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TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF SUB-REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE SAHEL: THE CONFEDERATION OF THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES (AES) BETWEEN SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY, AND DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES.

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in July 2024 represents a paradigm shift in sub-regional integration, challenging conventional models rooted in economic interdependence and democratic governance. Comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger three military-led states with a combined population exceeding 70 million the AES articulates a sovereignty-centric vision of integration that prioritizes security cooperation, institutional autonomy, and the repudiation of Western influence. This article examines the AES as a new

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model of sub-regional integration, analyzing its institutional architecture, security framework, economic pillars, and geopolitical positioning. Drawing on primary sources including the Liptako-Gourma Charter, the Treaty of Confederation, and official communiqués, as well as policy analyses from Chatham House, the Centre for Democracy and Development, and the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, the study assesses the AES's viability as an alternative to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The article argues that while the AES represents a genuine assertion of sovereignty responding to legitimate grievances against ECOWAS and former colonial powers, its military-driven governance model, institutional shallowness, and geopolitical dependency on Russia present significant challenges to sustainable integration. The study concludes that the AES's long-term viability depends on its ability to balance sovereignty with accountability, security with development, and autonomy with regional cooperation. It recommends that both ECOWAS and the AES pursue pragmatic engagement on shared security and economic challenges while maintaining principled positions on governance standards.

Keywords: Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Sub-Regional Integration, Sovereignty, ECOWAS, Sahel, Security Cooperation, Regional Governance, Military Regimes, Geopolitics, Development

RÉSUMÉ

L'émergence de la Confédération de l'Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) en juillet 2024 représente un changement de paradigme dans l'intégration sous-régionale, remettant en question les modèles conventionnels fondés sur l'interdépendance économique et la gouvernance démocratique. Composée du Burkina Faso, du Mali et du Niger trois États dirigés par des militaires avec une population combinée dépassant 70 millions d'habitants l'AES articule une vision de l'intégration centrée sur la souveraineté qui privilégie la coopération sécuritaire, l'autonomie institutionnelle et le rejet de l'influence occidentale. Cet article examine l'AES comme un nouveau modèle d'intégration sous-régionale, analysant son architecture institutionnelle, son cadre sécuritaire, ses piliers économiques et son positionnement géopolitique. S'appuyant sur des sources primaires incluant la Charte de Liptako-Gourma, le Traité de Confédération et les communiqués officiels, ainsi que sur des analyses politiques du Chatham House, du Centre pour la Démocratie et le

Développement et du Service de renseignement étranger ukrainien, l'étude évalue la viabilité de l'AES comme alternative à la Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO). L'article soutient que, si l'AES représente une affirmation authentique de souveraineté répondant aux griefs légitimes contre la CEDEAO et les anciennes puissances coloniales, son modèle de gouvernance militariste, sa superficialité institutionnelle et sa dépendance géopolitique envers la Russie présentent des défis significatifs à une intégration durable. L'étude conclut que la viabilité à long terme de l'AES dépend de sa capacité à équilibrer souveraineté et responsabilité, sécurité et développement, autonomie et coopération régionale. Elle recommande que la CEDEAO et l'AES poursuivent un engagement pragmatique sur les défis communs de sécurité et d'économie tout en maintenant des positions de principe sur les normes de gouvernance.

Mots-clés: Alliance des États du Sahel (AES), Intégration sous-régionale, Souveraineté, CEDEAO, Sahel, Coopération sécuritaire, Gouvernance régionale, Régimes militaires, Géopolitique, Développement

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The landscape of West African regional integration has been fundamentally reconfigured by the emergence of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). On July 6, 2024, the leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger three military-led states that experienced coups between 2020 and 2023 signed a treaty establishing a confederation (Bernama, 2024). This institutional evolution, preceded by the Liptako-Gourma Charter of September 2023 establishing a mutual defense pact, represents a decisive break from the region's predominant integration framework, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The AES project is rooted in a shared narrative of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and the repudiation of former colonial ties. The three states have formally withdrawn from ECOWAS, expelled French military forces, and severed diplomatic relations with France and other Western powers (Anadolu Agency, 2025). They have instead aligned themselves with Russia, inviting Russian security contractors and deepening political and economic ties with Moscow (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). The AES leadership has articulated a vision of integration that prioritizes security cooperation, institutional autonomy, and the construction of alternative governance frameworks outside Western influence (Sputnik Africa, 2026).

