The AES Exit from ECOWAS and Brexit: A Comparative Reading Through Hirschman's Exit–Voice–Loyalty Framework

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Abstract

This article examines two withdrawal processes: Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit) and the Alliance of Sahel States' (AES) exit from ECOWAS. The study explores the extent to which the AES departure resembles Brexit. It begins by providing context for both events before analysing their similarities, differences, and implications. Data were gathered from primary and secondary sources and analysed using Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework. The findings show that common factors, such as concerns over national sovereignty and ambitions for economic, political, and geopolitical independence, motivated both exits. However, they unfolded differently: Brexit occurred through negotiated agreements to manage post-Brexit relations, whereas the AES departure occurred suddenly, without negotiations or prior arrangements. While each exit may be questionable, both indicate a desire for political self-determination.

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Introduction

The Sahel region has faced the threat of terrorism for over a decade, following the Libyan crisis, which led to Muammar Gaddafi's fall in 2011. Since then, insecurity has spread into West African Sahel states, starting with Mali, where internal factors, notably the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, contributed. That rebellion opened the door for terrorist groups to expand within the country, spilling over into its neighbours, particularly Burkina Faso and Niger. The democratically elected presidents of the three countries implemented several counterinsurgency strategies to tackle the situation, but to no avail. As a result, all three experienced coups d'état, sparking a wave of coups across the region. The wave began in Mali when, on 18 August 2020, a group of military officers, including then-Colonel Assimi Goïta (now a General), ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and installed Bah N'Daw as interim president. That coup was followed by a second on 24 May 2021 against Bah N'Daw, allowing Assimi Goïta to seize power. On 24 January 2022, Burkina Faso experienced its first coup of the era, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba, who overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Subsequently, on 30 September 2022, a second coup occurred, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, ousting Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba. Lastly, on 26 July 2023, a coup led by General Abdourahamane Tiani overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger.

These coups led to sanctions, including membership suspensions, border closures, travel bans, and asset freezes, imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on the countries in question. In response to these sanctions and to strengthen their unity, the three military-led regimes of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger united their countries in the Alliance of Sahel States (*Alliance des États du Sahel*, or AES). They decided to expel foreign Western troops, mainly French forces, and withdraw their countries from ECOWAS to gain more policy independence, with Russia emerging as a new strategic partner. This sudden break raises considerable policy uncertainty for ECOWAS and the departing countries alike. Analysing this situation with the Brexit experience in mind offers valuable insights by providing a comparative framework for understanding the potential economic, political, and social impacts of a state's exit from a regional bloc.

Some scholars have examined the issue from various angles. Aning and Bjarnesen present it as a dilemma for ECOWAS, which must balance

principles and pragmatism. Ansah explores the political reasons behind the exit of these countries, "placing it in the larger framework of military-led administration, anti-imperialist sentiment, regional security issues, and ECOWAS's perceived inadequacies." Sissoko et al. analyse the economic, political, and social consequences of the withdrawal of the three states from the regional bloc. Beyi offers a sociological analysis of the political and social structure of the Liptako-Gourma Charter. For Bassou, the path chosen by the Alliance states is clear but fraught with traps. Similarly, Sogodogo examines the decision of the three countries to leave ECOWAS within the context of challenges and opportunities. However, these authors do not compare the issue with another exit. This gap is what this study seeks to address, contributing to debates on regional integration/disintegration in West Africa and Europe.

In fact, the withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS is not without precedent on the global stage. For example, in 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) held a referendum on its membership in the European Union (EU). As a result of this referendum, about 52 per cent of the British people voted to leave the EU. This departure is known as Brexit, with the process beginning in 2016 and concluding in 2020, when the UK officially left the EU. Similarly, drawing a parallel with Brexit, the AES's decision to withdraw from ECOWAS is also an exit, which could be termed the AES exit. The purpose of this article is to assess how much this African exit resembles or differs from the logic of Brexit, prompting the following questions: Firstly, what is the rationale behind each exit? Then, to what extent does the AES exit mirror the Brexit experience? Finally, how significant can each exit be politically, economically, and socially within its region?

