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The "African Solutions" Paradox: Assessing the Inertia of the African Standby Force (ASF) in West Africa and the Sahel.

Olumayowa O. Albert[1]*, & Aminu M. Bappa[1]

[1]Department of Research, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), Lagos; o.albert@niia.gov.ng

* Correspondence: oalbert@niia.gov.ng

Abstract

African solutions to African problems remain central to Africa's peace and security agenda, yet the African Standby Force (ASF) has struggled to translate this principle into effective action. Designed to exist under five regional brigades in North, East, West, South and Central Africa, this study makes the ECOWAS Standby Brigade a cases study. Amid escalating terrorism, unconstitutional changes of government, and state fragility, the study examines the ASF's inertia between 2020 and 2025 to understand the positive transformation the African Union could have achieved in the region. The study examines the nature of governance and insecurity in the Sahel, role of external security arrangements in the region and the challenges of ASF deployment in the operational context between 2020 and 2025. The study made a robust analysis based on the theoretical postulation of regime effectiveness theory and regional security complex theory. Using qualitative content analysis of institutional and media reports, the paper contends that the ASF reveals a capacity-legitimacy mismatch in which the authority of African led security governance has outpaced its practical ability to deliver. The paper concludes that stronger political consensus, reliable financing, improved logistics, and clearer deployment procedures are necessary if African Regional Mechanisms such as the ECOWAS are to make African solutions more than a normative aspiration. Other Regional Economic Communities (REC) in Africa must therefore draw critical lessons from the experience of West Africa and the Sahel to be better prepared for regional security governance in the 21st Century.

Keywords: African Solutions, African Standby Force, ECOWAS, Paradox, Sahel, West Africa

Introduction

"African solutions" refers to the normative principle that African states and institutions should take primary responsibility for addressing conflicts and crises on the continent (Albert, 2011). Rooted in post-colonial assertions of sovereignty, ownership, and self-determination, the idea emerged in response to the perceived limitations, selectivity, and occasional failures of external intervention in African peace and security affairs (Gelot, 2012; Williams, 2018). The idea's significance became clearer in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, which exposed the weaknesses of international responses and reinforced demands for stronger African-led mechanisms of conflict prevention, mediation, and peacekeeping (Tieku, 2017). Following the transition from Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU), the principle of African solutions informed the development of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and its

pillars including the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the African Standby Force (ASF) (African Union, 2003). With other pillars such as the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), Panel of the Wise, and the Peace Fund, APSA was designed to express African agency in the management of security challenges (De Coning, 2013).

Whereas the principle carries considerable moral and political appeal, its effectiveness depends on more than normative commitments alone (Aning & Atuobi, 2009). The tension between aspiration and implementation has made African solutions remain both a goal and a challenge. Staeger and Faabayibo (2024) noted that between 2021 and 2023, 93% of decisions made at the level of the African Union were not implemented. Thus, the study evaluates "African Solutions" as a central question in African security governance, it inquires if Africans can design and sustain mechanisms capable of adequately responding to the continent's crises (Tieku, 2017). Within this normative framework, the African Standby Force (ASF) was conceived as a multidimensional response mechanism to support peace operations, conflict prevention, and humanitarian intervention across Africa (De Coning, 2013). In principle, the ASF embodies the institutional promise of African-led security governance, but the state of readiness remains paradoxical. This is because since the ASF was declared fully operational in 2016, no region mechanism has deployed them (Minko, 2025). While significant progress has been made in some areas of operational readiness, persistent challenges continue to constrain full readiness.

As a focal point therefore, this study examines West Africa and the Sahel to unravel the accomplishments of ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), which is the West African component of ASF. The study investigates the reasons behind the ESF's significant inactivity amidst ongoing terrorism, unlawful governmental transitions, and state instability in West Africa and the Sahel from 2020 to 2025. The study also examines the nature of governance and insecurity in the Sahel to assess the effectiveness and limitations of external security arrangements to gain insights into the challenges that encumbered the ASF/ESF.