The AES's institutional development has been rapid and comprehensive. In addition to the confederation treaty, the member states have launched a unified military force (FU-AES) of approximately 5,000 troops, established the Confederal Investment and Development Bank (BCID-AES) with a capital of 500 billion CFA francs, introduced a joint AES passport, and created an AES television network and media outlets (Mwangi, 2025; Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances du Burkina Faso, 2025). These initiatives reflect the AES's ambition to build a fully-fledged regional architecture that can serve as an alternative to ECOWAS.

1.2 Problem Statement

The AES presents a fundamental challenge to conventional models of sub-regional integration in Africa. Traditional integration frameworks exemplified by ECOWAS, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community are predicated on principles of economic interdependence, democratic governance, and institutionalized cooperation. The AES, by contrast, is built on military solidarity, anti-Western sentiment, and a sovereignty-centric vision that prioritizes autonomy over integration.

This divergence raises critical questions about the viability and sustainability of the AES model. Can a confederation of military-led states, governed by decrees rather than democratic processes, achieve the institutional depth necessary for effective integration? Can security cooperation, which the AES prioritizes above all else, substitute for the economic interdependence that has been the engine of regional integration elsewhere? Can the AES's sovereignty-centric approach coexist with

the need for regional cooperation on transnational challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and trade?

The stakes of these questions are substantial. The Sahel region is experiencing one of the world's most acute security and humanitarian crises, with jihadist violence causing tens of thousands of deaths and displacing over three million people (Chatham House, 2025). The AES's withdrawal from ECOWAS threatens to fragment regional security cooperation at precisely the moment when coordinated responses to transnational terrorism are most needed. At the same time, the AES's model of sovereignty-centric integration resonates with pan-African aspirations for genuine independence and may offer a template for other states seeking to escape neocolonial influence (Sputnik Africa, 2026).

1.3 Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the institutional architecture of the AES Confederation, including its legal instruments, governance structures, and policy frameworks.
2. To analyze the AES's security model, including the establishment of the unified military force and its implications for regional security cooperation.
3. To assess the AES's economic integration pillars, including the Confederal Investment and Development Bank and trade policies.
4. To evaluate the AES's geopolitical positioning and its implications for regional and international relations.
5. To compare the AES model with the ECOWAS model of regional integration, assessing strengths, weaknesses, and complementarities.
6. To propose recommendations for enhancing the viability of the AES and for managing its relationship with ECOWAS and the broader international community.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Theories of Regional Integration

The study of regional integration has been dominated by theories developed primarily in the European context, including neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and liberal intergovernmentalism. Neofunctionalism emphasizes the spillover effects of economic integration, whereby cooperation in one sector leads to cooperation in others, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic toward deeper integration. Intergovernmentalism emphasizes the role of state interests and bargaining in shaping integration outcomes. Liberal intergovernmentalism combines these perspectives, emphasizing both domestic interests and interstate bargaining.

These theories have been applied to African regional integration, with scholars noting the distinct characteristics of African integration: the emphasis on political cooperation, the weakness of economic interdependence, and the role of external actors. The AES, however, presents a novel case that challenges many assumptions of traditional integration theory. The AES's integration is driven not by economic interdependence but by shared security concerns and political solidarity. Its institutional development is not following spillover logic but is being constructed deliberately as an alternative to existing frameworks.

2.1.2 Sovereignty and Integration

The tension between sovereignty and integration is central to the study of regionalism. Traditional integration models involve the pooling or delegation of sovereignty to supranational institutions, creating a tension between national autonomy and collective decision-making. The AES project, however, is characterized by a strong assertion of sovereignty, with the member states emphasizing their autonomy and resisting the delegation of authority to supranational institutions. Niger's General Tiani declared that "All decisions will be taken within the confederal territory," underscoring the sovereignty-centric nature of the AES project (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

This sovereignty-centric approach has implications for the depth and sustainability of integration. While it may facilitate cooperation on areas of shared concern particularly security it may limit the institutional development necessary for addressing complex transnational challenges. The AES's institutional architecture, while growing, remains shallower and less developed than ECOWAS's five decades of accumulated frameworks (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025).

