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SECURING WEST AFRICA'S SHARED LIFELINES

An agenda for AES–ECOWAS cooperation

IN THIS ISSUE

— Executive summary 2
— Key figures 3
01 Introduction 4
02 Shared challenges and differentiated interests 5
03 Political and institutional conditions for cooperation 7
04 Practical arrangements for security, economic, and population-related cooperation 8
05 Security and economic cooperation in shared borderlands: a practical starting point 11
06 Recommendations 13
— Additional resources 15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AT A GLANCE

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2025 formalized an institutional rupture without diminishing the security, economic, and social interdependencies connecting West African countries. Jihadist insurgencies continue to destabilize the Sahel and threaten neighboring states, while attacks on commercial corridors and political tensions disrupt trade, essential supplies, and livelihoods. The October 2026 ministerial consultations in Dakar opened the way for an agreement to guide cooperation between the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and ECOWAS.

Effective cooperation must accommodate differentiated interests and persistent political divisions. The three Sahelian countries confront entrenched insurgencies while seeking to preserve their sovereignty and institutional autonomy. Their ECOWAS neighbors seek to prevent jihadist expansion, secure vulnerable borders, and safeguard regional integration. Renewed bilateral initiatives and continuing financial and technical arrangements demonstrate that cooperation remains possible. Yet their uneven coverage limits their ability to address challenges extending across national jurisdictions. The priority is therefore to strengthen existing arrangements without requiring institutional reunification or compromising national authority.

FIVE PRIORITIES

This brief identifies five priorities for an AES–ECOWAS framework agreement:

1. **Establish standing security liaison mechanisms**
2. **Concentrate cooperation in selected borderlands and strategic commercial corridors**
3. **Protect civilian movement and livelihoods**
4. **Provide durable guarantees for trade and cross-border mobility**
5. **Safeguard regional investments and technical systems through differentiated institutional arrangements**

Particular emphasis is placed on geographically targeted agreements connecting national security efforts with border administration, customs coordination, and commercial-route protection. By building upon existing mechanisms and pursuing locally appropriate measures, regional authorities could deliver tangible benefits while gradually rebuilding the confidence necessary for durable cooperation between the two blocs.

KEY FIGURES

A REGION UNDER PRESSURE

An interdependent region facing common pressures

Security, economic exchange and humanitarian consequences

SECURITY

The expansion and intensification of jihadist violence

9,928 deaths

Fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel in the 12 months to mid-2026 — nearly 49,000 deaths recorded since 2022

× 22 approx.

Increase in annual fatalities from this violence in the Sahel since 2017

+86 % violent events | **+262 %** associated deaths

Benin–Niger–Nigeria borderlands, 2024–2025

Sources: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026; ACLED, 2026.

ECONOMY

Indispensable but vulnerable trade

3.92 million tonnes

Transit cargo handled by the Port of Abidjan in 2025 (+34.1 % year on year)

+50 to 100 %

Rise in transport costs on several Malian routes during the 2025 fuel crisis

≈ 2,500 containers

Mali-bound cargo stranded at the Port of Dakar, November 2025

Sources: Port Autonome d'Abidjan, 2025 results; FEWS NET, February 2026; Le Soleil, November 2025.

POPULATIONS

Displacement and access to essential services

239,000+

Registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, July 2026

4.1M+ children

Affected by the temporary suspension of classes in Mali during the fuel crisis, October 2025

8,860 schools closed by insecurity, AES countries

1.6M+ children affected

Burkina Faso	5,319	more than 818,000 children
Mali	2,444	more than 700,000 children
Niger	1,097	93,676 children

Reference periods differ by country; totals are indicative.

Sources: UNHCR, July 2026; UNICEF, Mali humanitarian report 2025; UNICEF, humanitarian appeals 2026.

Cross-border threats, shared interests.

Methodological note: national figures on school closures refer to different reference periods: April 2026 for Mali, data cited in the 2026 UNICEF appeal for Niger, and March 2024 for Burkina Faso (also reported in the 2026 UNICEF appeal). Aggregate totals are indicative and do not constitute a harmonized regional assessment for 2026. The temporary suspension of classes in Mali linked to the fuel crisis is distinct from school closures caused by insecurity.

Sources: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026; ACLED, 2026; Port Autonome d'Abidjan, 2025 results; FEWS NET, February 2026; Le Soleil, November 2025; UNHCR, 2026; UNICEF, Mali humanitarian report 2025 and humanitarian appeals 2026.

