CHAPTER 6

Between ECOWAS Agency towards Global Powers, or Global Powers Agency towards the Sahel?

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Introduction

African agency emanates from the concept of agency, which is basically the capacity to act in one's self-interest when dealing with a counterpart. A compressed definition yields agency as predicated on the ability to act, facilitated or constrained by the structure within which the action is exercised (Giddens 1984) and the impact of circumstances such as history and culture (Bourdieu 1990; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). These universal conceptualisations have been appropriated and re-theorised in African contexts from various standpoints. Self-determination (Mkandawire, 2011) and postcolonialism and decolonisation (Mbembe 2001; Quijano 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) are the popular African perspectives.

Drawing on scholars such as Nunoo and Adu-Boateng (2022) and Coffie and Tiky (2021), this chapter adopts a straightforward definition of African agency as the capacity of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to influence and derive desirable outcomes from countries designated as global powers. It is "the extent to which Africa (read ECOWAS) can act autonomously to shape its place in the world". ECOWAS agency is "the space available to and carved out by African states in molding the agendas of international institutions…". ECOWAS agency is the organisation's "ability to negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves".

Within these conceptualisations, the chapter is focused on areas in which ECOWAS acts in its own interests. This contrasts with circumstances in which external actors act on it.

The guiding question, therefore, is: In which ways does ECOWAS exercise agency towards global powers, and in which ways do global powers exercise agency towards ECOWAS? This question seeks to determine where agency lies in the relations. Related questions are, in terms of action, where does agency lie in ECOWAS's engagement with global powers? And are there instances where agency balances out between ECOWAS and global powers? This last question is about mutual agency in which ECOWAS and a global power derive benefits from the relations, or interdependence. To respond to these questions, the chapter considers the notions of a loss or gain in agency as well as mutual agency based on engagements between ECOWAS and global powers.

Context and focus

This chapter acknowledges that studies have been undertaken on ECOWAS and global powers in various forms in the past. Recent examples include an inquiry into "whether ECOWAS genuinely functions as a guardian of West African collective interests or operates largely as an institutional proxy for external powers" (Musa 2025). One of the major conclusions was that ECOWAS was encountering mismatches between domestic and external engagement agendas. The study was focused on developments after the departure of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS. A similar study analysed the crossroads at which ECOWAS and external actors found themselves over the exit of the three Sahelian states, with Western powers supportive of ECOWAS while opposing non-Western powers such as Russia, which supported the Sahelian states. This was seen as reminiscent of the Cold War era (Sam 2025). These and other studies focus on the coups in the Sahel and their aftermath. The current chapter covers the periods before and after these developments. Additionally, as explained above, many of the analyses on ECOWAS and global powers tend to overarch ECOWAS as an institution, while this

chapter stays very close to ECOWAS. Against this background, certain choices were made to ensure the chapter's coherence.

First, this chapter does not analyse the global powers' explicit relations with individual member states or the West African region generally. It focuses on direct ECOWAS-global power relations. This helps avoid conflating broader West African issues with those dealing with ECOWAS as an institutionalised regional economic community. Individual ECOWAS nations are included in the analysis only when their engagements with the global powers are facilitated through the ECOWAS institutional arrangement. Thus, the focus is on the ECOWAS agency, rather than the agency of member states. Analogously, the analysis focuses on global-power agency towards ECOWAS. A case in point is the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). On face value, it appears to be multilaterally negotiated, yet the agreements are concluded bilaterally between ECOWAS member states and the EU (Bavier 2014). It is, however, important to note that the EU's failure to push for uniform implementation of the EPAs also constitutes a failure of EU agency. To an extent, it shows the limited agency of ECOWAS to align member countries' external trade policies and practices. It also shows the limits of the EU to influence ECOWAS as an institution to align member states around its global trade strategy.

Secondly, the narrow focus means that the chapter eschews instances in which agency is from continental African sources and only transiently ECOWAS-specific. For instance, we leave out activities, projects, and programmes in which ECOWAS is but part of the African Union (AU) and EU engagements. This might seem like a lost analytical opportunity. The justification is that there is sufficient room for an analysis of broader continental agency towards global powers in a separate research endeavour. Such an effort could take the form of an ECOWAS agency towards global powers in the African Union. For instance, the Joint Valletta Action Plan, spelling out African and European principles of engagement on migration, which was agreed in 2015 (EU 2018a), has many ECOWAS perspectives. However, it is a much broader arrangement. Matters of migration become much more relevant when they are closely aligned with ECOWAS-EU

perspectives. In the same vein, the analysis does not include the extensive engagements between ECOWAS and China through the Forum on Africa China Cooperation (FOCAC) unless there is a direct link.