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design. Relying on data between 2020 and 2025, the study investigates how institutional, political, and security dynamics affected the ASF's non-deployment in West Africa and the Sahel. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the subject matter involves institutional behavior, political decision-making, and regional security governance, all of which require contextual analysis rather than measurement alone. The study sourced data from textbooks, journal articles, reports, official communiqués, policy documents, and selected media coverage. Collected data were content analysed with attention to patterns of action and inaction in the operational context.

Regime Effectiveness Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory: Theoretical Underpinning

This study was anchored on two theoretical perspectives: Regime Effectiveness Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory. These frameworks were appropriate because they explain why formal institutions with clear mandates do not always produce effective action or why regional security arrangements may remain weak even in the face of recurrent threats (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Regime effectiveness theory is useful for understanding the gap between institutional design and practical implementation (Young, 1999). In International Relations, regimes are not judged solely by the rules they establish, but by the extent to which they solve the problems they are created to address (Underdal, 1992; Young, 1994). From this perspective, the African Standby Force can be assessed not simply as an institutional innovation but as a mechanism whose effectiveness depends on political commitment, resource mobilisation, coordination, and implementation capacity. Where these conditions are absent, formal mandates may remain largely symbolic. This helps explain why the ESF, despite its normative importance and institutional recognition, has struggled to translate its legal and policy framework into sustained operational deployment.

Regional security complex theory is also relevant because it emphasizes the interconnectedness of security dynamics within a geographically bounded region (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). According to this approach, security threats are often concentrated within regional clusters, where the security of one state cannot be separated from that of its neighbors (Lake, 1997). West Africa and the Sahel constitute such a region, where insurgency, coups, border instability, and political distrust have repeatedly crossed national boundaries. The ESF was created partly in recognition of this reality. However, regional security complex theory also highlights a critical problem: shared threats do not automatically generate shared responses (Amable, 2022). Regional cooperation depends on political trust, common threat perception, and institutional legitimacy. Where those conditions weaken, collective security arrangements may become ineffective or remain dormant.

Applied to the West African and Sahelian context between 2020 and 2025, the theoretical framework suggests that the ESF's failure is not merely procedural or logistical, but symptomatic of deeper, structural tensions undermining African regional security governance.

Regime Effectiveness Theory is appropriate because it shifts analysis from the mere existence or legal design of the ASF/ECOWAS Standby Force to whether this security regime produces collective action, compliance, and intended outcomes in the Sahel. It

provides a framework for examining how institutional design, decision-making rules, resource capacity, member-state interests, sovereignty concerns, and reliance on external partners shape ECOWAS's ability or willingness to deploy troops to restore constitutional order and address insecurity. By linking regime characteristics to operational outcomes, the theory explains the inertia of the ASF/ESF and exposes how African regional security arrangements can become more effective.

In West Africa, the insurgencies led by JNIM and Al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel, alongside Boko Haram and Islamic State franchises in the Lake Chad Basin, illustrate RSCT dynamics. This is because violence in northern Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and north-eastern Nigeria has spilled across borders through refugee and IDP movements, arms and drug trafficking, kidnap-for-ransom economies, and mobile militant networks that exploit porous borders and shared ethnic and religious ties (Fafore, 2019). Boko Haram/ISWAP attacks have drawn Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon into a common security dilemma, while JNIM and Islamic State-affiliated groups in the Liptako-Gourma have expanded operations into coastal West African states (Aubyn, 2021). These cross-border concerns have also triggered several regionalized responses in West Africa.

Governance and Security Debacle in the Sahel Region of West Africa

The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) was established as part of the African Union's broader peace and security architecture to provide a rapid-response capacity for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and post-conflict stabilization (Cilliers & Pottgieter, 2016). ECOWAS has long been one of the most active regional organizations in Africa, with a history of mediation, peacekeeping, and democratic regulation (Adebajo, 2002; Francis, 2006). Its security role became especially prominent during the civil wars and political crises of the 1990s and 2000s, when it intervened in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and other conflicts. As a result, ECOWAS came to be seen not only as an economic bloc, but also as a significant regional security actor (Adams, 2019). ESF was therefore expected to reinforce this role by providing a more structured and institutionally grounded mechanism for collective response.

