

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES): Its Implications, Challenges and Prospects in West Africa

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In this interview, Antoine SOMDAH, former ambassador of Burkina Faso to the Russian Federation, an expert in international law and nuclear law, and a member of the United Nations Security Council (2008 and 2009), critically assesses the importance of the newly created Alliance of Sahel States (AES), its implications, the challenges and future prospects in West Africa. This marked a major geopolitical turning point in the Sahel region for the three Republics of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It also signified the final withdrawal from the regional economic organization ECOWAS.

Here are the interview excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): How would you assess the potential and performance of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) since its creation?

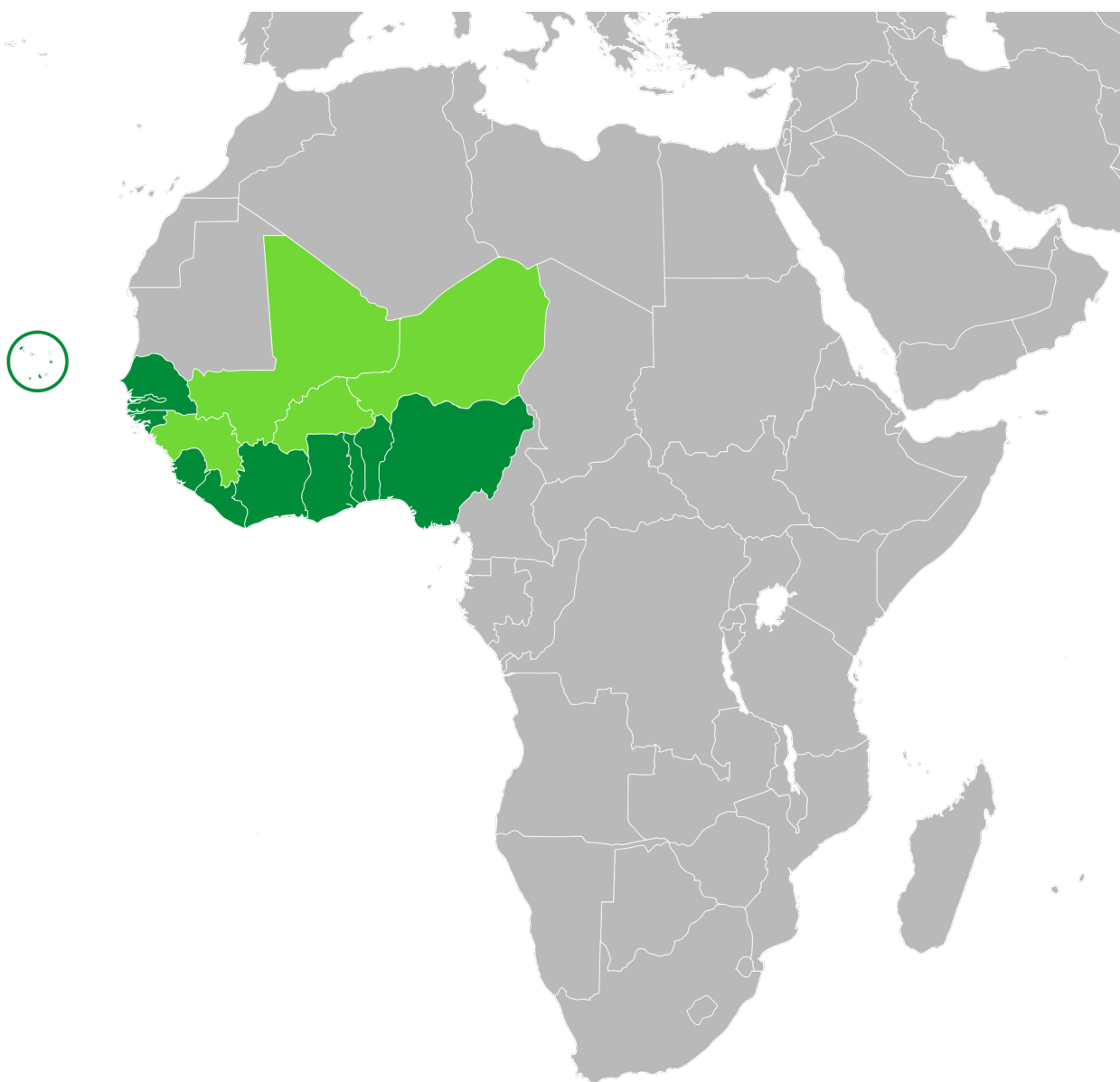
Antoine Somdah (AS): First of all, I would like to remind you that it was following the ineffectiveness of the security response, the weak solidarity, or even the abandonment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the face of the terrorist scourge, the irresponsible economic sanctions and especially the threat of military intervention in Niger that the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was born. It was established on September 16, 2023 with the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter by the States of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, three countries historically sharing the cross-border region of West Africa and the Sahel called "Liptako-Gourma" from which the symbolic name of the Charter comes.