2.1.3 Security Communities and Regional Integration

The concept of security communities, developed by Karl Deutsch and others, provides a useful framework for understanding the security dimension of regional integration. A security community is a group of states that have integrated to the point that war between them is unthinkable. The AES, while not a security community in the traditional sense, represents a form of security cooperation that goes beyond typical inter-state alliances. The unified military force, the mutual defense pact, and the joint intelligence sharing reflect a deep level of security integration.

However, the AES's security cooperation is directed primarily against non-state actors (terrorist groups) rather than against external states. This focus on "terrorist violence, economic terrorism, and media terrorism" (Mwangi, 2025) distinguishes the AES from traditional security communities and reflects the specific security challenges of the Sahel.

2.2 Empirical Studies Related to the Topic

2.2.1 ECOWAS and Regional Integration in West Africa

The literature on ECOWAS has examined the organization's role in promoting regional integration, conflict resolution, and democratic governance. ECOWAS has made substantial contributions to regional integration, including trade liberalization, infrastructural connectivity, and peacekeeping operations (Chatham House, 2025). Notable successes include democratic interventions in The Gambia (2017) and Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011), as well as peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali.

However, ECOWAS has also faced significant challenges, including weak enforcement mechanisms, financial dependency on external donors, and the failure of member states to uphold their commitments (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025). The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, adopted in 1979, has been poorly enforced, leading to arbitrary border closures and harassment of travelers. Similarly, the Protocol on Transhumance, established in 1998 and revised in 2003, has been poorly implemented, contributing to farmer-pastoralist conflicts.

The response of ECOWAS to the military coups in the Sahel including economic sanctions and threats of military intervention has been the subject of debate. Critics argue that these punitive measures were counterproductive, alienating regional public opinion and driving the juntas toward closer ties with Russia (Chatham House, 2025). The sanctions drove up the cost of living for ordinary Sahelian citizens without inducing the juntas to restore civilian rule.

2.2.2 The Sahel Crisis and Foreign Interventions

A substantial body of literature examines the security crisis in the Sahel and the role of foreign interventions. Studies have documented the failure of French-led Operation Barkhane to contain the jihadist insurgency, and the resentment that this failure generated among local populations (Chatham House, 2025). The withdrawal of French forces from Mali (2022), Burkina Faso (2023), and Niger (2023) reflects the collapse of the Franco-African security architecture in the region.

The rise of Russia as a security partner in the Sahel has been the subject of considerable analysis. The Wagner Group and its successor, Africa Corps, have been active in Mali and Burkina Faso, with approximately 2,000 Russian fighters operating in Mali and several hundred in Burkina Faso and Niger (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). Research has documented both their combat effectiveness and their alleged human rights abuses. The alignment of the AES states with Russia is interpreted as a form of "multi-alignment" or strategic hedging, driven by the regimes' desire to diversify partnerships and avoid dependency on Western powers.

2.2.3 The AES as a New Integration Model

The emergence of the AES has generated scholarly and policy analysis. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) has examined the AES's viability as an alternative to ECOWAS, noting

that "AES appears to prioritize military solutions to regional crises, neglecting economic and diplomatic strategies" and that "unlike ECOWAS, which has built a governance framework for nearly five decades, AES lacks institutional depth and experience in regional administration" (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025).

Chatham House has analyzed the geopolitical implications of the AES, noting that "despite the bitter exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS and their formation of the rival AES, the destinies of the two blocs remain deeply intertwined" (Chatham House, 2025). The analysis emphasizes the shared challenges facing both blocs insecurity, climate change, and rapid demographic growth and argues that "regional unity is the only viable long-term response" (Chatham House, 2025).

The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service has analyzed the AES from a geopolitical perspective, noting that "the AES countries seek to maintain maximum autonomy: using external partners on a situational basis, they retain full control over decisions" and that "the very logic of the AES indicates that the Sahel countries seek to maintain maximum autonomy" (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). This analysis suggests that the AES's alignment with Russia is pragmatic and opportunistic rather than ideological.

