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## HIGH-LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE ON “UNDERSTANDING THE GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CHANGES IN WEST AFRICA: EMERGING CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF ECOWAS “

16 APRIL 2025, ACCRA, GHANA

### COMMUNIQUE

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#### PREAMBLE

On 7th July 2024, the Authority of Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at its Sixty-Fifth (65<sup>th</sup>) Ordinary Session in Abuja, Nigeria directed the ECOWAS Commission to convene a “Special Summit on the Future of Regional Integration in West Africa.” The Special Summit is expected to consider the emerging geopolitical/geostrategic dynamics and challenges facing regional and political governance, development, peace, and security in West Africa. Ahead of this Special Summit, the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Social Science Research Council’s African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (Next Gen) program, and the Conflict Research Network (CORN) West Africa held a high-level policy dialogue in Accra, Ghana from 15-16 April 2025 under the theme “**Understanding the Geopolitical and Strategic Changes in West Africa: Emerging Challenges and the Future of ECOWAS**”. The high-level policy dialogue which included representatives from ECOWAS, governments, policymakers, civil society organisations (CSOs), analysts, and researchers, aimed at harnessing novel ideas that could be incorporated into the Special Summit preparatory documents to be considered by the ECOWAS Authority. Participants also deliberated on innovative ways of addressing the emerging geopolitical and geostrategic challenges confronting West Africa within the changing context in West Africa.

#### KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCERNS

The participants observed that West Africa is experiencing shifting geopolitical and strategic alliances with some countries, especially in the Sahel, turning to non-Western partners such as China, Russia, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and their exit from ECOWAS was highlighted as one of the major consequences of these geopolitical and geostrategic shifts. Participants expressed concerns about the limited progress of the mediation process to return the AES states to ECOWAS, and pointed out that their withdrawal poses significant security, political, social and economic challenges for the region.

The participants also highlighted how the social contract between the citizenry and the State is being eroded due to complex governance and development deficits. Issues such as weak institutions, manipulation of constitutional and electoral laws, weaponization of the judiciary, the instrumentalisation of security forces to silence dissent and enable unconstitutional maintenance of power, democratic backsliding and failure of electoral democracies to deliver dividends of development, worsening economic conditions/high standards of living, the youth bulge, high

unemployment, identity politics, corruption, marginalization of citizens, violent extremism and the lack of social services were specifically mentioned. These issues according to the participants drive public dissatisfaction and political apathy and ensure countries' vulnerability to unrest and unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) through military coups and constitutional changes to eliminate term limits and/or perpetuate the rule of sitting presidents. Concerns were expressed over citizens' support for the reemergence of military coups and how the weak, inconsistent, and disjointed responses of ECOWAS have diminished its legitimacy and credibility. To this end, participants emphasized the importance of overhauling the ECOWAS' democracy and good governance architecture as well as promoting inclusive and participatory governance, stronger civil society participation, gender mainstreaming and more locally grounded democratic models to reflect African realities. Furthermore, participants noted institutional weaknesses, credibility, legitimacy, and reputational crisis of ECOWAS and the need for the organisation to undergo a strategic reinvention that aligns with West Africa's current realities to reclaim its role as a credible regional union.

## RESOLUTIONS

Based on the deliberations, participants resolved as follows:

- I. **ECOWAS needs to re-imagine and position itself strategically to maintain its influence and relevance:** We are calling for deeper reflections and conversations at the regional and national levels about the future of ECOWAS amid the exit of the AES and the complex challenges confronting the region. The reflections could entail inclusive and participatory deliberations on all aspects of regional integration involving the decision-making organs of ECOWAS and citizens across all spectrums - traditional and regional leaders, CSOs, the media, women and youth, academic and research institutions, the private sector and organized labour. The outcome of these deliberations can enable ECOWAS to adapt, re-imagine and position itself within the ongoing geopolitical and geostrategic context to strategically maintain its influence and relevance.
- II. **Review of the 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty to enhance ECOWAS mandate:** We recognize that the bipolar international configuration at the time when the Treaty of Lagos was signed to establish ECOWAS in May 1975 in Lagos, Nigeria to promote economic integration has changed since the end of the Cold War from a unipolar to a multipolar system. We also recall that in recognition of the new political developments and challenges in the 1990s, a revised ECOWAS treaty was signed in July 1993 in Cotonou, Benin Republic to expand its scope and powers to include political and security cooperation. Given the impact of the changing world order on the ECOWAS mandate and responses to the range of existential crises facing the region, we call on the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS to consider further reviewing the 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty to enhance its mandate and relevance in the unfolding geopolitical and geostrategic context.
- III. **Improving ECOWAS Democratic Governance Architecture to prevent further democratic backsliding:** We call upon the Authority of Heads of State and Government to adopt the revised Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (as amended) and commit to a uniform application of the protocol to prevent further democratic backsliding and to reverse the trend towards unconstitutional changes of government (both military and civilian forms) in West Africa. Heads of State and

Governments are also urged to review the regions' normative instruments, while developing the strategic and political will to implement collective decisions.

