

# Understanding the Geopolitical and Strategic Changes in West Africa: Emerging Challenges and Future of ECOWAS

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# HIGH-LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE: **Understanding the Geopolitical and Strategic Changes in West Africa: Emerging Challenges and Future of ECOWAS**

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*Commissioner, Political Affairs, Peace and Security, ECOWAS Commission*

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*Accra, Ghana*

- The Executive Director of WANEP, **Mrs. Levinia Addae-Mensah**
- Ghana's Special Envoy to the the Alliance of Sahel States, **Col. Gbevlo Lartey**
- The Executive Director of Conflict Research Network (CORN); **Dr. Timipere Felix Allison**
- The Program Director of the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and the Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (Next Gen) program, **Prof. Cyril Obi**;
- Distinguished members of the Academia and Research Institutions
- Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

## **I. Introduction**

**1.** I feel incredibly honoured for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver the Keynote Address at this auspicious **High-Level Policy Dialogue**. I must, at the outset, express ECOWAS Commission's profound appreciation to WANEP, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)'s African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (Next Gen) program, and the Conflict Research Network (CORN), for jointly putting this timely event together. On a personal note, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks for the privilege accorded me to kickstart what promises to be an engaging debate on the future of regional integration in West Africa and the Continent at a time when evolving events are upending the world order that we used to know.

**2.** I commend your remarkable individual and collective interventions over the years to strengthen democratic culture, advocate for peace and to promote inclusive prosperity, as well as your commitment to providing platforms for reflection and interrogation of topical issues affecting the region and Africa at large. It is my strong conviction that this High-level Dialogue will share, deepen and fill knowledge gaps regarding Africa's future in the context of the dynamic geopolitical and geostrategic shifts and interests impacting economic fortunes and the global peace and security architecture.

3. I am not oblivious of the fact that this High-Level Policy Dialogue has been convened at a historical cross-roads and consequential moment in the evolution of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to continue the debate between the strand of thought that is already singing the dirges of ECOWAS as a viable project and the school of thought that argues for the Community to learn from its shortcomings and build on its undeniable successes by repositioning its normative and institutional frameworks to better meet the exigencies of our times. This is most welcome as we, as policy makers, rely on your deep thinking and research outputs to polish our efforts at promoting regionalism and democratization, sustainable development, and peace and security.

4. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In order to ***contextualize and make sense of “the Geopolitical and Strategic Changes impacting integration in West Africa in order to allow for an impassioned prediction of the Future of ECOWAS”***, which is the apt theme of this Dialogue, I deem it necessary to structure my address within the framework of the **historical timeline of ECOWAS’ evolution, which will hopefully offer me the opportunity to highlight the following:**

- ❖ The Geostrategic and Geopolitical shifts, as well as internal factors that shaped ECOWAS’s evolution;
- ❖ The Successes and Challenges of Regional Integration;
- ❖ ECOWAS and its Relations with the Breakaway Sahelian Bloc;
- ❖ ECOWAS@50 and The Special Summit on The Future of Regional Integration in West Africa;

5. Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The factors driving geostrategic and geopolitical considerations that have shaped international relations since at least the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could be traced to two philosophical giants of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, namely GWF Hegel, who saw capitalism and liberal democracy as the end state of statecraft or political economy, and Karl Marx, who posited that the contradictions in production relations between capital and labor would lead to the collapse of Capitalism and the enthronement of Communism. As shall be seen, the Organization of African Unity and Africa’s Regional Economic Communities including ECOWAS, emerged, just as the current global shifts, under the shadow of variations of these two broad schools of thought.

## II. ECOWAS and the Cold War Era (1960-1989)

6. We often hear reductionist narratives to the effect that ECOWAS was founded by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 with the sole purpose of promoting economic integration and complete indifference to internal affairs of Member States and that the Community must return to its original vision and leave countries to determine their own political and security pathways. This ahistorical argument ignores the basic fact that, ECOWAS emerged at the height of the Cold War, when the NATO Alliance and the Warsaw Pact Countries ruled the global roost, carved spheres of proxy influence, with China playing the role of Joker and the spectre of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) preventing a nuclear conflagration due to the fierce global competition. The emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement was the closest attempt by the Developing World to stay equidistant from the ravaging Global Powers.