01

CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023 led to confrontation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) over sanctions, constitutional transitions, and regional security. The military leaders of these countries then established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023, announced their exit from ECOWAS in 2024 alongside the establishment of their own confederation, and formally withdrew from the economic community in January 2025. Their departure created two distinct regional blocs with very different degrees of institutionalization. It also left several unresolved political differences despite deeply interconnected security, economic, and social interests.

The security stakes are substantial. During the 12 months ending in mid-2026, jihadist-linked violence resulted in an estimated 9,928 fatalities. Violence remains entrenched in the three Sahelian countries while threatening neighboring ECOWAS states. Timbuktu Institute research documents the expansion of the jihadist coalition, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), into western Mali, particularly Kayes, where insecurity threatens communities and transport links with Senegal. Farther east, JNIM and Islamic State-affiliated militants have intensified their activities in the Benin–Niger–Nigeria borderlands. Between 2024 and 2025, violent events involving jihadist groups in this area increased by 86 percent along with a 262 percent rise in associated fatalities. Fragmented cooperation compounds these threats.

Economic interdependence is equally consequential. In 2025, the Port of Abidjan handled about 3.9 million tonnes of transit cargo, largely for Burkina Faso and Mali, approximately 35 percent more than in 2024. Yet JNIM's attacks on Mali's principal fuel-supply routes from Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal—which together account for approximately 95 percent of its fuel supply—have disrupted transport and essential services. By November 2025, some 2,500 containers bound for Mali were stranded in Dakar. Fuel shortages contributed to price increases, power cuts, and interruptions to public services; UNICEF reported temporary school closures affecting more than 4.1 million children. Political restrictions have imposed additional costs: during the Benin–Niger border crisis, Cotonou's port reported a 10–15 percent decline in turnover.

These disruptions affect governments, businesses, and populations whose livelihoods depend on cross-border trade and mobility. Regional separation has left key relationships unsettled even while ECOWAS retained transitional trade and free-movement provisions, and the Sahel states remain in the UEMOA monetary system and, in some cases, countries have pursued bilateral security cooperation. Still, such arrangements cannot always address threats spanning several jurisdictions or provide durable commitments between regional blocs. Cooperation must also distinguish non-member participation from the rights and obligations of ECOWAS membership.

Diplomatic initiatives by Togo, Ghana, Senegal, and others have opened a path forward. Following consultations in Bamako and Lomé, the October 17, 2026, meeting in Dakar established joint thematic working groups to develop an AES–ECOWAS framework agreement. Its substance remains undefined. The imperative is to translate acknowledged mutual interests into credible arrangements that strengthen existing cooperation, close gaps that bilateral efforts cannot resolve, and deliver practical benefits without requiring institutional reunification.

> ***Prospects for AES–ECOWAS cooperation rest less on identical interests than on overlapping vulnerabilities and interdependencies.***

02 SHARED CHALLENGES AND DIFFERENTIATED INTERESTS

SHARED CHALLENGES

Prospects for AES–ECOWAS cooperation rest less on identical interests than on overlapping vulnerabilities and interdependencies. Three dimensions shape these shared interests: cross-border security threats, the continuity of economic exchange, and the need for civilian protection. Their relative importance varies across countries, calling for differentiated responses rather than a uniform regional approach.

THE INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED REGIONAL THREAT

The Sahelian countries confront entrenched insurgencies requiring sustained territorial defense, protection of supply routes, and the maintenance of state authority in contested areas. Their ECOWAS neighbors have different priorities: some seek to prevent militant entrenchment, while others face increasingly lethal attacks. National operations alone have limited reach where militants can retreat across borders, replenish supplies, and exploit adjoining jurisdictions. These differences matter because coastal governments may prioritize border security, early warning, and intelligence sharing to oppose armed groups, while AES authorities face immediate demands to protect existing supply lines and contested territory. Neither bloc is uniform either, as vulnerable, and even contested, areas in Benin require a different response than those needed in Ghanaian or Guinean areas where prevention remains central. Cooperative measures serving a coastal state's preventive interests could also help its Sahelian neighbor sustain commercial access and operational security.

The Benin–Niger–Nigeria triangle illustrates how armed groups operate across three jurisdictions while political tensions impede cooperation with Niger. In the Sikasso–Korhogo–Bobo-Dioulasso area, strained Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire relations complicate coordination despite overtures to rapprochement between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. Neither border region can be secured adequately through an isolated bilateral relationship if adjacent territories remain accessible to armed groups.