To answer these questions, the analysis is guided by Albert O. Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory, which explains how members of organisations respond to dissatisfaction through three options: remaining loyal (loyalty), expressing dissatisfaction (voice), or leaving the organisation (exit). This theory offers an interpretive lens to understand the decision-making logic behind both the AES exit and Brexit cases, especially in contexts where institutional reform (voice) seems ineffective. This framework enables a nuanced understanding of how domestic political legitimacy, sovereignty claims, and regional power dynamics shape exit behaviours. However, while the analysis compares the UK–EU and AES–ECOWAS trajectories, it is

important to note from the outset that the EU is a supranational organisation, whereas ECOWAS remains mainly intergovernmental. This distinction helps to avoid false equivalence.

The study relies on document-based qualitative analysis, combining both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official communiqués, treaties, and charters such as the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, the Liptako-Gourma Charter, the Treaty of the Confederation of Sahel States, and key reports on Brexit. In addition, speeches and official statements, such as Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Bruges speech and declarations by ECOWAS and AES leaders, are analysed for ideological framing. Secondary sources consist of academic articles, policy papers, and reports that discuss regional integration, sovereignty, and exit processes. The selection of sources follows three criteria: direct relevance to regional withdrawal processes, authoritative or peer-reviewed status, and representation of multiple perspectives (African, European, and global). Finally, the study triangulates evidence from policy documents, speeches, scholarly analyses, and media sources, while situating each case within its specific historical and political context. Despite this relative caution, the changing security and political dynamics in the AES could challenge the stability of the findings; therefore, ongoing monitoring remains essential.

1. Rationale for Both Exits

Brexit was motivated by a combination of reasons that developed over many years and culminated in the 2016 referendum. These include desires for sovereignty, economic independence, and border control (Hobolt 4). Regarding sovereignty, for example, the UK has historically maintained a cautious and often sceptical stance toward European integration. This is why, while the European Economic Community (EEC) was founded in 1957, it did not join until 1973. This scepticism persisted following the transformation of the EEC into the EU in 1993, as evidenced by Britain's opt-outs from the single currency (the euro), the Schengen Area, and various provisions relating to justice and home affairs (Menon and Salter 1306). From its EU membership, we can infer that Britain is not keen on supranational authority. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed this British ethos in her 1988 Bruges speech, recognising that "active cooperation between independent

sovereign states" was "the best way to build a successful European Community." She did not hide her disagreement with European integration that would infringe on countries' sovereignty. Many, including Thatcher's former colleagues, view that speech as a precursor to the UK's Brexit journey (Green 1). Thus, Thatcher's Bruges speech likely influenced the UK's future EU membership.

This reflects the British people's long-standing scepticism towards supranational constraints, as evidenced by the majority voting in favour of "Leave" in the Brexit Referendum. Therefore, Brexit was driven by the British people's desire for full sovereignty. In this context, Britain first expressed "voice" through Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Bruges speech. It then demonstrated "loyalty" by remaining in the EEC (which later became the EU), as shown by the 1975 referendum, where 67% of British voters supported remaining in the EEC (Hobolt 8). Ultimately, the country exercised Hirschman's "exit" by leaving the EU in 2020 because "one either exits or one does not" (Hirschman 15). However, Brexit has yet to convince its supporters, let alone its opponents.

Regarding the AES exit, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, all founding members of ECOWAS since 1975, recently experienced military coups that led to the suspension of their membership and the imposition of sanctions by the organisation. In Niger's case, ECOWAS even closed its borders with the country and threatened military intervention to restore President Mohamed Bazoum to power. This action prompted the military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso to warn that any attack on Niger would be regarded as aggression against all three states. This coordinated defiance meant a clear rejection of ECOWAS's authority.

To consolidate their autonomy and ensure mutual defence, the three states adopted the Liptako-Gourma Charter (*Charte du Liptako-Gourma*) on 16 September 2023, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (*Alliance des États du Sahel*). The Charter stipulates that aggression against one member constitutes aggression against all (art. 6), indicating a shift towards a collective security framework. Then, on 28 January 2024, the Alliance leaders announced their joint withdrawal from ECOWAS, which was later formalised at the Niamey Summit on 6 July 2024 through the Treaty of the Confederation of Sahel States *(Traité portant création de la Confédération des États du Sahel)*, aimed at coordinating policies in security, diplomacy, and development.