2.3 Research Gaps

Despite the growing literature on the AES, several research gaps persist. First, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of the AES's institutional architecture and its viability as a new model of regional integration. While individual components such as the unified military force and the investment bank have been examined, the overall institutional framework and its coherence require further study.

Second, the economic dimensions of the AES integration project have received limited attention. The BCID-AES, the joint passport, and trade policies represent significant departures from ECOWAS integration, but their viability and implications have not been fully assessed.

Third, the geopolitical implications of the AES, particularly its alignment with Russia and its repudiation of Western influence, require further analysis. The extent to which the AES's

integration project is shaped by external actors, and the implications for regional and international relations, merit further study.

Fourth, the comparison between the AES and ECOWAS models of integration has been conducted primarily at a general level. A more detailed comparative analysis, examining specific policy areas and institutional mechanisms, is needed.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the institutional architecture of the AES Confederation, and how does it compare with traditional regional integration frameworks?
2. How does the AES's security model, particularly the unified military force, address the security challenges of the Sahel, and what are its implications for regional security cooperation?
3. What are the economic pillars of the AES, and how viable are they as alternatives to ECOWAS economic integration?
4. How does the AES's geopolitical positioning particularly its alignment with Russia shape its integration project and its relations with the broader international community?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining doctrinal legal analysis with case study methodology. The doctrinal legal analysis involves the systematic examination of legal instruments, treaties, and official documents. The case study methodology enables an in-depth examination of the AES as a contemporary geopolitical phenomenon.

4.2 Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study includes legal instruments, official documents, policy analyses, and scholarly literature relevant to the AES and regional integration in West Africa. The sampling was purposive, focusing on documents directly relevant to the research questions, including:

- Primary sources: Liptako-Gourma Charter, Treaty of Confederation, official communiqués
- Policy analyses: Chatham House, Centre for Democracy and Development, Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service
- Scholarly literature: Peer-reviewed articles on regional integration, security cooperation, and the Sahel crisis

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed three methods:

1. **Document Analysis**: Systematic review of primary legal instruments, official documents, and reports from international organizations and research institutions.
2. **Policy Analysis**: Examination of policy briefs and analyses from research institutions, including Chatham House, the Centre for Democracy and Development, and the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service.
3. **Media Analysis**: Review of media coverage from international and regional sources, including Anadolu Agency, Sputnik Africa, and Ecofin Agency.

4.4 Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis employed doctrinal legal analysis to interpret legal instruments and identify applicable rules and principles. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in official documents and policy analyses. Comparative analysis was employed to assess the AES's institutional framework against ECOWAS and other regional integration models.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Institutional Architecture of the AES Confederation

The AES's legal framework rests on two primary instruments: the Liptako-Gourma Charter, adopted on September 16, 2023, and the Treaty establishing the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States, signed on July 6, 2024.

The Liptako-Gourma Charter established the Alliance as a mutual defense pact, committing the signatory states to mutual assistance in the event of armed attack and to cooperation in the fight against terrorism and organized crime (Bernama, 2024). The charter's provisions on mutual defense reflect the AES states' primary security concerns and their determination to establish an autonomous security framework outside ECOWAS.

The Treaty of Confederation elevated the Alliance from a defense pact to a formal confederation. The treaty establishes a confederal structure with common institutions, including a Confederal Executive, a Confederal Parliament, and a Confederal Court (Bernama, 2024). It provides for the coordination of foreign policy, defense, and economic integration. The treaty also establishes the AES as a subject of international law, capable of entering into relations with other states and international organizations.

The governance structures of the AES remain in development, but the available information suggests a relatively loose confederal structure. The Confederal Executive, headed by a rotating presidency, coordinates policy among member states. The Confederal Parliament, while providing a forum for deliberation, does not appear to have legislative authority comparable to supranational institutions in other regional organizations (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025). The Confederal Court is intended to resolve disputes between member states and ensure compliance with confederal obligations.

The governance structure reflects the AES's sovereignty-centric approach. The member states have emphasized their autonomy and resisted the delegation of authority to supranational institutions. Niger's General Tiani declared that "All decisions will be taken within the confederal territory," underscoring this commitment (Anadolu Agency, 2025). The AES's institutional development is likely to proceed cautiously, balancing the benefits of coordination against the preservation of national sovereignty.

