essential for sustainable growth, peace, and national cohesion. Consequently, it is evident that national security is an essential prerequisite for the economic growth and development of any nation (Akindoyin, 2023a).

Paleri (2022) opined that security is a condition of being or existence devoid of danger, fear, threat, anxiety, and uncertainty. According to this concept, security can be defined as the presence of peace and stability, which create conducive conditions for growth and development. Albert (2021) observed that national security exists in two forms: internal and external security. Internal security entails maintaining order within the borders of a sovereign nation by enforcing national laws and defending against internal threats to security. The external security is concerned with the dynamics of the foreign policy of a state and features of its geopolitical environment.

There exist two perspectives on security: the limited approach and the broad approach. The advocate of the narrow perspective associates security with military power and the application of force (Buzan et al. 1998). The advocates of the comprehensive approach perceive security via five distinct sectors: military, sociological, political, environmental, and economic, as threats to security (Buzan et al., 1998). As a result, one can observe that the difference in the definition of security is associated with the different perspectives of both methods. It is, thus, practical to view security as not merely a concern of the military but carry out such risks by considering extra variables. Considering these challenges, security implies the maintenance of the existence of a state, the maintenance of which is ensured through the use of military force. The understanding of a threat and its attributes is determined by the way states classify the threats based on their security interests.

2.2. Collective Security as a Concept

Collective Security represents a substantial commitment to fostering international peace among states (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b.). It serves as a mechanism for crisis management in international relations, instituted to foster global peace, as aggression or warfare obstructs worldwide security. Collective Security relates to the rationality of distinct international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the Economic Community of West Africa states (ECOWAS) in a bid to protect the local, regional, and international peace and security. Experience indicates that traditional approaches to sustaining global peace and stability fail to provide effective answers for contemporary inter-state disputes and regional instability. The international community established the concept of Collective Security to introduce innovative approaches for fostering mutual confidence among states and addressing shared security challenges through agreeable cooperative techniques (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b.). Most states view collective security as a way of achieving stability and improving their security systems through cooperation with the state as well as non-state actors to address security issues. Collective security is a complex concept but one developed over the past decades.

Collective security refers to an unfading commitment between a group of governments that share common interests, geographical location or economic ties to defend and safeguard the personal security interests of every member government in the region it includes. The idea of Collective Security was first declared by the League of Nations, and the United Nations took

it up. According to the 18 th century writing of Immanuel Kant in his book, perpetual peace, the law of nations is centred on the federation of free states (Kant, 1897). As such, through collective security, no member state can take any action, which would upset world peace, hence preventing potential conflicts. Collective security refers to the security of sovereign states, and is associated with the liberal democracy, which is strengthened by the good economic ties in the region, thus enhancing the rule of law.

Collective Security depends on a robust military coalition of states capable of deterring potential aggressors and possessing the military capacity to retaliate if required. This notion supports the international community's control of global military force to build order, regulate state behaviours, mitigate potential security risks, and preserve existing peace. Akindoyin (2024c) posited that "within an international organisation, threats or assaults against one state inherently signify a threat to all member states, enabling them to collectively respond to the aggressive state". Others, like as Konchak have contributed to the notion that a peaceful and stable international order can only be sustained through a collective security system, wherein the military plays a crucial role (Konchak, 2021) Collective Security safeguards the security of each member state globally against potential aggression perpetrated by one state against another. Collective Security is an assurance mechanism wherein member governments mutually defend one another against potential threats.

Numerous scholars have sought to delineate collective security by examining a nation's affiliations with regional and international organisations in relation to the extent and variety of global security concerns. Scholars contend that states encounter analogous security challenges owing to proximate geographical positioning, shared objectives, and various other determinants. Davidzon (2021) defines collective security as a pact among certain governments to safeguard their vital interests, maintain integrity, and ensure safety against a shared adversary or threat for a designated duration through a coalition of their capabilities. For Benarbia Yousra (2023), he perceives collective security as an idealist concept that relies on the prevention of hostilities through the establishment of a formidable military force by member states to deter aggression or, by implication, to initiate a retaliatory strike capable of subduing the obstinate member.

The aforementioned definitions of Collective Security by various scholars indicate that this notion serves as a systematic strategy for preserving peace among a coalition of like-minded sovereign states, prepared to defend one another against any prospective attacker.