Strategically speaking, it is a collective defense and mutual assistance bloc aimed at countering any ECOWAS military intervention or any external threat including terrorism and with the ambition of sub-regional economic integration. This strategic choice is fueled by similarities in economic data and territorial (2,781,392 km²), demographic (71.5 million inhabitants according to 2022 data), social and cultural continuity as well as a shared history, marked by colonization, which creates a feeling of rejection of the occupying power to aspire to real sovereignty. The creation of the AES marks a major geopolitical turning point in the Sahel region. It is not only a rational response to the regional environment marked by insecurity and instability but also the common desire of the three countries to strengthen their sovereignty and coordinate their efforts in the fight against terrorism. The result of growing frustration with traditional Western partners, the AES symbolizes the quest for strategic alternatives and new allies on the international scene. Several actions have already been undertaken with meetings and draft initiatives to move the Alliance towards the Statutes of a confederation and ultimately towards a federation.

It is in this regard that, on January 28, 2024, the Alliance countries announced their

withdrawal from ECOWAS. Then, on February 15, a meeting of the Alliance member countries was held in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), which laid the foundations for the creation of a confederation.

On March 6, the Alliance also announced the formation of a joint anti-terrorist force and in May it finalized the draft treaty creating the Confederation of the Alliance, with the aim of completing the draft text relating to the institutionalization and operationalization of the Alliance of Sahel States. Recently, on July 6, 2024, the first summit of the Alliance of Sahel States was held in Niamey, Niger, which saw the adoption of the Treaty establishing the Confederation of Sahel States and which also addressed issues and challenges common to the three countries, including security and defense, terrorism, as well as economic, commercial and cultural exchanges.



Map of the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (From the Public Domain)

The AES also aims to create an economic and monetary union, as well as its own currency which should be based on the natural resources of the member countries of the Confederation. It must be recognized that previously a meeting of the Ministers of Economy and Finance of the member countries of the AES held in Bamako on November 25, 2023, in order to promote economic development within the AES area, had recommended, among other things, the creation of structuring projects in the fields of energy, infrastructure, transport and food security. It had also recommended the creation of a stabilization fund and an investment bank. The meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs held following the latter, on November 30 and December 1, 2023 in the same city, had recommended to the Heads of Member States the creation of a confederation.

KKK: What are the political and economic implications of the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)?

AS: Quite naturally, the withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS necessarily has immediate political and economic implications for not only the AES itself but also for all other ECOWAS countries in terms of mobility of people and goods, trade and regional sectoral policy. It is a sovereign choice made by these three countries, even if it takes a period of one year after notification for them to cease to be members of the community, in accordance with the ECOWAS Treaty of 1993.

There will also be impacts in the areas of collective security, the regional defense force and the fight against terrorism even if they have never functioned as they should. On the other hand, the leaders of the AES reaffirmed their membership in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), one of the specific institutions of ECOWAS, in order to minimize the sudden economic shock that the AES area could undergo. Moreover, this withdrawal could lead to a redefinition of economic relations in the West African region, with significant adjustments at the national, regional and extra-regional levels. It could also offer opportunities for reform and endogenous development in this area.

KKK: From what you said above, does this mean that trade and economic cooperation with neighboring states have ceased? Do you also foresee the emergence of possible conflicts between the Alliance and ECOWAS?

AS: I don't think so! It is true that the free movement of people and goods remains a determining factor in relations, particularly trade between states and peoples, however, the states of the region have always remained interdependent, which could force the AES countries to negotiate bilateral agreements with certain states with which they have very strong economic and friendly ties, but also with those with economic resilience or with states or organizations that share common interests and challenges outside the West African region. Also, with a view to creating its common currency, the AES should consider, in the medium term, its withdrawal from UEMOA to stimulate its endogenous economic development.



Alliance of Sahel States (red) (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Moreover, it is not excluded that other countries in the region will be attracted by the AES federation project. In any case, it is an opportunity to start off on the right foot towards full sovereignty and free ourselves from external influence. On the emergence of possible conflicts between the Alliance and ECOWAS, I would say no, because the preservation of peace and stability in the West African region is a crucial priority and both entities are aware of this.

KKK: Do you think ECOWAS needs serious reforms in the context of current geopolitical developments?