7. As a consequence, ECOWAS was founded on the lowest common denominator based on the line of least resistance - economic integration - and nothing more. That era laid the foundations for regional economic integration underpinned by the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Goods and Services and the Right of Abode and Establishment – the first such Charter on the Continent. That Protocol laid the basis for broader free trade arrangements such as the Trade Liberalization Scheme, and the rollout of infrastructure in the areas of transport and energy. These initiatives continue today in the guise of the Lagos-Abuja Road/Rail Corridor; the innovative Community Levy Scheme that allowed the Community to be 80% financially self-reliant and which has since been copied by the African Union and other subregional organizations; the elusive search for a common regional currency, the Eco; the West Africa Gas Pipeline; the Regional Electricity Regulatory Authority based in Accra; the West Africa Power Pool based in Cotonou; the Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency in Praia and many more. The Bretton Woods Institutions, which shaped the global financial markets at the time and continue to do so, however, kept Africa under captive markets, held Africa back from industrialization and perpetuated stunted growth in virtually all sectors.

## III. ECOWAS IN THE ERA OF A UNIPOLAR WORLD (1989-2011)

8. Distinguished Participants,

1989 stands out as a pivotal moment in the annals of modern history and a harbinger to the current geostrategic shifts. It heralded the implosion of the Soviet Union, the eventual demise of the Warsaw Pact, and the hegemony of the United States as the sole Power on earth. The intellectual firepower for the New World Order was provided by two neo-Hegelian exponents. Francis Fukuyama, referencing the dissolution of the Soviet Union in a Summer 1989 essay “End of History?” in *National Interest*, declared that ‘a global consensus on liberal democracy as the sole legitimate form of government had emerged’ and that ‘liberal democracy may constitute the final form of human government and consequently, the end of history’.

**9.** The Cold War ended with the United States and its allies emerging as the preeminent global force, dictating a new rules-based international order; Russia was weakened, and China was yet to flex its economic muscle. These circumstances ironically favoured the emergence of ‘multilateralism’ between 1989 and, for West Africa, 2011, under Pax Americana. Shorn of the security shield hitherto provided by the opposing Global Powers, military, dictatorial, and autocratic rulers in Africa were exposed to the pent-up frustration and anger of citizens across Africa.

**10.** The period saw the zenith of citizen action in West Africa, not seen since the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s. The period was also marked by the flourishing of multiparty democracy, where the ballot ruled over the gun. Under the circumstances also, countries that could not absorb the shock descended into outright civil wars that threatened to spread across the region, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. The interconnectedness and mutually reinforcing relationship between security and development became too obvious to ignore.

**11.** Though the focus of ECOWAS integration from the onset was on developmental regionalism underpinned by market integration, it could not ignore the debilitating impacts of political and security meltdown on the development agenda. Thus, West Africa, under the aegis of ECOWAS, rose to the occasion on three fronts:

- **12.** Firstly, guided by the axiom African solutions to African problems, the Organization intervened to end the civil wars. Over the years, ECOWAS has brokered peace processes in the region including in Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, The Gambia, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali and Sierra Leone.
- **13.** Secondly, ECOWAS developed a vanguard normative framework to guide State behaviour, such as the Declaration of Political Principles (1991), the ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993); the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999); the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001); and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008), among others.
- **14.** Finally, ECOWAS set about establishing a governance architecture, with the transformation of the ECOWAS Secretariat into a Commission in 2007 followed by the establishment of a Community Parliament and Community Court of Justice, and many other sectorial agencies, to spur the regional integration agenda. The declared objective of all these endeavours was to transform the Community from an ECOWAS of States to an ECOWAS of People.



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**15.** Thus seen, up until about 2020, every West African nation had undergone some measure of democratic reform and chose its leaders through the ballot box. The period also witnessed the unprecedented frequency with which incumbents were defeated at the ballot box leading to alternations of power, even if not a turnaround in the fortunes of the governed. Military incursions into politics were rare, and those that occurred were quickly reversed thanks to regional and united international pressure that multilateralism ensured. However, liberal democracy as practiced in West Africa, comes with fatal flaws that requires open-heart surgery if it is to survive the current global turbulence.

#### **IV. ECOWAS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD AND POSSIBLE RESURGENCE OF PROXY WARS (2011-...)**

**16.** Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my measured view that the mismanagement of the post-Cold War opportunities of genuine win-win global governance, spurred not least by the euphoria of triumphalism and overreach that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as well as the growing tensions between Modernization and Westernization by ignoring cultural and historical factors, combined to midwife multipolarity. In West Africa, the assassination of Muamar Gaddafi in 2011 dramatically transformed the asymmetric conflict environment by injecting terrorism of mass destruction into the conflict-prone Sahel, already groaning under separatist rebellions.