Cooperation has nonetheless adapted. Senegal and Mali conducted joint patrols around Kayes in 2025; Mali and Guinea renewed military consultations; and Ghana's August 2026 agreement with Burkina Faso linked intelligence exchange and patrols to protecting commercial routes. Mali and Côte d'Ivoire resumed intelligence discussions in October. These decisions demonstrate interest in renewed engagement, not necessarily sustained implementation. Even where patrols and bilateral intelligence contacts resume, a third country's absence may leave operational seams that armed groups can exploit. The problem is therefore less the absence of cooperation than its uneven geographic coverage,

operational reliability, and continuity across political changes.

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PRESERVING INTEGRATION DESPITE INSTITUTIONAL SEPARATION

Landlocked Sahel economies depend on access to coastal ports, while neighboring ECOWAS states benefit from transit revenues, supply chains, and Sahelian markets. Political restrictions and militant attacks have disrupted these relationships through different mechanisms. The Benin–Niger closure restricted exports and transport contributing to pressure on Niger's fiscal revenues. Traders have used alternative routes and informal crossings around Gaya in Niger and Malanville in Benin as a bypass. These types of adaptations sustain commerce but increase uncertainty and transport burdens. At an April 2026 meeting, Burkina Faso and Togo addressed port fees and customs delays on the Lomé–Ouagadougou corridor, showing a shared interest in more efficient transit.

Insecurity imposes costs even where borders remain formally open. JNIM's attacks on Malian supply routes have enabled it to exert economic pressure without capturing major cities. FEWS NET (Famine Early Warning Systems Network) documented transport-cost increases of 50–100 percent on several routes during the 2025 fuel crisis, alongside interruptions to humanitarian deliveries exposing significant vulnerabilities. These shocks affect coastal transport operators and ports as well as Sahelian consumers. The economic interest in predictable routes therefore extends across the AES-ECOWAS divide, although individual countries' dependencies vary. Diversion may attract additional traffic to one coastal port while increasing costs for Sahelian importers and depriving another port of revenue; maintaining alternatives and improving their reliability can benefit all parties without eliminating commercial competition.

Moreover, institutional ties have neither collapsed nor remained unchanged. ECOWAS continues to apply transitional trade and mobility provisions, while GIABA granted the AES countries nonmember participation subject to obligations. The AES inaugurated its development bank, the BCID-AES, in December 2025, even as its members remained within UEMOA and the common CFA franc system. Continued integration and emerging AES institutions create distinct questions about future access, institutional rights, and the compatibility of financial arrangements.

POPULATIONS AND WIDER POLITICAL INTERESTS

Cross-border insecurity imposes human costs far beyond insurgents' principal operating areas. By July 2026, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo hosted more than 239,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers. In northern Benin, restricted access to farmland and markets has undermined livelihoods and strained host communities. In the Burkina Faso–Ghana–Togo borderlands, Togo closed Cinkassé's cattle market over stolen-livestock trafficking concerns. Its reopening under tighter tracing procedures after local negotiations shows that security measures need not permanently sever cross-border livelihoods, but the disruption alone can be destabilizing for community members. The case also distinguishes the consequences of insurgent insecurity from those of government restrictions enacted in response.

Population movements also create reciprocal responsibilities. The September 2026 Lomé Dialogue produced agreements between Burkina Faso, coastal host states, and UNHCR on refugee protection and conditions for safe, voluntary return. Receiving states need to manage protection and service demands, while Burkina Faso has an interest in safeguarding displaced nationals and facilitating their return when conditions permit. Such cooperation matters independently of military or commercial objectives. Displaced families and host communities require access to education, health care, legal protection, and documentation regardless of whether military cooperation has improved. Agreements over these practical responsibilities can provide an additional basis for regional engagement.

The two blocs thus have overlapping but unequal priorities. Improved border security could help ECOWAS neighbors contain militant threats while protecting routes vital to Sahelian economies; preserving mobility and civilian protections would serve populations

and markets on both sides. These complementarities create incentives to cooperate even where governments differ on political objectives and the specific arrangements that they are willing to pursue.

03 POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS FOR COOPERATION

CONDITIONS FOR COOPERATION

Diplomatic engagement has advanced through countries maintaining ties with both organizations. Togo's April 2026 consultations, Ghana's special envoy, and Senegal's hosting of the October 2026 Dakar meeting have helped reopen negotiations. They have not resolved the question of how to cooperate without reigniting disputes over the withdrawal of the Sahelian countries. The diplomatic opening reflects a willingness to negotiate, but the existence of working groups is not itself evidence that the parties agree on the scope of security cooperation or the respective obligations of their institutions. Nevertheless, the willingness demonstrates that engagement with the AES bloc as a negotiating counterpart need not imply endorsement of military rule.