AS: Oh yes of course! "Every cloud has a silver lining"! The current situation in ECOWAS reflects the persistent security, economic and political challenges facing the region. This situation even becomes an opportunity for ECOWAS to readjust its integration model by placing great emphasis on the creation of an ECOWAS of the people to encourage increased investment, in order to complete economic integration. Also, the need to advocate dialogue

and enhanced cooperation on security with the AES and finally adapt its regional integration and cooperation policies to its changing environment.

KKK: Can you also discuss China and Russia's current cooperation in trade, investment and security with the Alliance of Sahel States?

AS: The growing relations between China, Russia and the emerging governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger suggest a geopolitical reconfiguration in West Africa. But first, it must be said that China and Russia are themselves essential strategic partners. The AES Heads of State have decided to take their destiny into their own hands and move away from facade and ineffective partnerships to sincere partners such as Russia and China, but also Turkey. These partnerships with Russia, China and Turkey have enabled the AES countries to equip themselves well and effectively conduct operations against armed terrorist groups. The arrival of Turkey and Iran in the Sahel equation is part of a broader movement of diversification of international partnerships by the AES countries.

China, mainly established on the African continent thanks to large investments, seems increasingly to want to focus on the East coast where the country launched its New Silk Roads project in 2017. It is engaged in the Sahel in several areas such as agriculture, trade, security, energy and infrastructure.

Russia's influence is also felt throughout the continent, but with a more significant presence in French-speaking Africa and the Sahel, taking advantage of the departure of all French soldiers of the Barkhane force from Malian territory in August 2022. Indeed, with nearly 3,000 soldiers engaged since 2013 in the Sahel, the French anti-jihadist force Barkhane has faced the rise of anti-French sentiment in a few years, with the Malian authorities having preferred to move closer to Russia and the help of the paramilitary troops of the Wagner Group. In September 2022, the Burkinabe authorities who had just come to power also expressed their desire to move closer to Russia despite France following the protests against the Barkhane force.

Since 2010, Russia has included the African continent in its foreign policy. Over the years, it has positioned itself as a possible alternative for African states disappointed by Western alliances, both politically and militarily, through a hybrid strategy. Russia therefore intends to provide support, as much as possible, to the Alliance of Sahel States, particularly in terms of security, training military personnel and police bodies and by developing economic cooperation.

The paramilitary group "Wagner" is present in Mali, among other places, with active military operations, participating in combat. This group is gradually being replaced by "Africa Corps" or "African Corps". This is a new military corps that officially represents Russia on the African continent, taking over the security architecture established by Wagner under a more centralized command structure within the Russian Ministry of Defense. The first major deployment of this new military corps took place in Burkina Faso in January 2024 with 100 Russian military instructors and, since then, it has gradually taken control of operations in Mali and most recently in Niger. Turkey also offers defense and intelligence support.

KKK: What are the main economic sectors that are important for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Do you consider the state of civil society, youth and the media in the development of political and economic power?

AS: I said earlier that the AES countries have similar economic challenges characterized by a strong dependence on agriculture and foreign aid, underdeveloped infrastructure, and vulnerability to external shocks such as fluctuations in commodity prices and climatic hazards. Mobility is also a crucial aspect for these landlocked countries and dependent on trade corridors through coastal states for their imports and exports.

Several development initiatives are taken in this direction to stimulate the main important economic sectors in the priority areas of agriculture, livestock, health, energy, transport and mineral resources, but also in the area of road, rail and airport infrastructure.

Mali, for example, followed by Burkina Faso with their important agricultural sector, were important contributors in terms of agricultural products in the ECOWAS region. Burkina Faso and Niger played crucial roles in the trade of goods and mineral resources such as textiles, livestock, gold and uranium. This new era for the AES countries will allow greater economic and political autonomy in order to strengthen the sovereignty of States. They will now have the opportunity to easily pursue economic policies in line with their realities and aspirations.