2.3. Elements of Collective Security

Collective Security is a framework for power or crisis management aimed at maintaining peace in the event of aggression or war directed a state towards a member state. Collective security governs the application of force via a generally agreed accord among all the nations that exist in the system. It examines the possible threats and acts of aggression grounded in the collective principle that the use of force is prohibited, with any nation that violates this norm facing collective sanctions (Claude, 1992). Collective Security entails the below elements:

- i. It acknowledges that warfare and aggression are inherent aspects of international relations, and that breaches of national security are inevitable;
- ii. A consensual treaty governs the resolutions of the international entity;
- iii. All the sovereign states consent to forgo war as a policy tool, except in cases of self-defence;
- iv. All the sovereign states commit to assist any victimised state against an aggressor state.

Collective Security is better implemented at a multilateral level rather than a unilateral level since it requires the member states conform to the principles and ideology of the organisation to operate effectively. Unilateral action cannot be seen by a Member State as a collective security even though many nations are involved or even with the backing of an international agency. Collective Security principle is therefore based on its group character and not on the convergence of the individual interests.

The Collective Security System also requires the decision-making process to be an interactive affair by all the stake holders and not a one-sided affair of a few individuals and all the decisions to be based on common grounded principles. Collective Security is based on the principle of the indivisibility of peace (Andreatta, 1996). The threat of war is a global menace towards peace which all states are bound to prevent any form of aggression regardless of time or place. Indivisible peace means that any unilateral use of force cannot be legal and rationalised since it affects the whole world. Wars are not legal since no state has the unilateral privilege of compromising international peace to its gain. Bakircioglu (2022) argued that the use of force is only justifiable in the case when a state is launching self-defence or pursuing altruistic international goals.

Collective Security has the mechanism of punishing any state or non-state in which the force is used as a political, economic or socio-cultural instrument regardless of whether it is justified. No distinction is made between a praiseworthy and a condemnable feeling of risking world peace. In its turn, this means that the actions of the aggressive state or non-state actors cannot affect their intentions in terms of disrupting the peace of the population, but only the violet of the established code of behaviours. The type of the hostile state or non-state actor, its dominance versus weakness, does not matter, the principle is upheld, because the threat to international peace remains unchanged, despite changes in the effects it has to international stability.

2.4. Evolution of ECOWAS

About two decades after which African countries gained political independence, West African countries established the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 28 May, 1975. The Organisation sought to bring about an economic union to enhance the development of trade, business, and investment in the sub-region similar to European Economic Community (EEC). Prior to the acquisition of self-determination by African States in the 1950s and 1960s, African leaders saw that post-independence, regional cooperation would be crucial for the optimal use of the continent's extensive potentials and resources for its development (Akindoyin, & Obafemi 2024b).

ECOWAS founding members envisioned the union as a transcendent regional institutional pyramid that complement member state's national development, aimed at accelerating and achieving self-reliance and sustainable development in the sub-region. Article 3 (1) of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty states that the objectives of the Community are to foster cooperation and integration, culminating in the formation of an economic union in West Africa to elevate the living standards of its populations, sustain and improve economic stability, promote relations among Member States, and advance the progress and development of the African Continent (Onuoha & Akogwu, 2022).

The region of West Africa once attempted to form a regional bloc, with the most notable of them being the creation of the CFA franc zone, a single currency union that joined francophone countries of West Africa to a single currency. In the year 1964, the president of Liberia William

Tubman proposed that the West African community should be economically united in order to share the custom duties that were accrued by the coastal republics of the West Africa region. In 1965, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone executed the Agreement. However, no significant outcomes resulted from the Agreement (Akindoyin, & Obafemi 2024b).

The Nigerian Head of State (General Yakubu Gowon) alongside her Togo counterpart (Gnassingbe Eyadema) in 1972, sought to develop economic collaboration transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries. The two leaders expressed confidence that the regional economic union will promote economic development in the region. The president of Nigeria and their counterpart in Togo developed an idea concerning the format and extent of the related West African Community to execute this project. In 1973, the leaders made a trip to twelve West African countries with a firsthand Agreement to introduce the idea to the West African Community. West African leaders convened in Lomé, Togo, from December 10 to 15, 1973, to discuss the draft Agreement and subsequently held additional sessions to review and revise the draft Treaty, culminating in the establishment of ECOWAS on May 28, 1975, in Lagos (Akindoyin, & Obafemi 2024b).