Meanwhile, the security environment in West Africa and the Sahel has deteriorated sharply in recent years (Nkanta & Albert, 2024). Since 2020, the region has experienced escalating terrorism, unconstitutional changes of government, military coups, and growing state fragility (International Crisis Group, 2024; Thurston, 2020). Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been especially affected by overlapping crises of insurgency, weak governance, and contested legitimacy. These developments have strained ECOWAS's political authority and exposed the limits of existing regional security mechanisms. Since 2020, the West Africa region has experience six successful coup d'états, two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea, and the latest in Niger (Berks, Breitung, Haidara & Oginni, 2023). The most recent in the series of coup resurgence that eventually gave way

to the establishment of the AES and its exit from ECOWAS was Niger. After the successful execution of the coup, Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu who was also the Chairperson of ECOWAS at the time condemned the military action. He reaffirmed ECOWAS stance of Zero Tolerance for Unconstitutional Changes of Government (UCG), clarifying that the region will not tolerate the military incursion into government. International partners such as the United States, France, and the United Nations (UN) also condemned the military takeover in strong terms (Mom, 2023).

During a remarkable ECOWAS conference in Abuja, member states-imposed sanctions against Niger in response to the military coup and reiterated President Bazoum's status as the legitimate leader (ECOWAS, 2023). ECOWAS officials cautioned that should Bazoum's authority is not reinstated within a week, they would implement all requisite actions, perhaps involving military intervention, to re-establish constitutional governance. Currently, Mali and Burkina Faso, West African nations governed by military regimes, have shown support for the coup leaders in Niger (Africa News, 2024). They cautioned ECOWAS against further action, stating it would endanger Pan-Africanism. They additionally asserted that any military intervention in Niger would compel them to implement "self-defence measures" in support of Niger's military forces (Mom, 2023). The Russian Federation cautioned ECOWAS against employing military action to resolve the Niger conflict. Despite the Russian government's denunciation of the coup in Niger, the Wagner Group, now known as Africa Corps, praised the armed insurrection (AlJazeera, 2023). And notwithstanding regional and continental pressures, the Tchiani led Nigeriene junta dismissed a threefold peace initiative from ECOWAS, AU, and UN. Faced with no alternatives, ECOWAS initiated arrangements for the deployment of reserve military forces to reinstate constitutional governance in the landlocked Niger Republic.

While states such as Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Guinea-Bissau were more open to the military response, the ultimatum expired on 7 August 2023 and nothing was further said or done about the situation (Berks, Breitung, haidara & Oginni, 2023). International observers feared the operation could have devastating consequences, including massive loss of life, high logistical, financial, and human costs, and enormous forced displacement affecting both Africa and Europe (Berks, Breitung, haidara & Oginni, 2023). Instead of a robust and coordinated ESF deployment, the crisis response had relied on a series of ad hoc or externally driven arrangements such as Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the Accra Initiative, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and the Multinational Joint Task Force (Charbonneau, 2017; United Nations, 2024). While these initiatives were intended to stabilize the region, they proved limited in effectiveness, legitimacy, or sustainability. Their proliferation also exposed the lack of a coherent long-term regional security solution. Rather than replacing external dependence with African

collective action, the region often oscillated between weak regional coordination and improvised external support.

The political consequences of this situation have been significant. The inability of ECOWAS to respond decisively to instability has contributed to a perception that regional institutions are unable to protect democratic order or enforce norms of good governance. In turn, this has affected the relationship between ECOWAS and the military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, all of which have challenged the authority and legitimacy of the regional organization (Oluyemi, 2025). The subsequent withdrawals of these states from ECOWAS on January 29, 2025, reflected the erosion of trust in Regional Economic Communities that were expected to preserve constitutional order and collective security (Nkanta & Albert, 2024).