**17.** On the geopolitical and geostrategic fronts, four broad tendencies can be discerned:

- Tensions between liberal democracy forces and the push towards autocracy/military dictatorship;
- Acute and rapidly spreading insecurity engendered by terrorism and violent extremism amidst the Jihadist agenda to create Caliphates on the continent, instrumentalizing faith and identity while asserting illegal control of natural resources, taxation; and
- Contradictions between growing interdependence and collapse of multilateralism amidst inexorable rise of multipolarity, exemplified by fragmentation and transient alliances, such as: The NATO Alliance (Collective West); the BRICS Plus (Brazil, China, Russia, India, South Africa and growing); the Medium Powers (The conflicting Gulf States, Turkey and Israel; as well as the North African rivals (Algeria and Morocco).

- Revolution in Digital Technology that has facilitated AI-enabled autonomous weapons systems, the explosion of social media and the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

**18.** Thus observed, these developments have enabled forum shopping by swapping external partners with differing viewpoints and interests and portend a possible new pivot towards proxy wars akin to the Cold War experiences of 1945 to 1989. ECOWAS was slow to react to the seismic geostrategic shifts.

## **V. DEBILITATING FACTORS UNDERLYING CURRENT GOVERNANCE CRISIS WITHIN THE ECOWAS SPACE**

**19.** Much as the political and geostrategic factors have facilitated the current malaise within the Organization, it is obvious that the state of captured liberal democracy amidst chronic governance deficits has led to mass disenchantment across the region and ruptured the social contract between the citizenry and the State.

- Governance and development deficits (State capture, economic mismanagement, currency instability, retreat from the periphery, marginalization and selective provision of basic services; retreat into identity politics; corruption – Erosion of the social contract between the citizenry and the State.
- Manipulation of constitutional and electoral norms.
- Weaponization of the judiciary and the instrumentalization of security forces to silence dissent and enable unconstitutional maintenance of power.
- The youth bulge – unemployment, underemployment.
- Perceived control of internal governance decisions by external powers.

## **VI. ECOWAS AND RELATIONS WITH THE ‘ALLIANCE OF SAHELIAN STATES (AES)**

**20.** Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, at its 66<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Summit on 15 December 2024, formally acknowledged the decision by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to withdraw from the Community on 29 January 2025, following their earlier decision to do so on 28 January 2024 and in line with Article 91 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty.



**21.** In taking the decision, the Authority left the door open for their automatic reintegration into the Community should they have a change of mind by 29 July 2025. In addition, the Authority appointed President Diomaye Faye of Senegal to join forces with President Faure Gnassingbe of Togo to pursue dialogue with the three countries with a view to encouraging them to return to the Community. As you may be aware, the Chair of Authority, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Nigeria and other Heads of State, notably President John Dramani Mahama of Ghana, are pursuing similar engagements to the same end.

**22.** Further, the Authority decided to grant the citizens of the three countries the enjoyment of the privileges under the Protocol on Free Movement until further notice, while instructing the Commission to draw up contingency plans for divorce negotiations with regard to the nature of rupture (hard or soft), and assets and liabilities between ECOWAS and each of the three countries.

**23.** ECOWAS has, in addition, invited the three countries to cooperate with the Community in the security and humanitarian spheres, sources of existential threat to the entire Region.

**24.** In adopting a conciliatory and pragmatic approach to the three breakaway countries, ECOWAS is acutely aware of the reputational damage that a permanent split would inflict on both parties. ECOWAS is a Community of citizens bound by centuries of solidarity based on historical, geographical, and cultural affinity and contiguity.

**25.** ECOWAS, however, is a rules-based Community bound by instruments, values, and norms that all Member States have freely signed up to, including the Constitutional Convergence Principles for membership.

## **VII. SPECIAL SUMMIT ON THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA AND THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM**

**26.** Distinguished Audience, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
On the eve of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its existence, the ECOWAS Brand as the pioneer Regional Economic Community has captivated many by its daring interventions and successes as well as standard setting in diverse spheres of Community life. Examples abound, such as inclusive regional economic integration, norm setting, innovative internal resource mobilization techniques, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. And there is cause to celebrate these remarkable achievements. However, as in all human endeavour, ECOWAS' trajectory has not always been linear and upward but also uneven, with lows and highs as this presentation has sought to portray, which calls for sober introspection, rectification, and repositioning towards the future.

**27.** With this in mind, the Authority of Heads of State and Government has directed the Commission to facilitate the commemoration of this milestone on two tracks – celebratory and reflective.

**28.** The celebratory aspect will involve showcasing ECOWAS achievements, the Community's cultural unity and diversity, outreach engagements, publicity, honouring deserving sons and daughters, and renewing our commitment to the regional integration project. The festive activities will be launched here in Accra, next week, and will be observed in all Member States, culminating in Lagos, Nigeria, where the ECOWAS Treaty was adopted on 28 May 1975.