Fifteen nations ratified the agreement called the Lagos Treaty that instituted the Union (ECOWAS). These fifteen nations include; Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Dahomey (Benin), Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Conakry, Ghana, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Togo, Sierra Leone, and Mauritania. In the year 1976, Capo Verde (previously known as Cape Verde) became a member of the Organisation, increasing the total membership to 16. In December 2000, Mauritania resigned its membership from the Organisation without providing clear and acceptable justifications for its departure (ECOWAS official website, 2019). Akindoyin & Obafemi (2024b) contended that ECOWAS leaders originally envisioned and founded the organisation to tackle limited security concerns related to economic integration as a foundation for self-sufficiency. Over time, the leaders of the sub-regional organisation recognised a significant correlation between economic factors and broader security issues. Consequently, the Organisation has just been addressing certain concerns that West African leaders had not anticipated tackling.

Following the establishment of ECOWAS, the organisation grappled with its foundational ideals as its economic goals were eclipsed by numerous conflicts, environmental and developmental challenges, governance issues, entrepreneurship promotion, gender equality, and humanitarian concerns (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b). These concerns posed threats not only to national growth but also to regional integration. An immediate revision of the ECOWAS Treaty is necessary to tackle the aforementioned difficulties and to formulate efforts for regional peace and security. On July 24, 1993, the Member States amended the 1975 treaty to address all issues that necessitated its revision. The amended treaty includes sufficient measures for sub-regional security. This program required Member States to collaborate in consolidating and preserving peace, stability, and security in the region.

However, in January 2024, three West African States (Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso) declared the exit from the union. The principal impetus for this collective departure was the succession of military coups in these nations: Mali underwent coups in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023 (Mbye, 2025). In response, ECOWAS enacted sanctions and suspended memberships to compel a reinstatement of civilian administration. The juntas regarded these actions as punitive and fruitless, contending that ECOWAS had strayed from its core principles and yielded to external pressures.

Additionally, the three nations condemned ECOWAS for its apparent lethargy in confronting the rising terrorist threats and insecurity within their territories. They argued that the bloc did not offer sufficient assistance in addressing these existential threats, prompting countries to pursue alternative security arrangements. This resulted in the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023, a security coalition focused on mutual defence and counterterrorism, indicating a transition towards self-sufficiency in regional security issues.

The juntas additionally alleged that ECOWAS was swayed by foreign entities, which they contended undermined the bloc's capacity to operate in the best interests of its member nations. They contended that ECOWAS posed a threat to their nations' sovereignty and stability, leading to the choice to withdraw and adopt policies more closely aligned with their national interests. The withdrawals of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS were motivated by several factors, including responses to sanctions imposed after military coups, discontent with the bloc's assistance in tackling security issues, and perceptions of excessive external influence on ECOWAS's decision-making processes.

3. Methodology

The research design employed in the research paper is the descriptive design. In addition, the paper adopts the secondary source of qualitative data. These secondary sources are not limited to; academic journals, government reports, media reports and library sources, etc. The adoption of secondary data is due to the fact that it enabled a thorough analysis of the complexities of the ECOWAS security. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the data collected.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

In this research paper, the regional security complex theory is adopted as the theoretical framework.

Regional Security Complex Theory

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), formulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, offers a framework for the analysis of security dynamics at the regional level. The concept posits that security threats and dynamics are heightened across geographically adjacent states, resulting in the formation of separate regional security complexes (RSCs). These complexes consist of groups of states whose security issues are so interconnected that their national security cannot be effectively assessed in isolation.

Key Element of the Regional Security Complex Theory

Security Interdependence: States within a regional security complex exhibit security interdependence, indicating that their risks and security concerns are more interwoven with one another than with states external to the region.

Levels of Analysis: RSCT functions at various tiers – domestic, regional, and global. It analyses the impact of internal political frameworks, regional dynamics, and foreign factors on security interactions.

Amity and Enmity Patterns: The theory examines historical interactions between nations, whether cooperative (amity) or adversarial (enmity), to elucidate security alignments and rivalries (Buzan et al., 1998).

Regional Security Complex Theory and the Question of ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, offers a significant framework for examining ECOWAS's collective security. RSCT asserts that security is regionally concentrated, with areas establishing unique security complexes wherein nations are interconnected regarding security issues due to common threats, rivalries, and alliances. In West Africa, ECOWAS serves as the primary regional security entity, aiming to regulate security interdependence among its member nations. Nevertheless, certain obstacles impede the efficacy of its collective security measures.

Internal conflicts and fragile state institutions contribute to instability within the West African security complex. Civil wars, insurgencies, and violent extremism – exemplified by Boko Haram in Nigeria and jihadist factions in the Sahel – transcend state boundaries, complicating ECOWAS's response. The incapacity of certain member states to administer and secure their territories effectively generates regional security spillovers, hence deepening the security interdependence that characterises the complexity.