Sahelian Security since the AES

It was evident that ECOWAS had failed and suffered a loss after the AES bloc withdrew from the organization (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). As evident in the table below, the security situation in the Sahel and neighbouring Nigeria only worsened as Russian mercenaries moved in to fill the security vacuum that the ESF was supposed to be filling.

Global Terrorism Index of selected Sahel states between 2020 and 2026

Sn	State	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
1	Niger	13	15	10	8	5	5	4
2	Mali	8	7	7	4	3	4	5
3	Burkina Faso	10	4	2	2	1	1	2
4	Nigeria	3	3	6	8	8	6	4

(Source: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026)

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) reviews 163 countries, covering 99.7% of the world's population and ranks countries according to the impact of terrorism using four key indicators: terrorist incidents, fatalities, injuries, and hostages. From the table above it is clear that since the emergence of military governments in the Sahel and the intervention

of Russian mercenaries in the security of the region, the security conditions have not improved. The table also shows that insecurity in the Sahel has continued to have a negative influence on Nigeria where the experience of insecurity has also worsened over the years. The inability of ECOWAS to coordinate regional security, maintain democratic governance and enforce regional unity has since gotten to an overall worst and nothing seemed possible to undo the blunders. ECOWAS weakness showed their institutional lack of capacity to uphold critical frameworks such as:

1. ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001)
2. Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999)
3. Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defence (1981)
4. ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) (2008)
5. ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013)

Despite the bilateral assistance provided by indispensable allies like the United States, France, and certain European Union members to help Nigeria restore stability in the West African region, there was a notable lack of enthusiasm for multilateral initiatives (ISS, 2024). During their 42nd Ordinary Meeting in 2024, the ECOWAS Committee of Chiefs of Defence Staff reaffirmed their dedication to ensuring democratic governance, peace, security, and stability within the region (ECOWAS Commission, 2026). The Defence Chiefs reiterated their dedication to tackling regional security challenges via improved collaboration, intelligence exchange, and collective actions against terrorism and transnational organised crime. They committed to consolidating resources and enhancing collaborative efforts to protect stability and democratic governance in West Africa, acknowledging that regional security issues necessitate synchronised responses. The Defence Chiefs evaluated and concurred on the preparedness of their military forces, particularly on capabilities, people, and logistics, to facilitate the prompt deployment of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Force, as part of the wider activation of the ECOWAS Standby Force. The Defence Chiefs reiterated their dedication to establishing a 5,000-member ECOWAS Standby Force, prioritising the deployment of a 1,650-person Counter-Terrorism Brigade initially (ECOWAS Commission, 2026). The Finance Ministers of ECOWAS were anticipated to convene to complete the money and equipment logistics, subsequently initiating the actual deployment of the force.

During the 43rd Ordinary Meeting of the ECOWAS Committee of Chiefs of Defence Staff (CCDS) in 2025, attendees concurred that regional security and collaboration in West Africa have enhanced, and a unified stance has been formed to address security problems. During the discussions, Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff indicated that they

recognised significant regional security challenges and reiterated their dedication to addressing them. Despite some minor dissent among the members, the predominant agreement was a robust determination to engage in collective action. Ikeh (2025) noted that the Chiefs of Defence Staff deliberated on several issues, such as the reevaluation of obligations for the ECOWAS Standby Force, the ECOWAS Counter-terrorist Brigade, the logistics framework of ECOWAS, and the standard operating procedures for the ECOWAS logistics depot in Lungi (Sierra Leone), along with the rotation of Staff Officers in the Peace Support Operation Divisions of ECOWAS.

ECOWAS had been considering an African Union–proposed regional standby force since 2004, but only formally declared readiness in August 2025. Originally envisioned as 260,000 personnel with an annual cost of $2.5 billion, military leaders instead established a 1,650-man counter-terrorism brigade (Kone, 2026). Following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), the ESF continues to struggle with operationalisation. Prolonging this situation will sustain the unresolved issues that empower military juntas and increase fragmentation within ECOWAS, jeopardising regional unity, collective security, and integration. As instability escalates in West Africa, a paradox emerges: political consolidation progresses even as insecurity intensifies.