AES governments have insisted on sovereignty and the consolidation of their confederation. Before the Dakar meeting, their foreign ministers emphasized sovereignty, institutional consolidation, and population interests. ECOWAS, having reaffirmed its commitment to constitutional governance, must weigh the risk that extensive cooperation could appear to legitimize military governments whose departure followed disputes over those principles. Extending membership benefits without reciprocal obligations could also weaken cohesion and the perceived value of membership. These concerns are not symmetrical: the AES seeks recognition as an autonomous interlocutor, while ECOWAS must preserve institutional rules that distinguish its members from nonmembers. Thus, any agreement will need to address the varied interests of the two blocs rather than assume that cooperation removes the underlying political disagreement.

Yet cooperation can begin without needing to amount to reintegration. The ECOWAS Revised Treaty permits agreements with nonmember states and regional organizations while reserving Community decision-making rights for members. That legal distinction creates space for reciprocal sectoral commitments without extending voting rights or automatically conferring access to every ECOWAS program, financial privilege, or internal decision-making process. ECOWAS's transitional trade provisions and GIABA's differentiated nonmember arrangements illustrate how substantive participation can continue without restoring full membership privileges.

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> ***Cooperation can begin without needing to amount to reintegration.***

However, political mistrust continues to constrain cooperation. Tensions between Benin and Niger contrast with renewed Côte d'Ivoire–Mali intelligence contacts meanwhile Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire relations remained strained despite continued hopes for improvement. Divergent external partnerships and sensitivities over national military authority further complicate security cooperation. Bilateral initiatives provide openings but may leave gaps when threats extend across several borders. Moreover, nation-

al restrictions on sensitive intelligence, including those associated with external security partnerships, may limit what governments are willing or authorized to share. An AES–ECOWAS framework could clarify the types of information participating authorities can exchange, establish appropriate safeguards, and provide a basis for developing more sensitive cooperation as political trust improves.

04 PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR SECURITY, ECONOMIC, AND POPULATION-RELATED COOPERATION

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Overlapping interests alone cannot guarantee sustained cooperation between the two regional blocs. The challenge is to translate these interests into practical commitments compatible with existing political constraints and institutional mandates. A framework agreement could strengthen security coordination, preserve shared economic and financial arrangements, and consolidate mechanisms supporting cross-border mobility and civilian protection.

SECURITY COORDINATION WITHOUT A UNIFIED CHAIN OF COMMAND

Improved AES–ECOWAS security cooperation need not depend on creating a unified military headquarters. A standing liaison arrangement, supported by regular consultations between military General Staffs and designated counterparts in relevant national commands, could provide a foundation for sustained communication. Its initial functions could include exchanges of threat assessments, notification of cross-border incidents, and agreed procedures for rapid consultation when threats emerge. Such procedures would establish who is responsible for communicating and consulting across institutional boundaries without transferring operational authority from national governments.

As confidence develops, such an arrangement could also facilitate more demanding cooperation, including parallel patrols and synchronized operations undertaken under separate national commands. These activities would require additional understandings concerning geographic responsibilities, the handling of sensitive information, and operational authorization. This distinction is important: establishing dependable communication would be a relatively modest first step, while translating that communication into coordinated military action would depend on political trust and available capabilities.

Existing commitments provide starting points. Ghana's August 2026 agreement with Burkina Faso envisages intelligence sharing, coordinated patrols, surveillance, and commercial-route protection; Senegal and Mali already conduct patrols under national command. In December 2025, ECOWAS leaders called for consultations among intelligence chiefs, including those of neighboring countries. These arrangements demonstrate that more dependable communication need not await the creation of new regional military structures, although the exchange of sensitive intelligence would still require agreed authorization and safeguards.

Both blocs have announced plans to deploy joint forces, but neither force has been fully mobilized or implemented. Armed forces in AES countries remain stretched by insecurity within their territories, while the proposed ECOWAS counterterrorism brigade was still in the planning phase in late 2026. Synchronized national operations, pooled surveillance, or logistical support therefore remain conditional on political authorization, trust, resources, and operational readiness. Where forces have distinct mandates and external partnerships, common awareness of threats may be more immediately feasible than joint planning, much

less deployment across another state's territory.

Earlier initiatives offer cautionary lessons rather than institutional blueprints. The Accra Initiative supported intelligence contacts and periodic border operations, but implementation remained uneven. The G5 Sahel Joint Force faced financing and logistics constraints. The African Union's 2026 MNJTF assessment identified shortages in communications, mobility, equipment, and financing, while Niger's suspended participation exposed political vulnerabilities. Sustained liaison and operational continuity matter at least as much as an ambitious force structure and they offer more readily available starting points for security cooperation.