Ultimately, ECOWAS failed to intervene in Niger, further weakening its credibility. Consequently, somewhat like Brexit, the AES exit reflects a desire for sovereignty and resistance to supranational authority. Both withdrawals illustrate the logic of "exit" in Hirschman's framework, in which states prioritise self-determination over institutional loyalty despite the associated risks. This means that the AES Confederation and the UK have opted for sovereignty, fully aware of its consequences. From this background, we can now examine the similarities and dissimilarities between Brexit and the AES exit.

2. Brexit and AES Exit: Similarities
2.1. Sovereignty and Nationalism

As discussed above, recovering full national sovereignty was one of the key reasons for Brexit. In fact, the UK sought complete control over its laws and policies, free from EU interference. Likewise, the primary stated reason for leaving ECOWAS was the AES countries' desire for greater autonomy in policy and decision-making. With the threat of ECOWAS intervention looming, the leaders of the three countries found it better to circumvent its principles and even challenge its sanctions. The governments of these states then started to build a new entity in their quest for security, but also to free themselves from ECOWAS and Western influence (Sogodogo 1). Therefore, like Brexit, this withdrawal was also motivated by the quest for sovereignty in domestic affairs. Evidence for this is that in the Liptako-Gourma Charter, sovereignty is mentioned in articles 5 and 6, hinting that the signatory states are determined to fight for their emancipation from ECOWAS and other traditional international partners, especially their former coloniser (France).

The search for sovereignty and autonomy to choose a strategic partner brought the AES countries to actively collaborate with Russia and other new strategic partners to acquire combat-proven military equipment to better address the terrorist threat. This equipment is intended to enhance the operational capacities of the defence and security forces in the three countries, as well as that of the Homeland Defence Volunteers (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or VDPs)—a paramilitary force that Burkina Faso has recruited in the tens of thousands since 2020 to supplement its regular defence and security apparatus.

Apart from the equipment, Russian military personnel are present in

the AES countries. In Mali, for example, Wagner troops replaced the international coalitions, which were considered too Western in their interest (Beyi 440). According to Kohnert, Czerep and Bryjka, and Karr, "Russia has had nearly 2,000 soldiers that are part of the Wagner Group, renamed 'Africa Corps' in 2023, in Mali, roughly 200 in Burkina Faso, and at least another 100 in Niger" (qtd. in Kohnert 5). While the Russian presence in the region is confirmed, these figures are difficult to verify in official sources. Anyway, the Russian presence shows that anti-Western sentiment persists in the AES countries and that pro-Russian sentiment is growing. Nevertheless, the durability of this new partnership with Russia will ultimately be tested by the extent to which the security improvements initially invoked to justify the military seizure of power can be sustained.

Therefore, similarly to the UK, which exited the EU driven by concerns over immigration and the supremacy of EU law, the AES countries exited ECOWAS to manage their security situation without external interference or restriction. However, the notion of sovereignty underpinning both Brexit and the AES exit encompasses other domains, including economic, trade, political, and geopolitical considerations.

2.2. Economic Considerations

Regarding Brexit, the British people considered the costs and benefits of the UK's EU membership. Some questioned the cost of membership and wished their country could exit the EU and redirect that money to national policies. Roe-Crines and Heppell note that since joining the EEC in 1973, the UK's relationship with the EU has always been fraught. That is why successive governments across party lines were often seen as reluctant or "awkward partners" in Europe (Roe-Crines and Heppell).

In the case of the AES countries, economic concerns were also among the motives underpinning their departure from ECOWAS. The leaders of the three states and many citizens criticised and downplayed ECOWAS's economic achievements, arguing that its economic integration was ineffective, particularly because it failed to ensure the free movement of persons and goods. In fact, even though the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment grants ECOWAS citizens "the right to enter, reside and establish in the territory of Member States" (ECOWAS Protocol, art. 2), the borders of the countries in the area are still places of roadblock

rent-seeking where you have to pay to cross. This is therefore part of the secondary arguments in favour of the AES exit, aimed at establishing the genuine free movement of persons and goods to boost development. Therefore, for supporters of the AES vision, exiting ECOWAS would be an opportunity to gain greater economic and political autonomy to implement a model of unrestricted free movement that could facilitate greater collaboration, trade, and partnerships to boost economic development in the Confederation and attract other members. For this vision to materialise, security must take precedence, as no meaningful economic development can occur in an environment of fear or instability. Moreover, economic development rests on a sound political and geopolitical stance.