- IV. **Implementation of ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture to address complex security challenges:** We urge the Authority of Heads of State and Government to provide the necessary human resources, logistical capabilities and funding for the effective implementation of the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and other relevant protocols relating to ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture. Especially, we urge the Authority to commit the necessary resources for the deployment of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) to address the escalating threat of terrorism, violent extremism, and the humanitarian crises in the region.
- V. **Transitioning from an “ECOWAS of States” to an “ECOWAS of the People”:** We recognize the efforts being made through the ECOWAS Vision 2020 and 2050 to transition from an ECOWAS of States to an ECOWAS of the People and the slow progress in achieving this aspiration. We believe that the time has come for ECOWAS to show consistent political commitment to ensure that regional integration efforts engage and benefit the people directly, rather than just national governments. In that regard, we urge ECOWAS to adopt a strategic approach that prioritizes the needs and well-being of citizens across the region to ensure greater citizen engagement and empowerment within the Community to foster a sense of regional identity and belonging. We also urge the ECOWAS Commission to continue the engagement with CSOs to draw up a framework and modalities for the speedy establishment of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council - West Africa (ECOSOCC-WA) to serve as an institutional interface between citizens and decision-makers. CSOs are also encouraged to strengthen advocate efforts for the speedy establishment of ECOSOCC-WA.
- VI. **Leverage cross-frontier ethnic, social, and religious affinities and identities to build trust, strengthen collaborative actions for peace, and foster a sense of shared destinies:** Citizens within the AES and ECOWAS blocs share many affinities – ethnicity, language, religion, trade/economic activities, and inter-group histories, among others - that straddle national boundaries. Such pre-colonial ties have proven stronger unifiers between different groups in multiple permutations across the region. These are strong strands that bind rather than divide the people. We strongly recommend that, in building an ECOWAS of the people that offers space for membership of citizens in the AES states, civil authorities and other actors invest in fully understanding and leveraging these strands to promote the sense of oneness and shared destiny among citizens of the region, irrespective of national boundaries.
- VII. **Development and Implementation of ECOWAS Strategic Communication Framework to share the successes and processes of regional integration in West Africa:** We recognize that since its establishment in 1975, ECOWAS has recorded significant strides in critical areas of regional integration. However, these achievements have not been well communicated to citizens of member-states, leading to questions about the value and relevance of the regional organisation. To address this information gap, we urge the ECOWAS Commission to develop and implement a robust strategic communication framework to share the activities and successes of regional integration in West Africa to inform and educate citizens to gain acceptance and support. In addition, we urge ECOWAS to increase its digital presence in the region as a strategy to engage more closely with the youth, especially given the role social media has played both in

mobilising movements and spreading dis- and misinformation campaigns, including around the AES exit.

- VIII. **Contingency strategies to ensure regional stability and development amid AES exit:** We commend ECOWAS' decision to maintain access to the free trade zone under its Trade Liberalisation Scheme (TLS) with the AES despite their 0.5 per cent import levy imposed on goods from ECOWAS member states. We appreciate this strong signal of a people-centred approach to working with the AES that ensures trade, on which citizens on both sides depend for their livelihoods, is not caught in any tariff wars. We encourage ECOWAS to continue to build and maintain multilateral and bilateral relations with the AES within the short to medium term in compliance with its normative frameworks and protocols with respect to the free movement of people, goods, and services as well as the protection of migrants' rights to prevent any disruption of economic and social relations.
- IX. **Stronger cooperation and complementarity of efforts to address violent extremism (VE) and other transnational security challenges:** We affirmed that the security of West Africa is a shared responsibility, and no country or group of countries can guarantee the security of their citizens acting in isolation. We underscore the need for stronger cooperation and complementary efforts between the AES and ECOWAS to respond to violent extremism and other transnational security challenges in West Africa. We call on the two blocs to adopt a collaborative, holistic, citizens-centred, and evidence-based approach towards addressing the complexities of the security and VE challenges through strategic intelligence sharing, joint operations, creation of cross-border citizens' counter-violent extremism actions groups, and other relevant means.
- X. **Coordination and harmonization of bilateral and multilateral responses to the AES exit from ECOWAS:** We call on the ECOWAS Commission to foster effective coordination and harmonization of the ongoing multilateral mediation efforts and bilateral engagements with the AES to enhance effectiveness, unified messaging, and resource optimization to ensure sustainable solutions. We also recommend detailed strategic responses by ECOWAS that exclude force/coercion but rather exercise its soft power by building trust and convincing the AES on the relevance of retaining their membership in ECOWAS as democratic states.
- XI. **Investment in Track-Two Diplomacy:** We call on ECOWAS to invest in track-two diplomacy or third-party interventions to soften the grounds, build trust and complement official diplomatic engagements with the AES. To this end, we urge ECOWAS to identify and use the Council of the Wise, civil society actors, academics, researchers, media personalities, and influential community leaders as trusted voices to support its engagements in the AES member states.
- XII. **Development of a regional partnership framework to guide engagements with external partners:** We urge ECOWAS to develop a comprehensive partnership framework that reflects the national interests of member states as well as the current, evolving and potential future realities to guide both states and ECOWAS engagements with the multitude of external actors in the region.
- XIII. **CSOs to strengthen advocacy efforts to ensure effective responses to national and regional challenges:** We urge CSOs to strengthen their advocacy efforts at the level of ECOWAS and its member states to address the structural factors contributing to