> *Sustained liaison and operational continuity matter at least as much as an ambitious force structure.*

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL COOPERATION

The decision of Sahelian military leaders to withdraw from ECOWAS created institutional costs and put investments at risk. In February 2024, ECOWAS identified more than $500 million in potentially affected regional projects and programs, including 47 EBID-financed projects in AES countries valued at approximately $322 million. Some consequences have materialized: ECOWAS decided to relocate several institutions, and West African Health Organization's transfer from Burkina Faso toward Côte d'Ivoire advanced in October 2026 with the handover of provisional headquarters in Grand-Bassam. An economic working group involving relevant national ministries and financial institutions could undertake a project-by-project review of outstanding commitments, disbursements, and implementation obstacles. Where necessary, participating authorities could negotiate continuity arrangements consistent with the mandates and approval procedures of the institutions financing those projects.

Existing customs arrangements show how commercial cooperation can be reinforced. In September 2026, Ivorian and Malian customs officials assessed SIGMAT, their interconnected transit-management system on the Abidjan–Bamako route, and agreed on improvements to tracking and information exchange. Burkina Faso and Togo have similarly addressed customs delays and costs along the Lomé–Ouagadougou corridor. Building on these national arrangements, participating customs and transport authorities could agree on common procedures for exchanging transit documentation, reporting disruptions, and addressing recurring delays. Regular technical consultations would be especially valuable where shipments cross several jurisdictions or bilateral improvements remain uneven.

Regional financial bodies provide precedents for differentiated participation as well. In December 2025, ECOWAS admitted AES countries to GIABA as nonmembers subject to anti-money-laundering and counterterrorism-financing obligations and approved their continued participation in EBID as nonregional members. Burkinabè and Nigerien ministers subsequently attended EBID's April 2026 governors' meeting. Continued involvement, however, does not guarantee previous governance rights or access to every benefit. Clarifying the terms of participation and outstanding financing commitments is more useful than assuming that these institutions either remained unaffected or ceased to serve the three Sahelian states. GIABA's technical obligations differ from EBID's financing and governance rules: the two examples demonstrate the possibility of adaptation, not a common legal template. The relevant question is which benefits each institution can still provide and on what reciprocal terms.

Other networks remain important regardless of ECOWAS membership. The AES states participate in UEMOA and the BCEAO, whose interoperable instant-payments platform launched in September 2025 for all eight monetary-union members. The West African Power Pool demonstrated synchronized operation across 15 countries in November 2025, although arrears and operational constraints remain. These systems offer services worth protecting and channels for addressing future disruptions. Their operation also involves authorities outside an AES–ECOWAS negotiating framework, so agreements should reinforce rather than supersede the mandates of UEMOA, BCEAO, energy-market bodies, and participating states. Cross-border payments and electricity supply create practical incentives for continuity even when political integration is contested. The BCID-AES and any prospective monetary divergence increase the value of technical dialogue with

the competent regional institutions.

> *The priority is to strengthen existing arrangements without requiring institutional reunification or compromising national authority.*

FREE MOVEMENT, CIVILIAN PROTECTION, AND CROSS-BORDER RELATIONSHIPS

ECOWAS's transitional decision preserved visa-free movement, residence and establishment rights, and recognition of existing ECOWAS travel documents for AES nationals. This avoided an immediate rupture, but future arrangements—and some administrative implications of new AES documents—remain unsettled. The concern is that continued access depends on provisions whose duration and reciprocal application require clarification. Different experiences at checkpoints, in residence administration, and in commercial transport can matter as much as formal rights. The ECOWAS Brown Card vehicle-insurance scheme exemplifies an existing cross-border service whose benefits should be clarified and preserved where applicable, rather than assumed lost.

Protection arrangements also continue despite political differences. The September 2026 Lomé Dialogue produced agreements involving Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana, Togo, and UNHCR on refugee protection and conditions for safe, voluntary return. Host countries must provide services and protections, while Burkina Faso retains responsibilities toward displaced nationals. The agreements demonstrate cooperation responding to needs that cannot be managed by any one state. Their continued effectiveness depends on national protection systems and local authorities, not solely on commitments announced at regional meetings.

Local relationships are equally important. In January 2026, authorities and pastoral organizations from Burkina Faso and Ghana met at Léo to address transhumance and land-use disputes. UNDP-supported community peace structures in Ghana have also facilitated communication with Burkinabè authorities about cross-border incidents. Such initiatives connect border security to people's ability to move, trade, graze livestock, and seek protection. Reinforcing them where security and commercial pressures intersect offers a practical bridge to geographically focused cooperation.