2.3. Political Identity and Geopolitical Alignment

The UK is a unitary country, made up of four constituent nations and run by a constitutional monarchy. Its citizens take pride in their parliamentary system, which aligns with their desire for direct, accountable government and their disapproval of supranational institutions and laws. This British mindset facilitated the path to Brexit, although the outcome has not proved to be the blessing-in-disguise many Brexiters anticipated. Since Brexit, the integrity of the country has come under strain, particularly as Scotland and Northern Ireland, both of which voted strongly against Brexit (Uberoi 5), were nonetheless obliged to accept the referendum result. This can create political tensions and divisions in these nations that can be difficult to handle.

When it comes to the AES exit, since the military takeovers in question, several voices have been raised against the model of democracy promoted by ECOWAS. In Burkina Faso, for example, the authors of these loud voices are mostly grassroots citizens, commonly referred to as the *Waayiyan* ("come out" in Mooré). Gathered at roundabouts and other strategic places across the country, in towns and rural areas, the *Waayiyan* are civilian men and women from all social and professional backgrounds who have decided to keep a citizens' watch, aiming to thwart any attempt to destabilise the regime. Then, any suspicious movement is met with calls on social media, urging people to come out and defend the regime. The other two AES military-led regimes also have their unconditional supporters, like the *Waayiyan* of Burkina Faso, ready to respond to any call for a rally. In their rejection of the West and liberal democracy, they call on the AES leaders to

strengthen their partnership with Russia. This implies that the AES political vision intersects with that of "Russia that is challenging democracy and its proponents" (Kohnert 10). This also indicates that politically, the AES countries are not in favour of liberal democracy. As politics and geopolitics are closely intertwined, the military regimes have distanced themselves from their traditional partner (France) to align with Russia and other new strategic partners, such as Türkiye, China, and Iran.

Another reason for the AES exit and this realignment is that ECOWAS seems unfair in its approach to democratic governance in the subregion, as it is flexible toward constitutional manipulations and strict toward military takeovers. According to supporters of the AES countries, a constitutional manipulation is a coup; that is, a violation of the constitution to cling to power. Therefore, the organisation's incapacity to address constitutional manipulations by certain presidents to extend their tenure through additional mandates weakened ECOWAS when it came to sanctioning military takeovers that constitute a blatant constitutional violation. For supporters of the AES vision, remaining in such an organisation could not be helpful in that context. They even encouraged the three leaders to withdraw from ECOWAS to implement policies better suited to the new realities of their countries.

To give them more leeway, in Burkina Faso, Captain Traoré, after a year and a half in power, was granted a five-year extension in May 2024, when national stakeholders extended the transition period by 60 months, starting on 2 July 2024, with an expected end in 2029. In February 2025, a similar decision was made in Niger, where the transition led by General Tiani was set at 60 months, extending the process until 2030. Finally, in April 2025, the Malian driving forces did so, allowing General Goïta to serve as President until 2030. These national driving forces, which vested power in the three AES leaders, may be said not to represent the will of the populations, as they are not elected bodies. However, this does not deprive them of legitimacy because even an election cannot content everyone. Elections do not even seem to be the priority in the AES Confederation for the moment. What matters most is consolidating the institutions of the Confederation. What is sure is that the Confederation exited ECOWAS, signalling a "'direct' way of expressing one's unfavourable views of an organisation" (Hirschman 17).

Nonetheless, the withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS, presented

as the solution to the region's plight, could also worsen the already dire security situation because "a divided Sahel will make tackling regional challenges even more difficult" (Kohnert 1). Concurring with Kohnert, Adisa argues that this exit "would create complex regional security and economic dynamics in the West African region redefining economic relations and targeted cooperation in the area of security" and "affect the West African border security", as joint security initiatives such as "joint patrols and information sharing mechanisms would be affected, potentially exposing neighboring countries" (7). The exit is indeed a cause for concern, as strained relations with neighbouring countries hamper coordinated action that could be effective in the fight against the phenomenon.