Challenges of ECOWAS Standby Force Operability

The ESF's inability to respond decisively in West Africa and the Sahel can be explained through a combination of technical limitations and political constraints (AU, 2015). While operational weaknesses such as underfunding, poor logistics, and limited interoperability are critical, they do not fully account for the repeated non-deployment of the force. The deeper problem is that the ESF has operated within a fragmented political environment in which member states have not consistently converged on the need for collective intervention (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023). The result is an institution that possesses normative legitimacy on paper but lacks the political and operational conditions required for effective action. Another major factor behind ESF inertia is inadequate financing. Standby forces require stable funding for training, mobilization, equipment, deployment, and sustainment, yet African regional security mechanisms have historically depended on irregular contributions from member states and uncertain external support (Williams, 2018). In the case of the ESF, limited and inconsistent funding has weakened readiness and made rapid deployment difficult. Without reliable financial backing, even a well-designed standby arrangement struggles to move from planning to execution.

Logistical deficiencies have also constrained performance. Effective deployment requires transport capacity, medical support, communications systems, and pre-positioned resources. The ESF has repeatedly faced difficulties in assembling and moving personnel

and equipment quickly enough to respond to fast-moving crises. These problems are especially serious in the Sahel, where distances are vast, terrain is difficult, and insurgent violence evolves rapidly. In such an environment, delays in deployment reduce the practical value of the force's mandate. A further technical limitation is the lack of interoperability among participating states. The ESF depends on the ability of forces from different countries to work together under shared procedures, standards, and command arrangements (Williams, 2018). However, differences in training, equipment, doctrine, and operational culture can make coordination difficult. These weaknesses reduce the force's ability to function as a coherent regional instrument. They also make it harder for member states to trust that deployment will be efficient, effective, and politically manageable.

Although these technical challenges are real; they are not sufficient to explain the ESF's inertia. More importantly, the force has been constrained by political fragmentation among member states (Mudoh & Ibn-Mohammed, 2026). Regional security institutions can only act decisively when there is a shared willingness to define a crisis as collectively actionable and to bear the political costs of intervention. In West Africa and the Sahel, this consensus has often been weak or absent. States have differed in their assessments of the legitimacy of intervention, the urgency of action, and the appropriate form of response. This political problem is especially visible in the context of coups and unconstitutional changes of government. ECOWAS has attempted to defend constitutional order through sanctions, mediation, and diplomatic pressure, but its enforcement capacity has been limited (Mom, 2023). The ESF was expected to provide the credible coercive backing for such norms, yet its non-deployment has left ECOWAS relying heavily on political tools without a strong operational reserve. As a result, the organization has struggled to demonstrate that its rules are enforceable. This has weakened both deterrence and legitimacy.

The crisis of legitimacy became more pronounced as military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger rejected ECOWAS's authority and presented the organization as disconnected from local political realities. In this context, the absence of a functioning standby force mattered not just operationally, but symbolically. It suggested that ECOWAS and the broader African peace and security architecture were unable to translate formal commitments into action. Rather than reinforcing regional governance, the ESF's inactivity exposed the limits of regional solidarity. It is important to avoid overstating the causal claim that ESF inertia directly caused Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to exit ECOWAS. A more defensible interpretation is that ESF non-deployment contributed to the perception that ECOWAS lacked credible enforcement power, thereby reducing the political costs of defiance and weakening the organization's deterrent value. In other words, the problem was not a simple linear cause-and-effect relationship, but a

bigger erosion of institutional authority. The weakness of the standby force became part of a wider legitimacy crisis affecting ECOWAS as a regional security actor.