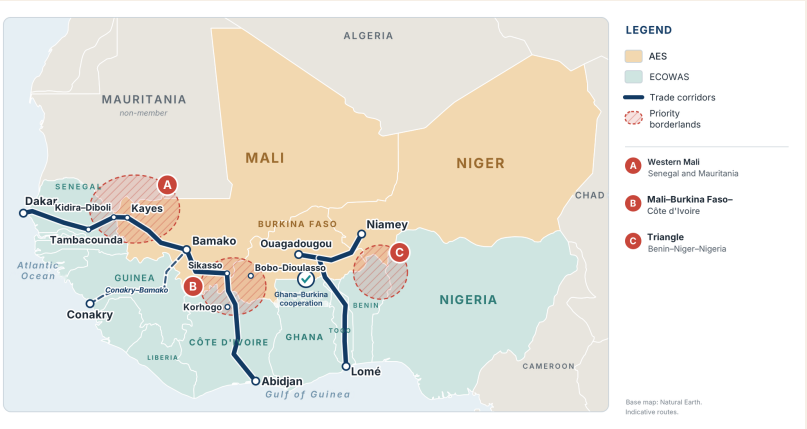
05

BORDERLANDS AND CORRIDORS

SECURITY AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION IN SHARED BORDERLANDS: A PRACTICAL STARTING POINT

SHARED CORRIDORS, DIFFERENTIATED RISKS

Borderlands and trade routes to consider for AES–ECOWAS cooperation



Main trade corridors and three borderlands with stakes for AES–ECOWAS cooperation. The routes shown do not constitute a list of officially selected pilot projects. *Base map: Natural Earth. Routes and areas are indicative.*

Selected borderlands and commercial corridors are promising locations for turning existing cooperation into mutual benefits. Commercial corridors are more than transport routes: their effectiveness also depends on coordination among infrastructure, institutions, markets, and security arrangements. Security threats, trade dependencies, and population movements frequently intersect along these corridors. Geographically targeted arrangements would not require a new regional security institution; they could connect authorities already responsible for securing borders, transport, and civilian movement. This concentration could yield visible benefits in a limited number of places before the political conditions for wider cooperation are established, while preserving the possibility of expansion as confidence grows.

Mali's supply corridors show why protecting these shared lifelines matters. JNIM attacks have disrupted fuel shipments from Dakar and Abidjan, prompting military escorts and emergency trade measures. During June 23–29, 2026, Malian forces reported escorting 940 civilian trucks between Kayes and Bamako without major incident. Senegal and Mali had already initiated patrols near Kidira–Diboli in February 2025. More regular intelligence and operational communication across the border could link these patrols with Malian traffic protection farther inland, reducing reliance on reactive escorts. Renewed Ivorian–Malian security contacts and customs cooperation offer a related foundation along the Abidjan–Bamako corridor. These are not integrated corridor-security agreements today. Their significance is that governments already perform complementary functions that could become more proactive and mutually reinforcing if communication and border coordination were sustained.

The Conakry–Bamako corridor illustrates preventive cooperation. Mali and Guinea have arrangements covering border security, intelligence, transit, and infrastructure at a time when insecurity along Mali's traditional routes has increased the corridor's importance. JNIM's southern Malian presence raises concern about infiltration toward Guinea's eastern commercial and mining areas, although Guinea has not experienced a sustained jihadist campaign. Reinforcing existing agree-

ments could protect trade before disruption becomes more severe.

Farther east, Lomé–Ouagadougou–Niamey illustrates the interplay between political restrictions and insecurity. Trade diverted from the Benin–Niger frontier toward Togo and Burkina Faso, and an OECD assessment documented substantially longer, costlier journeys on alternative routes requiring military protection. Better security could make these routes more reliable, but it cannot alone eliminate border restrictions or customs obstacles. The Ghana–Burkina Faso corridor presents a different opportunity: its defense agreement already combines security cooperation with commercial-route protection in a comparatively less threatened setting.

These are candidates for consideration, not prescribed pilots. Economic significance, documented security vulnerabilities, and political feasibility should guide selection. The Benin–Niger–Nigeria borderlands are particularly threatened, yet bilateral mistrust may make them less immediately feasible. A corridor with more favorable political relationships may be a better starting point even if its security pressures are less acute.

In participating areas, cooperation could begin with shared threat assessments, regular cross-border communication, coordinated national patrols, and procedures for reporting disruptions, all under separate national commands. Along the Dakar–Bamako corridor, these arrangements could connect Senegalese–Malian frontier patrols and Malian convoy protection with customs, police, and transport officials working to sustain civilian and commercial movement. Border police and gendarmerie posts could exchange alerts on security incidents and emerging threats, while customs services could share information on trafficking and transport disruptions. As confidence develops, neighboring governments could consider more formal parallel patrols or coordinated monitoring of vulnerable border crossings, subject to agreement on geographic scope, national responsibilities, information-sharing procedures, and resources.