That being said, just like the UK, which sought to redefine its global role post-Brexit by exiting the EU and looking for new alliances and trade partnerships, the AES Confederation has started a shift in the geopolitical alliances, seeking to align closely with non-Western partners such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran (Kohnert 3; Adisa 2; Ansah 167). Thus, the AES exit can establish a new regional bloc that would reflect a new geopolitical structure in West Africa, similar to the UK's post-Brexit stance, which allows it to collaborate freely with any country, though facing regulatory measures from the EU. This hints that exiting ECOWAS could also raise concerns about the free movement of persons and goods, as observed in the case of Brexit.

2.4. Trade and Regional Integration

After Britain decided to leave the EU, a Brexit deal became necessary to define the future relationship. Across the country, Brexit created complexities for cross-border travel. However, it put Northern Ireland in a particularly delicate situation. In fact, successive Brexit-era Conservative British Prime Ministers proposed different solutions for this constituent nation, which constitutes the only land border between the UK and the EU. Theresa May, the first Prime Minister to deal with Brexit, proposed a deal that avoided a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, known as the Irish backstop. That deal aimed to keep the UK in the EU customs union (Whitten 23) as a fallback if no better trade deal was reached after the transition period. However, the backstop was too controversial and was one of the reasons for Theresa May's resignation. Boris Johnson, who took over from her, reached

another deal with the EU, known as the Irish Protocol. This second deal was meant to allow Northern Ireland to remain aligned with specific EU Single Market rules (for goods) to avoid a hard land border and its related issues with the Republic of Ireland. Then, goods moving from Great Britain (England, Wales, and Scotland) to Northern Ireland, whatever their final destination, should undergo checks. However, they could move freely (without checks) between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That solution was also contested by the Northern Irish people, especially the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), because it treated Northern Ireland differently, and "contained no democratic consent mechanism" (Phinnemore and Whitten 2).

Following Boris Johnson's resignation, Rishi Sunak came up with the Windsor Framework. According to Phinnemore and Whitten, the Windsor Framework "is the 'democratic consent mechanism'" that "obliges the UK government to provide members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) with the opportunity to grant their 'democratic consent' to the continued application of core provisions" of the agreement. In the same vein, Murray and Robb explain that this framework is "the new package of measures" agreed by the UK and the EU, as well as the new name for the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, presented in February 2023 (1). This last agreement establishes two lanes (green and red) for goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. That is, goods with Northern Ireland as their final destination must go through the green lane (no checks). However, some categories of goods continuing to the Republic of Ireland (the EU) must go through the red lane (must be checked) (6–7). This last solution, though still valid, also failed to bring total satisfaction to Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole. This shows that all three agreements are contested and evolving, making the Northern Irish issue crucial and contentious. Therefore, regarding trade and regional integration, despite the agreements that the UK signed with the EU, Brexit has yet to prove advantageous for Britain overall and Northern Ireland in particular. If the UK fails to achieve a more consensus-based and effective solution to the Irish border, Brexit could have far-reaching consequences for the UK, as the country's unity may be at risk.

Concerning the AES exit, ECOWAS also has a common market that facilitates trade among member countries. Then, the exit of the three states may lead to similar uncertainties about free movements in the subregion to some extent. However, until now, ECOWAS has not yet put an end to the

free movement of persons and goods from the AES countries. This means that ECOWAS's free trade scheme remains open to the three countries. Should the rules change, negotiations may be held to establish agreements to facilitate collaboration between the two blocs and prevent the escalation of border frictions. An alternative approach would be to conduct these negotiations on a multiple bilateral basis. The choice between single bilateral negotiations (AES negotiating with ECOWAS as a bloc) and multiple bilateral negotiations (AES negotiating with individual ECOWAS countries) will depend on how solid, unified, and integrated ECOWAS remains. Thus, Brexit and the AES exit share certain similarities. This is evidenced by the fact that sovereignty was the main reason for each exit. In addition, each exit creates an isolation and may cause economic and political difficulties for the countries that opted for Hirschman's exit (the UK and the AES countries), as well as for those that preferred the loyalty option (the remaining EU and ECOWAS member countries).