Divergent national interests and political will among ECOWAS member nations undermine collective security initiatives. RSCT emphasises that within security complexes, governments may favour self-reliance above regional collaboration. Certain states exhibit reluctance to wholly endorse ECOWAS-led initiatives owing to apprehensions of sovereignty, economic liabilities, or political affiliations. This elucidates the discrepancies in ECOWAS's responses to crises, shown by the protracted and disjointed interventions in Mali and Guinea.

Third, external initiatives and the influence of large powers further complicate ECOWAS's security function. RSCT recognises that regional security complexes are not isolated entities but engage with global powers. The participation of France, the United States, and the United Nations in West African security matters occasionally enhances but also diminishes ECOWAS's independence. The reliance on foreign financing and military assistance undermines the regional organization's ability to operate autonomously.

Therefore, the application of RSCT to ECOWAS's collective security frameworks underscores the impact of security interdependence, state fragility, conflicting national interests, and external pressures on the region's security dilemmas. Enhancing ECOWAS's security framework necessitates more dedication to regional collaboration, refined institutional structures, and diminished reliance on external entities.

4. Discussions of Findings

4.1. Examining ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been instrumental in maintaining regional security via collective security frameworks. Its methodology is grounded in preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping initiatives, mediation, and conflict resolution strategies. In light of the ongoing security concerns in West Africa, ECOWAS has had to consistently en-

hance its methods to tackle rising threats, including terrorism, political instability, and inter-ethnic conflicts.

In 1999, ECOWAS instituted the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, establishing a legal basis for regional operations. The Mechanism empowers ECOWAS to assist in member states during instances of significant political instability, human rights abuses, or humanitarian emergencies. The initial and most consequential initiatives within this paradigm occurred in Liberia (1990) and Sierra Leone (1997). The ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was dispatched to terminate violent civil conflicts, avert genocide, and reinstate democratic governance. The interventions effectively stabilised both nations, resulting in democratic elections and post-conflict reconstruction (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b).

The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) was created as a component of the African Standby Force (ASF) within the framework of the African Union. The ESF is responsible for swift deployment in peace enforcement, humanitarian aid, and post-conflict stabilisation. It functions with military, law enforcement, and civilian elements to augment regional security capabilities. In 2017, ECOWAS deployed the ESF as part of the ECOMIG mission to The Gambia following former President Yahya Jammeh's refusal to acknowledge the election results. The deployment of ECOWAS forces facilitated a tranquil transfer of authority to President Adama Barrow with minimal violence. This intervention exemplified ECOWAS's dedication to democratic ideals and collective security (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b).

ECOWAS has consistently utilised diplomatic strategies, including as mediation and discussions, to avert confrontations. The Mediation and Security Council, along with the ECOWAS Commission, orchestrates these initiatives in collaboration with regional leaders and international partners. Subsequent to the 2012 military coup and the emergence of jihadist insurgencies in Mali, ECOWAS significantly contributed to diplomatic mediation, resulting in the formation of a transitional government. Despite ongoing obstacles, ECOWAS has maintained its engagement with Mali to promote peace and enhance counter-terrorism initiatives (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b).

Terrorism has increasingly impacted West Africa, especially in the Sahel region. In response, ECOWAS has enacted counter-terrorism plans, encompassing intelligence-sharing, military collaboration, and the fortification of border security. Primarily spearheaded by Nigeria, ECOWAS has endorsed the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a regional military alliance comprising Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin, in the fight against Boko Haram. This approach has markedly diminished Boko Haram's territorial dominance and operational efficacy in the region.

ECOWARN, the early warning system of ECOWAS, gathers data on prospective security threats to enable prompt interventions. It functions via regional bureaus that oversee socio-political changes and furnish intelligence for decision-making. Utilising ECOWARN, ECOWAS recognised political instability in Guinea-Bissau and engaged in diplomatic intervention to avert further decline. Peacekeeping operations were also implemented to uphold stability. Consequently, it can be asserted that ECOWAS has achieved notable advancements in fostering collective security via peacekeeping missions, mediation endeavours, counter-terrorism strategies, and early warning mechanisms.

4.2. Investigating ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms Complexities

4.2.1. Funding Complexities in ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

ECOWAS has a significant complexity due to its substantial reliance on foreign benefactors, including the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), and specific nations like as France and the United States. Although these partners offer essential financial assistance, their priorities may not consistently coincide with ECOWAS' long-term security objectives. This dependence undermines ECOWAS' authority and frequently leads to delays in decision-making and the execution of security actions.