The ESF's inertia should therefore be understood as part of a political economy of non-deployment. Decisions about whether to mobilize a standby force are not purely technical; they are created by national interests, threat perceptions, bargaining, and regional power relations. Member states may hesitate to authorize deployment when they fear escalation, regional backlash, financial burden, or involvement in conflicts that do not align with their own strategic priorities. In such circumstances, the existence of the force does not guarantee its use. This helps explain why the ESF has remained largely dormant despite recurring insecurity. The force was designed to operate as a collective instrument, but collective instruments require collective will. When states disagree about the desirability of intervention or are unwilling to assume the risks of enforcement, institutional readiness alone is not enough. The result is an organisation that can articulate norms of regional security but cannot consistently act on them.

The distinction between technical weakness and political fragmentation is therefore crucial. Technical weakness slows deployment, but political fragmentation can prevent deployment altogether. The ESF case suggests that the latter is the more fundamental problem. Without a shared political commitment to act, improvements in financing or logistics alone are unlikely to solve the problem. Conversely, if political consensus were stronger, technical deficiencies would still matter, but they could be addressed through reforms and strategic resource mobilisation.

Discussion of Findings

While ESF troops are to remain in their home countries until activation, Nigeria is anticipated to be the primary contributor in both manpower and logistics (ASA, 2026). A regional logistics depot in Freetown, Sierra Leone, provides support for the decentralised deployment model. To decrease dependence on Western security frameworks and transition to regional autonomy, financing was agreed to be conducted internally. Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) was conducted for Guinea's pledged Motorised Company by the ECOWAS Commission in July 2026 (ECOWAS Commission, 2026b). The thorough evaluation evaluated personnel capacity, command and control structures, training protocols, equipment, communication systems, logistics, medical assistance, engineering competencies, and self-sufficiency. A thorough examination of the contingent's intensive training for peace support activities was also performed. The evaluation of the ESF indicated that the training domains encompass Protection of Civilians, Rules of Engagement, International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, Civil-Military Coordination, Gender and Sexuality, First Aid and Combat Lifesaving, Leadership, Military Ethics, Conflict Management, and Operational Planning.

The examination confirmed that the Motorised Company has an admirable degree of operational readiness.

When considered holistically, the evidence suggests that the ESF's failure to deploy in the Sahel and West Africa is indicative of a more profound discrepancy between normative ambition and political actuality. Although the force has consistently served as a symbol of African ownership and regional responsibility, it has been unable to function as a practical instrument of collective security in the Sahel. This discrepancy is not solely the result of administrative delays or material shortages. It is indicative of the challenges associated with maintaining political commitment in a divided political and security environment, the feebleness of institutional legitimacy, and the constraints of regional consensus. The analysis also demonstrates the relevance of the West African situation to broader African-led security governance. The challenge is not merely local if the ESF is unable to be deployed effectively in one of the continent's most volatile sub-regions. It raises more significant concerns regarding the design of standby arrangements, the conditions of political authorisation, and the feasibility of "African solutions" in a context where regional fragmentation is deepening, and external influence is increasing. Accordingly, the ESF's inertia is most effectively interpreted as a revealing example of the tension between political will and operational failure, rather than as an isolated operational failure.

The operational feasibility of the ESF is significantly reliant on uniform engagement protocols, command integration frameworks, information amalgamation systems, and interoperability criteria across military of disparate capabilities. Although the framework appears encouraging, analysts express apprehension that the ESF has yet to undergo evaluation, notwithstanding the clear indication that West Africa is witnessing insurgent evolution rather than a decrease in insurgency. The ESF presents a significant potential for ECOWAS to enhance regional security collaboration in less robust West African nations; yet, obstacles related to the comprehensive integration of intelligence, political commitment, rural governance reform, and cross-border cooperation persist. If ECOWAS's counterinsurgency initiatives do not attain significant structural advancements, the operations of armed factions are expected to persist on various fronts.