An appropriately mandated and operational ECOWAS 1,650-person counterterrorism brigade might eventually provide selective support in vulnerable frontier areas, subject to legal authorization and agreement with the states concerned, including for any activities on AES territory. Such possibilities are more demanding than liaison or separately commanded national patrols and should not delay achievable initial cooperation. The force remains under development; its initial planning estimate of $481.5 million reinforces the case for targeting scarce resources rather than assuming a large regional deployment is readily available.

The added value of an AES–ECOWAS framework would be to connect national initiatives across several jurisdictions and make them less dependent on shifting bilateral relations. It could promote consistent security and transit procedures without suppressing legitimate competition among coastal ports. A regional floor of reciprocal commitments could reduce the risk that neighboring states offer incompatible bilateral concessions or competing security arrangements. ECOWAS's October 2026 work toward a regional transport observatory, with anticipated AES and UEMOA participation, illustrates how existing technical initiatives could support this purpose.

> ***The added value of an AES–ECOWAS framework would be to make national initiatives less dependent on shifting bilateral relations.***

Continuity matters beyond individual operations. The MNJTF's experience demonstrates the importance of maintaining political commitments and coordination; Lake Chad stabilization efforts show why security gains may eventually need complementary policing, administration, mediation, and livelihood recovery. As security improves, participating governments could strengthen local police and administrative services, support community mediation, and restore access to markets and livelihoods disrupted by insecurity. The appropriate measures would vary by location and could expand gradually without becoming prerequisites for initial corridor agreements. The initial priority would be to make cooperation visible on the ground through safer travel, fewer disruptions to trade, and a faster response to cross-border incidents. Building on these achievements could then pave the way for more ambitious commitments between the two regional blocs.

06

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

The AES withdrawal left West Africa politically divided without diminishing shared threats or economic dependencies. Armed groups exploit poorly coordinated borders and disrupt supply routes, while fragile institutional arrangements expose commerce and cross-border populations to further uncertainty. Dialogue is now a collective-security imperative, not merely a diplomatic choice.

The two organizations need not reverse their separation or create elaborate new institutions. They can begin with feasible commitments that restore communication, protect shared economic lifelines, safeguard civilians, and gradually establish more dependable relations. Five priorities stand out.

1 ESTABLISH A STANDING SECURITY LIAISON BETWEEN EXISTING AES AND ECOWAS STRUCTURES

Designate counterparts in existing security and intelligence institutions to maintain direct communication among military commands and exchange assessments of shared threats. Regular consultations between intelligence chiefs and military General Staffs could advance ECOWAS's December 2025 call for intelligence consultations with neighboring states. The parties should also establish agreed procedures for notifying counterparts of cross-border incidents, identifying responsible points of contact, and requesting rapid consultation. Such an arrangement could connect bilateral channels that remain unreliable or interrupted, particularly where threats span three or more jurisdictions. Its purpose would first and foremost be dependable information exchange and operational deconfliction, rather than create a joint headquarters at this stage, though that may prove useful over the long term. Responsibilities, delegated authority, and safeguards for sensitive information would require agreement, while deployment decisions would remain national.

2 NEGOTIATE TARGETED AGREEMENTS LINKING BORDER SECURITY AND COMMERCIAL-CORRIDOR PROTECTION

Building on the proposed security liaison arrangements, AES and ECOWAS authorities should invite interested governments to jointly select a small number of shared borderlands and commercial corridors based on economic significance, documented security threats, and political willingness to cooperate. Agreements would coordinate existing national capabilities with support from relevant bodies of both organizations, without requiring a separate multinational force. The objective is to immediately strengthen existing cooperation rather than impose uniform operations across corridors.

In participating areas, governments could share threat assessments, report incidents, and coordinate national patrols, with each force remaining under its own command. Synchronized operations, pooled surveillance or logistical resources, and potential support from regional forces would remain conditional on authorization, resources, and operational readiness. The priority is to improve communication, reduce gaps that armed groups exploit across jurisdic-

tions, and coordinate actions already within national mandates.

Along strategic commercial routes, these measures should connect border police, customs, and transport authorities to anticipate attacks, keep crossings accessible, and minimize disruption to goods and civilians. Existing Senegal–Mali border patrols and Malian convoy protection between Kayes and Bamako offer one starting point; Abidjan–Bamako, Abidjan-Bobo Dioulasso, Conakry–Bamako, Tema–Ouagadougou, and Lomé–Ouagadougou–Niamey present other opportunities. Arrangements should reflect different threats and political conditions: preventive cooperation along the Ghana–Burkina Faso corridor entails different requirements from protecting Mali's supply routes or overcoming Benin–Niger tensions.