Both Brexit and the AES exit illustrate how disintegration can undermine collective political, economic, and security capacities. Nevertheless, as of now, while Brexit has generated domestic tensions, particularly over the unresolved Northern Irish border issue, the AES exit has not yet led to any change in free movement in the region. Taken together, both withdrawals demonstrate that exiting from integrated arrangements can have negative consequences. This indicates that there are similarities between both exits, albeit to a limited extent. However, they diverge on other dimensions.

3. Brexit and the AES Exit: Dissimilarities
3.1. Global Impact and Institutional Complexity

Brexit is a significant global event due to the UK's historical international role and the EU's high level of integration. Conversely, the AES exit is less globally notable, although it could potentially be transformative for West African integration. Furthermore, Brexit required a referendum, allowing the British public to choose whether to remain in or leave the EU. The decision to exit was made in 2016, but the actual departure process began in 2020 after several rounds of negotiations between the EU and the UK to reach a Brexit agreement. In contrast, the AES exit was quickly decided by AES leaders, without public consultation or prior negotiations with ECOWAS.

The ECOWAS Revised Treaty states that a member state intending to withdraw must give the Executive Secretary one year's written notice, which is then communicated to all other members. If the notice is not withdrawn within that year, the state's membership ends (art. 91). However, the AES leaders declared the withdrawal effective immediately. Even so, the decision could not take effect until the end of the notification period (29 January 2025). Before the deadline, on 15 December 2024, ECOWAS leaders held a summit and decided to set a six-month grace period. This grace period was intended to give negotiations for the return of the three members a better chance. This indicates that ECOWAS has not closed the door to dialogue. It even called on the departing members to come to the negotiating table, but to no avail. On 22 December 2024, the AES leaders rejected the olive branch offered by ECOWAS, as announced in a statement signed by the Confederal President (General Assimi Goïta) and broadcast simultaneously on the national television channels of the three countries. This suggests that the AES left ECOWAS without a transition period, unlike the UK, which took four years to negotiate its departure. A unilateral withdrawal could not work for the UK, which was highly involved in the EU's trade framework. Regarding institutional complexity, the EU is far more integrated politically and economically than ECOWAS. Therefore, while Brexit involved disentangling the deeply rooted EU institutional ties, the AES exit involved fewer administrative tasks within ECOWAS. The divergence between Brexit and the AES exit extends beyond their scope and types to embrace their trajectories.

3.2. Diverging Trajectories

While Brexit means Britain exiting the EU to recover full sovereignty, it does not mean that the UK is likely to open up to other countries to increase the number of its constituent nations (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) because it does not intend to be a confederation or federation. The UK is already a unitary state, working to prevent some of its constituent nations (especially Northern Ireland and Scotland) from leaving it and joining the EU. Brexit, as discussed above, puts Northern Ireland in a delicate situation regarding its border with the Republic of Ireland. The very issue could push it to consider exiting the UK, reuniting with the Republic of Ireland, and then joining the EU. Scotland could also consider exiting the UK. Before Brexit, in 2014, Scotland held an Independence Referendum (about its

independence from the UK). Although the majority of the Scottish population voted to remain in the UK, Sharp et al. note that irrespective of the result of the referendum, "the UK faces a deepening political crisis stemming from the growing economic chasm between London and the rest of the country" (Sharp et al. 33). Another Independence Referendum in Scotland after Brexit could produce an outcome in favour of leaving the UK, then joining the EU. Therefore, the possibility of Northern Ireland and/or Scotland leaving the UK cannot be ruled out, as debates over rejoining the EU and Irish reunification continue. The likelihood of such outcomes will depend on the broader consequences of Brexit for the UK as a whole and for each constituent nation. The prospect of these two constituent nations leaving could fade if the UK were to re-enter the EU, as opponents of Brexit advocate. This position has increasingly gained support from some former pro-Brexit voters who have become disillusioned with the outcomes of the withdrawal.