Table 1: Comparison of AES and ECOWAS Institutional Features

Feature	AES	ECOWAS
Established	2023 (Alliance), 2024 (Confederation)	1975
Membership	3 states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger)	15 states
Governance Structure	Intergovernmental, limited supranational	Commission, Parliament, Court
Primary Focus	Security cooperation	Economic integration, security, governance
Legal Basis	Liptako-Gourma Charter, Treaty of Confederation	ECOWAS Treaty, Protocols
Economic Integration	Emerging (BCID-AES, joint passport)	Comprehensive (CET, monetary integration)
Security Mechanism	Unified Military Force (FU-AES)	ECOWAS Standby Force
External Alignment	Russia, non-Western partners	Western partners, African Union

5.2 Security Cooperation: The Unified Military Force

On December 20, 2025, the AES officially launched the Unified Force of the AES (FU-AES) during a ceremony at an air base in Bamako, Mali (Mwangi, 2025). The force brings together approximately 5,000 troops drawn from the three member states and is designed to integrate air power, intelligence sharing, and coordinated ground operations to combat Islamist insurgency and terrorism across the Sahel.

Mali's transitional president, General Assimi Goïta, described the launch as a "historic turning point" for the Sahel and emphasized the multidimensional nature of the conflict: "This war is not only military. It is also political, economic, and informational" (Mwangi, 2025). He identified

three major threats armed terrorist violence, economic terrorism, and media terrorism and noted that the confederation had adopted a comprehensive strategy that includes the creation of AES Television, AES Radio, and AES print media to counter disinformation.

The unified force has a single command, coordinated ground, air, and intelligence components, and its headquarters located in Niamey (Mwangi, 2025). The force is intended to be autonomous from external influence, with the AES leadership emphasizing that decisions concerning their peoples are taken by the authorities of the confederation "and nowhere else" (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

According to AES leaders, the unified force has achieved positive operational outcomes. General Goïta reported that "several terrorist bases have been destroyed thanks to the professionalism of the confederal forces" (Mwangi, 2025). He noted that since the Niamey Mutual Initiative declaration of July 6, 2024, joint military operations have resulted in the neutralization of several terrorist leaders and the destruction of multiple insurgent sanctuaries. These achievements, according to Goïta, were made possible by "meticulous planning, timely and effective intelligence sharing, and above all the comprehensive pooling of our collective efforts and resources" (Mwangi, 2025).

5.3 Economic Integration: The Confederal Investment and Development Bank

On December 11, 2025, the AES formally established the Confederal Investment and Development Bank (BCID-AES) (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances du Burkina Faso, 2025). The bank was created following the validation and signing of its statutes, marking a significant step toward economic integration among the three member states.

The BCID-AES is designed to serve as the "financial arm of Sahelian integration" (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances du Burkina Faso, 2025). Its mandate includes mobilizing sovereign resources and financing priority projects in the following sectors:

- **Road infrastructure and connectivity**: Projects to reduce isolation and improve transportation links

- **Agriculture and food security**: Initiatives to enhance agricultural productivity and ensure food self-sufficiency
- **Energy and regional interconnections**: Projects to expand energy access and link regional power grids
- **Private sector support**: Financing for private projects aligned with national development priorities

The BCID-AES has a statutory capital of 500 billion CFA francs (approximately US$900 million) (Ecofin Agency, 2025). The three member states have already committed initial capital, although the specific amount has not been disclosed. A confederal levy is also planned to strengthen the bank's financial resources (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances du Burkina Faso, 2025).

The bank is intended to follow the model of regional development institutions such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union's BOAD and Central Africa's BDEAC. These institutions raise funds annually to finance public and private investments across their member states (Ecofin Agency, 2025).

Several strategic issues remain unresolved, including the size of the bank's starting capital and whether it will be opened to international partners or non-member states (Ecofin Agency, 2025). These factors will be decisive in determining the bank's ability to finance large-scale projects in the Sahel, a region facing substantial development needs.