The framework should sustain commitments beyond fluctuating bilateral relations, clarify territorial responsibilities, and encourage predictable security and transit procedures. Participating governments could assess practical outcomes—including security incidents, transport disruptions, border delays, civilian safety, and continuity of information exchange—without establishing a new regional chain of command.

3 PROTECT CIVILIAN MOVEMENT AND LIVELIHOODS ALONGSIDE CORRIDOR SECURITY

Participating governments should identify the civilian measures needed to make improved security meaningful for border communities. Priorities could include maintaining police and administrative services at border crossings, protecting access to markets and pastoral routes, establishing reliable channels for reporting threats and abuses, and supporting local mediation where insecurity aggravates community disputes. Local authorities, traders, pastoralists, and displaced populations should help identify these priorities, while governments retain responsibility for civilian protection and accountable policing. As security improves, targeted investments in services and economic recovery could support more durable stabilization without becoming prerequisites for initial cooperation.

4 GIVE TRADE AND CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY DURABLE RECIPROCAL GUARANTEES

Move beyond temporary uncertainty by confirming rights that are already functioning and negotiating clarification where needed. Priorities include reciprocal movement and residence provisions, transit of goods, recognition of relevant documents, and workable transport and vehicle-insurance rules. Where customs or travel systems operate effectively, retain them; where implementation is inconsistent or the legal basis remains transitional, establish compatible documentation and predictable transit procedures that protect traders, transporters, pastoralists, and border communities. These commitments should respect the mandates of existing regional institutions without confusing cooperation with full ECOWAS membership. The objective is a reciprocal and durable legal understanding, not a replacement for arrangements that presently work or an assertion that transitional movement rights have already expired.

5 PROTECT REGIONAL INVESTMENTS AND TECHNICAL SYSTEMS THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED NONMEMBER COOPERATION

The AES–ECOWAS working groups should review potentially affected investments and financial commitments project by project, identifying disbursement and implementation obstacles, access conditions, and decisions needed to ensure continuity. Such decisions must respect the mandates of the financial institutions concerned. EBID's continued engagement with AES countries as nonregional members provides a

basis for protecting investments under differentiated governance and financing rules. GIABA similarly demonstrates that technical cooperation can continue under specified obligations without restoring the rights associated with ECOWAS membership.

The framework could also clarify cooperation on shared services—customs information exchange, health surveillance, electricity interconnections, statistics, and development financing—through existing competent institutions. Particular attention should be paid to maintaining the BCEAO's interoperable payment infrastructure, regional electricity networks, and health services affected by WAHO's relocation. Priority should go to systems on which governments, businesses, and populations already rely, rather than preserving institutional affiliations for their own sake.

Finally, economic authorities could explore dialogue between BCID-AES and established regional development-finance institutions on complementary infrastructure investments. Any future proposal affecting the common currency or cross-border payments should prompt advance consultations with UEMOA and BCEAO to identify potential costs and incompatibilities.

FURTHER READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

01 Sow, Djiby. "Are Bilateral Ties the Route to Renewed West African Security Cooperation?" Institute for Security Studies, October 22, 2026.

02 Sambe, Bakary. "Dakar Consultations: Between ECOWAS and the AES, Dialogue Is No Longer Just a Diplomatic Option, It Is an Imperative of Collective Security." Timbuktu Institute, October 19, 2026.

03 ECOWAS. "Final Communiqué: First Session of the Ministerial Meeting of the Dialogue on Cooperation Between ECOWAS and the AES Confederation." Dakar, October 17, 2026.

04 Nantulya, Paul. "Transforming Africa's Economic Corridors for a New Era." Africa Center for Strategic Studies, October 7, 2026.

05 Samb, Yague. "AES–ECOWAS Disagreements: What Solutions for Regional Stabilization?". Timbuktu Institute, July 17, 2026.

06 Nsaibia, Héni. "Q&A: Why Is Jihadist Violence Escalating in the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria Border Triangle?". ACLED, February 26, 2026.

07 Timbuktu Institute. "JNIM in Kayes - Economic Fragility and Cross-Border Threat" Report, September 13, 2025.

08 Harris-Coble, Lacey, and Olivier J. Walther. "The Resilience of Agricultural Trade Networks in West Africa." *West African Papers* No. 50, OECD Publishing, May 12, 2025.

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