**29.** The reflection aspect will entail dispassionate bottom-up deliberations across the Region on all aspects of the regional integration project. The key actors will be citizens across all spectrums of endeavour: traditional and regional leaders; civil society organizations, the media, opinion leaders; women and youth; academic and research institutions, the private sector; organized labour, etc.

**30.** The thematic areas provisionally include, but are not limited to:

- Interrogating the approach to regional peace, security and stability;
- Democracy, Constitutionalism, and Good Governance;
- Pathways to sustainable and inclusive development, industrialization and regional integration;
- Financing the Agricultural Sector;
- Digital Transformation, New Technologies, AI, and Social Media; and
- Partnerships in the Era of Multipolarity.

**31.** It is anticipated that the key outcomes of the exercise will be synthesized into a Compact that will be scaled up for adoption by the ECOWAS decision-making organs at a Special Summit on the Future of Regional Integration.

**32.** In essence, the Special Summit will serve as a rallying point for people across the region to reimagine and recommit to a collective path forward, embracing regional integration as the bedrock of our shared future. While the preparation for the holding of the Special Summit is still at the planning stage, let me assure you that WANEP, SSRC and CORN and other regional CSO networks will be involved to actively participate in the events, consultations, and meetings leading to this historic Summit. I dare say that the great ideas that would be harnessed at this meeting would certainly find their way into some of the reflections and discussions that would be had as part of the preparatory documents to be considered by the Authority.

## VIII. ECOWAS - CIVIL SOCIETY: FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

**33.** Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
You will no doubt agree with me that ECOWAS, at various stages of its evolution, has actively sought to integrate civil society in its endeavours. ECOWAS facilitated the emergence of the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), with mixed results; has maintained WANEP and other networks as valued partners over the years, and prioritized the role of citizens in various strategic documents, such as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework.

**34.** With the help of Civil Society, and for the purpose of organically integrating citizen voices in regional integration, the ECOWAS Commission has, since late 2023, begun the process of engagements with various stakeholders with the aim of establishing the Economic, Social and Cultural Council - West Africa (ECOSOCC-WA) as an institutional interface between citizens and decision-makers. I strongly harbour the hope that your deliberations here will culminate in, among other conclusions, drawing up a framework and modalities to advocate for the speedy establishment of ECOSOCC-WA, provision for which is contained in the ECOWAS Revised Treaty of 1993.

**35.** In the same vein, with the support of constitutional experts, ECOWAS is presently undertaking a review of the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. This review process embeds concrete mechanisms and processes to re-negotiate social contracts between government and citizens, where such has collapsed, enlisting Community civil society to play renewed an active role in charting the future of the region.

## IX. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

**36.** Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
We stand at a defining moment in the history of West Africa. ECOWAS is at cross-roads. The hurdles ahead are daunting, but with commitment of every West African, particularly citizen agency, to re-imagine ECOWAS by the People, of the People and for the People with a strong sense of solidarity and self-reliance, ECOWAS shall traverse this trying period and emerge as a stronger and more resilient regional organization.

**37.** To achieve this goal, we must begin by asking critical questions at this forum. For example:

- ❖ Are political parties in Member States fit for purpose as the basic units and incubators of governance?
- ❖ Are short term limits for Presidents/Governments conducive to continuity and good economic and social governance in the absence of autonomous and resilient civil bureaucracy and minimum cross-party national vision?
- ❖ Is the mode of electing our representatives to Parliament conducive to inclusive decision-making, or should we consider varieties of proportional representation?
- ❖ How do we ensure, for instance, the independence of the Judiciary to prevent it from being one of the weakest links in accountable governance?
- ❖ Should ECOWAS cast aside its values, rules and norms and allow Junta leaders to stand for office? What will be the consequences?
- ❖ How should the Youth Question be resolved?
- ❖ Why has civil society/citizen agency for responsible and responsive governance continued to wane since the 1990s and how do we reinvigorate it?

**38.** Many questions, but with this, I thank you for your kind attention and wish all of us a productive Dialogue.

## **ABOUT THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER**

*Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah, PhD, joined the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from the United Nations, where he served as the Director of the West African Division of the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations at United Nations. In that role, Amb. Musah backstopped the UN Special Political and Peacekeeping Field Missions, as well as broader peace and security engagements, in West Africa and the Sahel. Before assuming that role in January 2019, he was, from March 2016 until December 2018, the Director of the Africa II Division in the UN Department of Political Affairs, handling Central, North and West Africa. He also served as Deputy Head of Office and Director of Political Affairs at the UN Office to the African Union (UNOAU) from May 2014 to March 2016, where he led the political pillar of UN's strategic partnership with the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities on peace and security, and supported good offices work in Eastern and Southern Africa.*