5.4 Geopolitical Positioning and External Relations

Alignment with Russia: The AES states have strengthened ties with Russia, with approximately 2,000 Russian fighters operating in Mali and several hundred in Burkina Faso and Niger (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). The regimes have invited Russian security contractors in and sent their foreign ministers to Moscow for high-level talks (Sputnik Africa, 2026).

The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service has analyzed the AES's relationship with Russia, noting that "the very logic of the AES indicates that the Sahel countries seek to maintain maximum autonomy: using external partners on a situational basis, they retain full control over decisions"

(Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). The analysis further notes that "local regimes are characterized by political inconsistency, rapid changes in priorities, and a pragmatic willingness to break agreements as soon as they lose their benefits" (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). This suggests that the AES's alignment with Russia is pragmatic and opportunistic rather than ideological.

Repudiation of Western Influence: The AES leadership has consistently framed international human rights advocacy and foreign intervention as forms of neocolonial interference. The withdrawal from the ICC, ECOWAS, and other institutions is positioned as an exercise of sovereignty against external domination. Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traore described the AES's creation "not as a political choice but a survival necessity," calling it the only shield against a cycle of violence and systemic destabilization (Sputnik Africa, 2026).

The AES's repudiation of Western influence extends to the creation of alternative media platforms. The launch of AES Television, AES Radio, and AES print media is framed as a tool "to break disinformation campaigns and hostile narratives targeting our states" (Mwangi, 2025). This reflects the AES leadership's concern with "media terrorism" and their determination to control the narrative surrounding their project.

Relations with ECOWAS: The AES's relations with ECOWAS remain characterized by tension and mutual suspicion. The AES leaders have described ECOWAS as serving external powers and as hostile to the interests of Sahelian populations. General Tiani declared that "our peoples have irrevocably turned their backs on ECOWAS" and that the AES is an alternative to "any artificial regional group" (SABC, 2024).

ECOWAS, for its part, has adopted a more measured approach following the AES's withdrawal. The bloc has chosen to maintain open borders, allowing citizens of the AES states to retain their freedom of movement and other privileges previously enjoyed under ECOWAS membership (Chatham House, 2025). This approach, while preventing immediate economic shocks, creates a precedent where states can enjoy the benefits of regional integration without fulfilling their obligations.

Chatham House notes that "despite the bitter AES split from ECOWAS, various shared regional mechanisms covering food security, gas and electricity transfer, and economic and monetary affairs continue to function as before" (Chatham House, 2025). The AES states have also chosen so far to remain members of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), with its common currency and central bank.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 The AES as a New Model of Sub-Regional Integration

The AES represents a distinctive model of sub-regional integration that diverges from traditional frameworks in several key respects. First, the AES's integration is driven primarily by security concerns rather than economic interdependence. The Liptako-Gourma Charter established a mutual defense pact, and the unified military force represents the most developed aspect of AES cooperation (Mwangi, 2025). This security-first approach reflects the specific challenges of the Sahel but may limit the depth of integration in other areas.

Second, the AES's integration is characterized by a strong assertion of sovereignty, with the member states emphasizing their autonomy and resisting the delegation of authority to supranational institutions (Anadolu Agency, 2025). This contrasts with traditional integration models, which involve the pooling or delegation of sovereignty. The AES's sovereignty-centric approach may facilitate cooperation on areas of shared concern but may limit the institutional development necessary for addressing complex transnational challenges.

Third, the AES's integration is framed as an assertion of anti-colonial sovereignty. The AES leadership has consistently articulated its project in terms of decolonization, sovereignty, and the repudiation of Western influence (Sputnik Africa, 2026). This framing resonates with pan-African aspirations for genuine independence and distinguishes the AES from other regional integration projects.

The AES model has both strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths include the alignment of member states around shared security concerns, the commitment to self-reliance, and the rhetorical appeal

of anti-imperialism. Its weaknesses include institutional shallowness, the absence of democratic governance, and geopolitical dependency on Russia (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025). The long-term viability of the AES model will depend on its ability to address these weaknesses while building on its strengths.

6.2 The Sovereignty-Security-Development Nexus

The AES project reflects a distinctive approach to the relationship between sovereignty, security, and development. The AES leadership has articulated a view in which security precedes and enables development. Niger's General Tiani, citing Cheikh Anta Diop, stated that "security precedes everything" (Anadolu Agency, 2025). This security-first approach has driven the establishment of the unified military force and the emphasis on security cooperation.