The results of this analysis confirm that the ECOWAS Standby Force's inertia in West Africa and the Sahel cannot be interpreted as a straightforward operational shortfall. Rather, the evidence indicates a more profound contradiction within African regional security governance: the ESF possesses substantial normative legitimacy, but this legitimacy has not been matched by adequate political cohesion or operational readiness. The primary conclusions of this investigation indicate that technical deficiencies continue to be significant; however, they are not sufficient to determine the outcome in isolation. The ESF's capacity to act is significantly diminished by underfunding, logistical constraints, poor interoperability, and a lack of rapid deployment capabilities.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not entirely account for the force's relative inactivity in the face of persistent insecurity. Institutional reform and resource mobilisation would likely suffice to enhance performance if technical deficiencies were the sole issue. Rather, the ESF's consistent inability to deploy suggests that the force is impeded by a more fundamental issue: the absence of an enduring political consensus among member states.

The paper also illustrates that political fragmentation is essential for comprehending ESF inertia. Regional security institutions are not solely reliant on formal regulations; they are also reliant on shared threat perception, willingness to cooperate, and preparedness to bear the costs of collective action (Kacowicz & Press-Barnathan, 2016). In the Sahel and West Africa, these conditions have been weakened. Even as insecurity intensified, the activation of the ESF in Mali and the broader Sahel region has been impeded by divergent state interests, mistrust among governments, and uncertainty regarding intervention. This implies that the issue is not solely related to institutional design; it also involves political commitment and legitimacy. The case also exposes a bigger legitimacy crisis within ECOWAS and the regional peace and security architecture. The enforcement value of ECOWAS norms on democracy and good governance has been diminished because of the inability to establish a credible standby force (Shelton, Burke & Ford, 2025). When a regional organization is unable to substantiate its political declarations with operational capacity, its authority is at risk. The weakening of the ESF in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has resulted in an environment in which regional enforcement is perceived as less credible and regional discipline is less effective. The military withdrawals from ECOWAS were not directly caused by ESF inertia; rather, it diminished the organization's deterrent power and undermined confidence in its capacity to uphold constitutional order.

The results must also be interpreted in the context of a global order that is fragmenting. Ad hoc coalitions and alternative partnerships have replaced, reconfigured, or reduced external military interventions in the Sahel (Döring, 2023). New external actors have entered the security landscape, UN peace operations have faced increasing limits, and French operations have been scaled back or withdrawn (Albert, 2025). This results in a strategic environment that is more fragmented, and African institutions are expected to assume a greater degree of responsibility. However, the ESF case demonstrates that the potential of African-led security action is challenging to achieve when regional political consensus is weak and operational capacity is restricted. In this regard, the ESF's inertia is not only a regional issue but also a symptom of broader changes in global security governance.

The research draws attention to the West African dilemma. The "African solutions to African problems" principle promotes continental ownership and reduces external intrusion. Ownership does not guarantee effectiveness, as shown by the ESF case. When African institutions fail, external or spontaneous security mechanisms often step in

(Hiebert, 2023). Africa shall require international security aid, including arms supplies, tactical and communication equipment, aerial support, intelligence exchange, and collaborative special forces missions, until it reaches industrial maturity. However, this often serves as a militarised diversion from the difficult and monotonous process of resolving the complex issues that cause conflicts. Sahelian regimes are allying with illiberal states like Turkey and the UAE to close the gap. Following major online propaganda campaigns that swayed public opinion, they are recruiting Wagner Group Russian mercenaries (Bamigboye, 2026). In resource-rich countries, mercenaries exploit local economies and integrate Russian interests into domestic politics, undermining democracy. African regional organisations have the mandate to take responsibilities, but they may lack the cohesive determination or resources to do so.

The paper's main goal was to investigate this fundamental conundrum. Future African Standby Force studies are also affected by the issue. Equipment, preparation, and financing remain important aspects in African peace operations. The current analysis reveals those political conditions of deployment, such as collective action legitimacy, regional bargaining, and authorisation norms, need more examination. The ESF issue is not just about the force's capacity, but also about member states' readiness to authorise deployment and under what conditions. The case under scrutiny is significant beyond West Africa. This article examines ECOWAS and the Sahel, but the themes may apply to other regional security organisations. Political will, institutional design, and material capabilities must align for contingency troops. Without these elements, preparation is symbolic. Lacking credible implementation institutions and strong political commitment, African-led security responses will continue to exceed their execution.