Regarding the AES exit, it weakens ECOWAS somewhat, but it is also likely to pave the way for other countries attracted to the Confederation. This would expand the new West African bloc. Kohnert suggests that this new bloc "will seek to absorb new members such as Chad, Guinea, and Sudan to further strengthen its power and legitimacy as an alternative regional bloc" (1). Moreover, in January 2025, during an interview, the Togolese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Dussey, stated that Togo does not exclude joining the Confederation. Against this backdrop, if the Confederation prospers, it may establish a new model of governance with a stronger security system that could attract other Sahelian countries, further weakening ECOWAS. In this perspective, Aning and Bjarnesen argue that if the Confederation's withdrawal occurs, "ECOWAS will undergo an unprecedented transformation and will see its subregional scope significantly curtailed" (6).

As of now, the AES Confederation leaders have ruled out any return to ECOWAS. This resolute tone contrasts with that of the UK in implementing Brexit, which was carried out through negotiations and agreements rather than through direct statements, as observed in the case of the AES exit. In light of these dynamics, the AES exit could have significant implications for the subregion, compared to Brexit, whose effects are far from threatening the EU's integration. In fact, unlike the UK, which is geographically insular and separated from the European mainland, the AES is

situated in the interior of West Africa, at the geographic and economic heart of ECOWAS, occupying a substantial territorial area. Consequently, its departure could have more far-reaching repercussions for the regional bloc than Brexit did for the EU, since larger-scale exits tend to produce proportionally greater losses (Hirschman 23).

In essence, the two exits unfolded in fundamentally different ways. Brexit was implemented through a protracted and institutionalised process, negotiated through a series of agreements intended to regulate trade, political cooperation, and citizens' rights in the post-Brexit era. By contrast, the AES exit was abrupt and unilateral, taking place without prior consultation, negotiation, or transitional mechanisms to mitigate the economic and political consequences. Then, whereas Brexit sought to redefine and preserve aspects of the UK-EU relationship through compromise, the AES exit severed ties with ECOWAS overnight, highlighting the absence of procedural safeguards.

Moreover, the AES Confederation could evolve towards a more federal form, welcoming other voluntary African states, especially the Sahelian ones, to form a more solid bloc. Although the likelihood of this happening is low, the narrative underpinning the Confederation suggests that it could happen in the long term. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the aspirations of the AES countries cannot be realised without achieving a decisive victory over terrorism, the very reason for the military takeovers. In fact, if it is undeniable that the Confederation leaders have made notable efforts to coordinate security operations and share intelligence among the three member states, the end of the tunnel is still ahead, attesting to the seriousness of the threat.

Conclusion

Two main reasons prompted the AES withdrawal. First, the governments of the three states expressed dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's inability to tackle the ongoing security crisis in the Sahel, which has severely impacted their territories. Second, and more decisively, the AES exit was driven by ECOWAS's threat of military intervention in Niger following the 2023 coup. The military regimes viewed this decision as a violation of their sovereignty. Since ECOWAS membership involves the risk of external intervention, the military regimes chose to withdraw to safeguard their political authority. In this way, the AES withdrawal reflects aspects of Brexit that aimed to give the

UK complete control over its borders and to reassert its national authority over domestic law.

Although both withdrawals raise important questions and, despite occurring in different historical, geographical, and institutional contexts, they share a common goal: sovereignty. Nonetheless, they carry different implications. Brexit transformed economic and trade relations within the EU, a largely integrated organisation. This led the UK to negotiate and sign agreements with the EU to maintain trade and cooperation. Regarding the AES exit, it happened suddenly, without any prior negotiations or agreements on future relations with ECOWAS, creating uncertainty about the continuation of regional cooperation. Despite these uncertainties, the AES Confederation could flourish and reshape regional security frameworks and political alliances in West Africa. This will depend on the effectiveness of its policies and strategies, with the re-establishment of regional peace serving as the primary benchmark. Meanwhile, ECOWAS faces a dual challenge: rebuilding credibility regarding constitutional norms while offering calibrated security cooperation mechanisms to incentivise "voice" over "exit". Future research should therefore analyse trade flows, border frictions, and security incidents before and after both exits, as well as survey public attitudes towards integration in AES versus ECOWAS, to better understand the impact of such withdrawals.

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