However, the AES's approach to development remains underdeveloped. While the BCID-AES represents a step toward economic integration, its capital and mandate may be insufficient to address the substantial development needs of the region (Ecofin Agency, 2025). The AES's economic integration project is also constrained by the small size of the member states' economies and their limited financial resources.

The sovereignty dimension of the AES project is both a strength and a vulnerability. On one hand, the assertion of sovereignty responds to legitimate grievances against ECOWAS and former colonial powers, and it has resonated with Sahelian populations frustrated by the failure of international interventions (Chatham House, 2025). On the other hand, the conflation of sovereignty with immunity from accountability risks legitimizing authoritarian governance and undermining the rights of citizens.

6.3 The AES-ECOWAS Relationship

The relationship between the AES and ECOWAS is characterized by both conflict and interdependence. The political and institutional rupture is significant, with the AES states having formally withdrawn from ECOWAS and established alternative institutions (SABC, 2024). However, the two blocs remain economically and geographically intertwined. As Chatham House

notes, "the fates of the landlocked Sahelian countries and the nations of coastal West Africa remain tightly intertwined" (Chatham House, 2025).

The interdependence between the two blocs is evident in several areas. Trade relationships across the region have been deeply integrated for decades, with coastal West African states providing the crucial maritime gateways for landlocked Sahelian states (Chatham House, 2025). Shared regional mechanisms on food security, energy transfer, and monetary affairs continue to function despite the political rupture. The AES states have chosen so far to remain in WAEMU, maintaining economic ties with their neighbors.

The future of the AES-ECOWAS relationship is uncertain. The AES leadership has ruled out a return to ECOWAS, with General Tiani declaring that "our peoples have irrevocably turned their backs on ECOWAS" (SABC, 2024). However, the pragmatic considerations of economic interdependence and shared security challenges may eventually lead to a rapprochement. Chatham House suggests that "security collaboration might nonetheless be the first step towards rebuilding the mutual trust" (Chatham House, 2025).

6.4 Geopolitical Implications

The AES's geopolitical positioning has significant implications for regional and international relations. The AES states' alignment with Russia, their repudiation of France and other Western powers, and their pursuit of "multi-aligned" foreign policy reflect a fundamental shift in West African geopolitics (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025).

Russia's involvement in the Sahel has been framed as an opportunity by some observers and a threat by others. The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service notes that "for Moscow, this configuration opens up additional space for influence in the areas of security, finance, and information without formal commitments" (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025). However, the same analysis warns that Russia "risks encountering the same practices of opportunism and betrayal that other external players faced in the past" (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025).

The AES's repudiation of Western influence has also created challenges for international engagement. The European Union has advocated for "targeted, interest-based cooperation" rather than confrontation (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2025). However, the AES leadership's framing of human rights advocacy and foreign engagement as "interference" complicates diplomatic relations.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States as a new model of sub-regional integration, analyzing its institutional architecture, security framework, economic pillars, and geopolitical positioning. The analysis has yielded several key findings.

First, the AES represents a distinctive integration model driven by security concerns, sovereignty assertion, and anti-colonial sentiment. The AES's integration is characterized by a security-first approach, a strong emphasis on state sovereignty, and a framing that resonates with pan-African aspirations for genuine independence.

Second, the AES's institutional architecture, while developing, remains shallower and less comprehensive than ECOWAS's five decades of accumulated frameworks (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025). The governance structures are characterized by intergovernmental cooperation rather than supranational authority, reflecting the member states' emphasis on sovereignty.

Third, the AES's security cooperation, particularly the unified military force, represents the most developed aspect of its integration project. The FU-AES, with approximately 5,000 troops and integrated command structures, has achieved some operational successes in combating terrorist groups (Mwangi, 2025). However, the AES's withdrawal from regional security frameworks threatens to fragment responses to transnational terrorist threats.