democratic backsliding, unconstitutional changes of government, violent extremism, violent conflicts and other transnational security threats. CSOs are also encouraged to support and enhance their advocacy efforts for ECOWAS to re-imagine itself to restore its influence and credibility in addressing regional challenges.

- XIV. **Ensuring gendered perspectives in operational responses:** We call on ECOWAS to ensure the integration of gendered perspectives in its operational responses to political crisis, violent extremism and peacebuilding challenges in the region. Specifically, we urge ECOWAS to improve the role and participation of women in its decision-making and peacebuilding mechanisms and processes.
- XV. **Prioritize the Youth in ECOWAS decision-making processes:** We call on ECOWAS to prioritize the Youth in its consultative and decision-making processes, especially against unconstitutional changes of government. As media narratives of public perceptions of UCGs show, many youths lack appreciation of the military rule experienced by older generations and are increasingly dissatisfied with current democratic governments. There should be a deliberate strategy to integrate youth perspectives and concerns into the regional body's mission, operations, and communications.
- XVI. **Promote investment in economic development to address the economic challenges of the youth:** We encourage member-states of ECOWAS to invest in economic development initiatives to address youth unemployment, underemployment, poverty and other related challenges, which are major contributory factors for the radicalization and recruitment of youth into violent extremist groups.
- XVII. **Stimulate interests of the private sector in promoting peace, creating jobs, and supporting inclusive development:** We acknowledge that although the private sector/businesses have stakes in the maintenance of peace to ensure the security, stability, and prosperity of their businesses, not much attention is given to their potential role at different levels to support the promotion of peace and security in the region. We therefore recommend that ECOWAS and the AES establish a private sector desk/unit with a mandate to design and launch interventions that engage the private sector actors at different levels in the promotion of peace and security in their respective regions.

**In conclusion**, the high-level policy dialogue has been a pivotal moment for deeper reflections and discussions on the future of regional integration in West Africa. Recognizing the complex challenges confronting the region amid the AES exit and the consequences of the changing geopolitical and geostrategic context, we resolved to support ECOWAS and its member-states in their efforts to promote democracy, security, peace, and development. We call on ECOWAS and its member states, AES, citizens, civil society, women, youth, media, private sector/business community and all relevant stakeholders to commit to a peaceful, democratic, united and prosperous West Africa. We also call on ECOWAS to “rebrand” itself to make a difference in the region.

**Signed:**

***Representatives of Civil Society Organisations, Analysts, and Researchers across West Africa***

**Issued on this day, 30 April 2025, in Accra, Ghana.**

## List of Institutions

1. African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and the Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa program, Social Science Research Council (SSRC).
2. Conflict Research Network West Africa (CORN) Abuja, Nigeria
3. ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations, GIZ
4. Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone
5. Office of Ghana's Special Envoy to the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES).
6. Institute for Peace and Development (Tamale)
7. Institute for Research and Policy Integration in Africa, Ghana
8. Institute for Security Studies - ISS Nairobi
9. Legon Center for International Affairs and Diplomacy (LECIAD), University of Ghana
10. Nigeria's National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS)
11. Research and Action for Peace (REcAP), Network.
12. SD Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies, Ghana
13. University of Ibadan, Nigeria
14. University of Social Sciences and Management (USSGB) in Bamako, Mali
15. West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)