In 2017, the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) deployed troops to uphold the democratic transition after Yahya Jammeh's reluctance to relinquish power, with financial backing from the EU and other international allies. Despite the intervention's effectiveness, it underscored ECOWAS' financial fragility, as the mission's sustainability relied on foreign funding (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b).

Member nations of ECOWAS must allocate cash for regional security activities via a Community Levy, which is a 0.5% charge on imports into these countries (Oluwusi, 2016). Nonetheless, adherence to this levy remains irregular. Numerous member nations encounter economic difficulties that hinder their ability to meet financial obligations, resulting in financing deficits. Countries facing economic crises or political instability, like as Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone, frequently find it challenging to fulfil their commitments, so undermining ECOWAS' financial foundation.

A significant instance is the ECOWAS Mission in Mali (AFISMA) in 2013, which was first impeded by fiscal challenges. Although ECOWAS committed to spearheading the intervention against armed militants, it was deficient in financial resources to deploy adequate troops and maintain operations. The role was subsequently assumed by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation role in Mali (MINUSMA), highlighting ECOWAS' financial inability to independently manage extended security operations (Oluwusi, 2016).

Executing peacekeeping and counterterrorism activities necessitates considerable financial resources. The escalating expenses associated with logistics, manpower deployment, information acquisition, and equipment procurement impose considerable budgetary strains on ECOWAS. Numerous peacekeeping operations, like those in Liberia (ECOMOG, 1990-1999) and Sierra Leone (ECOMOG, 1997-2000), severely strained ECOWAS' financial resources. At present, ECOWAS encounters financial obstacles in financing counterterrorism initiatives against entities such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Islamic State affiliates in the Sahel region. The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy, established in 2013, is persistently underfunded, constraining the organization's capacity to train security personnel, improve intelligence-sharing, and execute coordinated military operations (Oluwusi, 2016).

ECOWAS interventions frequently necessitate prolonged financial commitments; nevertheless, financing deficiencies result in sudden mission departures, jeopardising stability in impacted areas. In Guinea-Bissau, the deployment of the ECOWAS security force (ECOMIB) from 2012 to 2020 was curtailed due to financial constraints, resulting in a security vacuum that necessitated intervention from international actors.

Likewise, in combating jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, ECOWAS has faced difficulties in maintaining financial commitments to security programs such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). The financial responsibility has transitioned to international donors, revealing ECOWAS's constrained capacity to autonomously oversee prolonged security commitments.

4.2.2. Political Will and Sovereignty Issues in ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

A significant complexity to ECOWAS' collective security procedures is the disparate levels of political will among its member states. Certain states exhibit greater readiness to endorse military operations and peacekeeping initiatives than others, resulting in an inequity in burden-sharing. Nigeria has always assumed a prominent role in ECOWAS peacekeeping operations, notably in Liberia (1990–1997) and Sierra Leone (1997–2000), frequently providing the largest contingent of troops and financial support (Mohammadi, 2024). Nonetheless, certain member states can exhibit reluctance to engage owing to internal political factors, fiscal limitations, or an absence of strategic interest in the prevailing conflict. Moreover, political instability among member states impairs their capacity to engage in regional security frameworks. For example, during the Malian crisis (2012–present), the protracted response of ECOWAS was partially attributable to the political instability within significant member states, which hindered the timely deployment of a formidable regional force. The absence of consensus among ECOWAS leaders about the management of military coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso underscores the variance in political resolve (Mohammadi, 2024).

Numerous ECOWAS member states saw security as an issue of national sovereignty, rendering them hesitant to permit external interference, even from a regional entity. This reluctance hinders prompt and efficient responses to crises. In The Gambia (2016–2017), then-President Yahya Jammeh declined to relinquish power following his electoral defeat, notwithstanding the pressure of ECOWAS. The deployment of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) was contingent upon prolonged political negotiations and the sanctioning of a military action spearheaded by Senegal (Mohammadi, 2024). The military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have also dismissed ECOWAS' aspirations for a prompt transition to civilian governance, citing concerns regarding sovereignty. This disobedience undermines ECOWAS' authority and encourages other governments to oppose collective security initiatives.