Fourth, the AES's economic integration project, centered on the BCID-AES, faces significant challenges. The bank's capitalization, while substantial, may be insufficient to address the region's development needs. The absence of international partners may further constrain its ability to mobilize resources (Ecofin Agency, 2025). However, the bank represents a significant step toward economic autonomy and reflects the AES's commitment to "sovereign integration" (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances du Burkina Faso, 2025).

Fifth, the AES's geopolitical positioning particularly its alignment with Russia and its repudiation of Western influence has significant implications for regional and international relations. The AES states' pursuit of "multi-aligned" foreign policy reflects a pragmatic approach to external partnerships, but it also creates dependencies and tensions (Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025).

7.2 Recommendations

For the AES States:

1. **Balance sovereignty with accountability**: The AES states should ensure that their sovereignty-centric integration model does not become a shield for authoritarian governance. The promised democratic transitions should be pursued, and human rights protections should be maintained.
2. **Strengthen institutional capacity**: The AES should invest in building institutional capacity, including developing governance structures, enhancing technical expertise, and ensuring transparency and accountability in the operation of institutions such as the BCID-AES.
3. **Maintain regional cooperation**: Despite the political rupture, the AES should maintain channels of communication and cooperation with ECOWAS on shared challenges, particularly security and trade. The interdependence between the two blocs makes cooperation essential (Chatham House, 2025).
4. **Diversify partnerships**: While maintaining relations with Russia, the AES should diversify its international partnerships to avoid excessive dependency. Engagement with emerging powers and international financial institutions could enhance the AES's development prospects.

For ECOWAS:

1. **Offer positive incentives**: ECOWAS should offer positive incentives for the AES states to re-engage with the regional framework, including development assistance and security cooperation. The punitive measures adopted in response to the coups were counterproductive and should be reconsidered (Chatham House, 2025).
2. **Maintain open channels**: ECOWAS should maintain diplomatic and security channels with the AES states, despite the political rift. The shared interest in countering terrorism and promoting regional stability requires continued cooperation.
3. **Promote its own strengths**: ECOWAS should enhance its own appeal as an integrated economic space and development partner, demonstrating the benefits of its model of integration.
4. **Maintain principles**: While offering positive incentives, ECOWAS should maintain its principles on democratic governance and human rights, avoiding unconditional terms for reintegration that would signal impunity for unconstitutional changes of government.

For the International Community:

1. **Avoid confrontation**: The international community should avoid confrontational approaches that drive the AES states further from the international community. Selective engagement on issues of shared interest, such as counter-terrorism and development, may be more effective.
2. **Support development**: International actors should support development efforts in the AES states, including through engagement with the BCID-AES and other economic initiatives. Development cooperation can build trust and demonstrate the benefits of international engagement.
3. **Monitor human rights**: International actors should continue to monitor human rights violations in the AES states and to advocate for accountability, but in a manner that avoids the perception of neocolonial interference.

7.3 Areas for Further Research

This study has identified several areas for further research. First, the institutional development of the AES, particularly the operation of the Confederal Parliament and Court, requires empirical study. Second, the effectiveness of the unified military force in combating terrorism should be subject to rigorous assessment. Third, the economic impact of the BCID-AES on development in the member states should be evaluated. Fourth, the geopolitical implications of the AES's

alignment with Russia, and the role of other external actors such as China and Turkey, deserve further analysis. Fifth, the relationship between the AES and ECOWAS, and the prospects for cooperation or reintegration, should be monitored over time.

8. LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on publicly available sources, including official documents, reports, and media coverage, rather than on primary research in the AES states. The absence of access to official archives, government records, and direct interviews with officials may limit the depth of the analysis. Second, the study relies primarily on English-language sources, which may not fully capture the Francophone African perspectives that are central to the AES narrative. Third, the study is limited by the early stage of the AES's institutional development; as the AES matures, its institutional framework and operational patterns may evolve in ways that are not captured in this analysis. Fourth, the study's focus on the AES's integration model may neglect the broader political, economic, and social dynamics of the Sahel, which are essential to a comprehensive understanding.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author is solely responsible for the conception, design, and execution of this study, including the literature review, legal analysis, and drafting of the manuscript.

11. COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests in relation to this study.

12. FUNDING INFORMATION

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13. DATA AVAILABILITY

All data and sources used in this study are publicly available and cited in the bibliography.

14. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any institution.

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