To the question of whether I consider the state of civil society, youth and the media to be in the construction of political and economic power, I would say that over the last two decades, the mobilization of young people has remained constant in denouncing the excesses of the powers in place and against the high cost of living. Among the components of social movements, we note in particular civil society organizations in which there are youth organizations, women's organizations and unions with the support of social networks and the media and the internet in general. The media, in various forms, play a vital role in the fight against corruption by communicating information on the work of these organizations and by raising awareness. Freedom of expression is guaranteed at the national, continental and international levels, even if the media may sometimes be subject to restrictions. In Burkina Faso, for example, since 1998 to the present day, the demands of civil society have helped shape the management of political and economic power. Currently, the context of terrorism that the country is suffering is far from leaving civil society organizations indifferent. More than in other countries, they do not hesitate to express their support for government forces, while providing their criticisms and elements of moderation to call for action with discernment and responsibility. On February 24, 2024, the Alliance of Youth of the Sahel States held its General Assembly in Ouagadougou, in which the delegations of Mali and Niger took part to affirm the desire of young people to support the dynamics underway in the three AES countries. To do this, several activities were scheduled to discuss themes relating to the sovereignty of peoples, the promotion of the economy, culture and the inclusion of young people in decision-making. They intend, through this organization, to contribute to the achievement of the objectives pursued by the AES while promoting good collaboration between the different sections of this structure which will be created in the two other countries.

KKK: Do you see collaborations on initiatives to improve energy, science and technology also possible with external players?

AS: Absolutely! Energy, science and technology are essential to the transformation of the AES area in terms of agriculture, industry and poverty eradication. It will, therefore, be necessary to invest in these sectors while promoting innovation. In terms of energy, production is mainly thermal, but the sun is becoming one of the energy potentials increasingly exploited in the AES countries. Energy production with gas and civil nuclear power is already being considered. The diversification of strategic partners is all the more

crucial with the withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS. The AES countries, taken individually, are already linked by international agreements and bilateral partnerships in the field of science and technology.

At the international level, these countries already participate in the technical and scientific cooperation projects of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as well as in programs carried out within the framework of the Regional Cooperation Agreement for Africa on Research, Development and Training in the Field of Nuclear Science and Technology (AFRA) and other specialized bodies of the United Nations system. In this regard, I would like to inform you that I personally had the opportunity to actively participate with the national team responsible for laying the foundations of this technical and scientific cooperation with the IAEA from 1999 to 2007.

The STI Agenda 2026 (science, technology and innovation) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) adopted in 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan, covers a number of urgent areas of inter-state cooperation, ranging from building a culture of science and innovation among young people to improving the employability of people, including water security, food and the environment; promoting healthy lives for all citizens and improving the quality of higher education and research, among others.

On the bilateral level, it should be noted that these countries have chosen a strategic partnership with the Russian Federation. Burkina Faso has been in partnership with Russia (Russian Agency Rosatom) since October 2023 for the construction of a nuclear power plant. On February 20, 2024, the three energy companies of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger during their meeting in Ouagadougou defined the strategies to secure the supply of electrical energy to the AES countries; this event marks the beginning of the optimization and pooling of clean energy resources by diversifying the choice of strategic partners.

KKK: Finally, what is the pathway forward in terms of democratic governance and development strategy in the three states? Are these states pursuing the principles relating to (peace and stability, development and prosperity) of the multipolar world?

AS: This question is all the more important as it deserves to be considered in depth. First of all, the AES is a confederation of states with limited capacity vis-à-vis the global system, which seeks to strengthen its autonomy to resist exploitation and reduce its dependence on this same global system dominated by Westerners, in particular the former colonial powers such as France and the international financial institutions, in a word the unipolar world order. This means that these are deep strategic issues, therefore complex. Certainly, in recent decades, economic crises, internal conflicts and the loss of confidence in traditional institutions, as well as the many failures observed in the chaotic management of certain wars in the Middle East, added to the mistakes made successively in the outbreak of the conflict in Syria and now with the provocation of that in Ukraine, and the attempts to destabilize certain African countries in order to control their wealth have weakened the capacity of Western countries to exercise a dominant influence.

While the West has long been seen as a model to follow, the rest of the world is questioning this cultural superiority and seeking to assert its own identity and voice. This is why the birth of the BRICS constitutes a more pragmatic alternative and oriented towards the multipolarity that the rest of the world aspires to, thus creating a unity of the Global South.

Obviously, the AES States are oriented towards multipolarity, which is intended to be a more

inclusive and concerted approach, where different countries and regions work together to find common solutions. In any case, the AES is obliged to redefine alliances in the region and pave the way for greater influence from powers such as Russia, China and Turkey, and even other emerging BRICS countries. In this way, it will succeed in defeating terrorism and consolidating its integration to become a center of influence; diversifying its economy to become prosperous in the region, which will of course promote the strengthening of its democracy, which remains a popular democracy.

Pursuing the principles of the multipolar world, the AES countries want, in all independence, to have pragmatic win-win partnerships that advance their interests for the purposes of their development, prosperity and stability. This strategic choice made by the AES countries is in line with the new approach of the Global South in the management of global governance and undoubtedly an opportunity, finally, to rebuild a new global security architecture.

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