Therefore, the ESF case serves as a cautionary tale for all African regional mechanisms. The ESF's inertia is the consequence of a combination of structural issues within the ECOWAS bloc, as the discourse confirms; however, the political dimension is the most significant. The force's inability to respond effectively in the Sahel revealed the fragility and potential of Africa's peace and security architecture. It illustrates that the discrepancy between ambition and action remains a significant impediment to African regionalism.

Conclusion

Although the proposed ECOWAS Standby Force has the potential to strengthen regional counterterrorism operations, its ability to prevent future military coups remains uncertain, as unconstitutional changes of government are often driven by domestic political grievances, weak governance, economic hardship, and civil-military relations rather than security threats alone. A more immediate operational challenge is addressing insecurity in the Sahel, where the most affected countries, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, are members of an Alliance of Sahel States (AES) that has distanced itself from ECOWAS. Without the consent and cooperation of these states, the force's ability to pursue terrorist

groups across borders would be severely constrained. Any attempt to deploy without diplomatic agreement could escalate into interstate confrontation rather than counterterrorism operations. While Russia has emerged as a key security partner for the AES governments, its support has primarily focused on assisting those regimes in regime protection, combating insurgencies, and consolidating internal security. The cordial relationship that Russia maintains with other West African states and wider African Union suggests that if ESF would have to invade AES to gain access and restore democratic order in the case of failed diplomatic engagement, a direct military backing of Russia against a collective ECOWAS intervention would be uncertain. Equally, any armed conflict involving ECOWAS member states would also attract support from external partners such as China, the United States, France, Germany, the broader European Union, and other allies with strategic interests in regional stability, thereby risking the internationalization of what is fundamentally a West African security challenge. Consequently, sustained diplomacy, political dialogue, and confidence-building measures between ECOWAS and the AES are likely to be more effective than coercive military action in restoring regional security and cohesion.

The findings enhance contemporary academic discourse by going beyond the structural framework of the African Standby Force and the conventional rhetoric of “African solutions to African problems” to provide a policy-oriented analysis of stumbling blocks to implementation. Interrogating ECOWAS's reluctance or incapacity to deploy armed forces for stabilising the Sahel and restoring constitutional governance following military coups from 2020 to 2025 reveals the political, legal, operational, logistical, financial, and institutional obstacles that hinder the translation of mandates into action. This study therefore improves the understanding of African regional security governance, peacekeeping missions, and the reversal of coups. It demonstrates that the Western Brigade of the African Standby Force (ASF), better known as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) subject is not solely a matter of capability deficiency but also involves conflicting interests, concerns over sovereignty, lack of consensus, and reliance on external partners. By exposing these foundational problems and advancing practicable solutions, the study offers its policy contribution to the AU, ECOWAS, and their constituent member states.

Additionally, democratic assessment frameworks should place greater emphasis on substantive democratic indicators, including institutional autonomy, opposition viability, and executive restraint, rather than focusing primarily on electoral cycles. This would provide a more accurate understanding of democratic performance across African states.

Recommendations

Regarding the preceding analysis, the study suggests that to ensure that the ESF is living up to the expectations of providing remarkable solutions to West Africa's peculiar challenges as envisaged by APSA, ECOWAS should:

1. Foster deeper diplomatic engagement with AES states to get access and cooperation.
2. Establish clearer and faster deployment procedures for the ESF to tackle lull that may emanate from political will and deployment consensus.
3. Strengthen joint training and interoperability among member states.
4. Srengthen intelligence gathering and collaboration with intelligence networks of member states.
5. Ensure that within the coming years, the ESF is expanded from the Counter Insurgency Brigade of 1650 officers to the full force comprising about 260,000 troops.

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