4.2.3. Political Instability and Coups as a Complexity Confronting ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

Since 2010, West Africa has had multiple military coups, particularly in Mali (2012, 2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), and Niger (2023). These coups have undermined democratic governance and resulted in regional instability. The prevalence of military coups compromises ECOWAS' security frameworks, presenting a conflict between upholding democratic principles and ensuring stability. For example, ECOWAS enacted penalties against Mali and Niger; nevertheless, these measures encountered opposition, diminishing the organization's authority. The security framework of ECOWAS is founded on institutions such as the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b). The failure to avert coups reveals the constraints of these frameworks. The ESF, designed to address crises, has not been effectively utilised to prevent military coups, mostly due to a lack of unanimity among member nations and logistical obstacles.

Coups further exacerbate divisions within ECOWAS. Certain governments favour diplomatic cooperation with juntas, but others advocate for stringent sanctions or military involvement. The 2023 Niger crisis illustrated Nigeria's advocacy for military intervention, which was met with opposition from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea. The absence of cohesion undermines ECOWAS' legitimacy and empowers juntas to defy external pressures. Political instability engenders security vacuums that terrorist organisations exploit (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b). In Mali and Burkina Faso, the instability resulting from coups has facilitated the expansion of jihadist groups' operations. The deterioration of national institutions following coups complicates counterterrorism coordination, hence harming regional security initiatives.

4.2.4. External Influences and Geopolitics: A Complexity Confronting ECOWAS Collective Security Mechanisms

Multiple foreign states, including France, the United States, Russia, and China, uphold critical military and economic interests in West Africa (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2024b). France, with Operation Barkhane (until its cessation in 2022), assumed a preeminent security role, especially in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. This foreign presence has frequently encountered local opposition, shown by the military coups in Mali (2020, 2021) and Niger (2023), where nationalist sentiments incited anti-French demonstrations. Likewise, Russia, via the Wagner Group, has strengthened its influence in Mali and Burkina Faso, undermining ECOWAS' security cooperation. These conflicting tendencies generate divisions among ECOWAS members, constraining its collective activity.

West Africa serves as a battleground for global power rivalry, especially between Western nations and rising countries such as China and Russia. The United States and European Union provide military assistance and counterterrorism training to ECOWAS; nonetheless, their priorities occasionally diverge from ECOWAS' regional strategies. For example, when ECOWAS enacted sanctions against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger due to military coups, Russia and China contested these actions, undermining ECOWAS' enforcement efficacy (Mohammadi, 2024). These external alignments hinder ECOWAS' capacity to execute a cohesive security strategy. ECOWAS contends with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, a significant portion of which is sourced externally. The 2011 collapse of Libya, subsequent to NATO intervention, resulted in a flood of weaponry into the Sahel, exacerbating armed insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have capitalised on these arms transfers, intensifying regional instability.

ECOWAS' reliance on foreign financing for its peacekeeping missions, exemplified by the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) in 2017, constrains its strategic independence. International donors frequently impose criteria that influence the region's decision-making, thereby diminishing ECOWAS' capacity to respond decisively in crises.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the diverse complexities that hinder the effectiveness of ECOWAS in maintaining regional stability. While ECOWAS has played a critical role in conflict prevention and resolution, its collective security mechanisms are constrained by structural, political, economic, and external challenges that undermine its operational efficiency.

This study identifies significant institutional shortcomings within ECOWAS, such as constrained financial and logistical resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistent protocol enforcement. These deficiencies undermine the organization's capacity to react promptly and resolutely to security concerns. The political will of member nations is inconsistent, as national concerns frequently overshadow regional obligations. This has resulted in disparate responses to crises, seen by the varied reactions to military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The research indicates that external factors substantially influence the security dynamics of ECOWAS. Foreign military actions, geopolitical rivalry, and economic dependencies influence the organization's autonomy in decision-making and the execution of security measures. The involvement of other actors, like France, the United States, Russia, and China, exacerbates regional dynamics, frequently fostering divides within ECOWAS member states.

Furthermore, the ongoing risks of terrorism, insurgency, and transnational organised crime present significant challenges to collective security. The growth of armaments, driven by both external and indigenous sources, persists in destabilising the area, complicating ECOWAS's efforts to manage conflicts. The research emphasises the necessity for reinforced border regulations, intelligence collaboration, and capacity-building efforts to improve regional security.

To address these complexities, ECOWAS must prioritise institutional reforms, enhance co-operation among member states, and diminish dependence on external actors. Effective enhancement will depend on sustainable financing, increased coordination, and the establishment of autonomous security measures. By tackling these structural and geopolitical intricacies, ECOWAS may re-establish itself as a more robust and proactive regional security entity, adept at efficiently handling modern security challenges.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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