Third, the relations between the global powers and ECOWAS are so extensive that it is not feasible to analyse every aspect. For instance, competing interests between Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone in the ECOWAS potentially make for an interesting investigation of agency. This is, however, left out because it would burst the analysis at the seams. This can be a useful further research inquiry. In another example, there is a density of formal meetings since 2000, so much so that analysing data and information from all of them is impossible for the current chapter. Instead, the chapter drills down to areas of engagement in which substantive agreements, such as financial commitments, are made. This is the essence of tracking agency at the official ECOWAS level.

Fourth, some of the ECOWAS external engagements are mediated through global supranational organisations such as the United Nations (UN). This chapter only analyses such engagements if they include both ECOWAS and one or several global powers, and the supranational organisation, like the UN. Direct engagements between ECOWAS and supranational organisations are eschewed because they would muddy the analysis. This chapter takes it that international organisations such as the UN are not global powers, but global governments

Fifth is the data access problem. Access to data is patchy because some of the sources about official engagements are available year-on-year, while others are not available. This forces the current chapter to use only the information and data available publicly, with the understanding that future studies would go out of their way to derive the data for a fuller analysis. This data is derived from the ECOWAS website and the websites of the respective global powers. Only lightly does the chapter use sources other than the official ones. This ensures that the chapter keeps close to secondary literature derived from primary organisational sources, in place of primary data collection. Future research can undertake more extensive secondary literature syntheses.

ECOWAS and China

Among ECOWAS's external economic partners, China has emerged as one of the most significant actors in West Africa. Official diplomatic and representational relations are, however, relatively recent, as they were formalised only in 2003 with the appointment of the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria as simultaneously the Chinese ambassador to ECOWAS (Yu Dunhai 2026). An imbalance in relations is evident from the basic fact that ECOWAS does not have a designated ambassador in Beijing.

The most recent highlight of these relations was China's handover of a new ECOWAS headquarters building, christened "The Eye of West Africa", strategically located along the Airport Road in Abuja in April 2026. To understand where agency lies in this initiative, it is worthwhile following the trajectory leading to the official opening of the building. During the handover of the building, it was noted that the initial plans for the Chinese donation had been made during a China-ECOWAS Joint Committee on Economic and Trade Cooperation in 2015 (ECOWAS 2026).

The agreement for the construction of the facility was signed in March 2018, financed through an initial $31.6 million Chinese Government grant (the figure was reported at $56.57 million in 2026), with the then Ivorian President of the ECOWAS Commission, Jean-Claude Brou, and then Chinese ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Zhou Pingjian, appending their signatures (ECOWAS 2018a). An implementation agreement was entered into in 2019, with Jean-Claude Brou signing for the Commission and Zhao Linxiang, the Chinese Economic and Commercial Counsellor, signing for China (ECOWAS 2019). The foundation was laid in December 2022 (ECOWAS 2022a), strategically coinciding with the 62nd Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government. Symbolically, the event was graced by heads of state, the host and donor of the land on which the facility stood, then Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, and then Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, President of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló (deposed in a coup d'état in 2025), and President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio. Also

present were the Gambian President of the ECOWAS Commission, Omar Alieu Touray, and the then Chinese ambassador of China to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Cui Jianchun. A notable aspect during this event included the reporting that the Chinese entity responsible for the funding was China Aid. A statement noted that China was "keen on expanding diplomatic relations with Africa through support for construction projects like the new ECOWAS Commission headquarters" and "to promote and support Africa's infrastructure development" in Africa (ECOWAS 2022a). Other significant factors included the framing of the facility as "a symbol of the unity and brotherhood of ECOWAS Member States" and China, the expansion of office space for the ECOWAS Commission (the executive arm of the REC), the Court of Justice, and the Parliament (ECOWAS 2022a).

The seriousness with which the building was taken is seen in the establishment of the "Ad Hoc Ministerial Committee on the Construction of the New ECOWAS Community Institutions Headquarters" (ECOWAS 2023a, 2023b). Representatives came from Benin, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, with regular physical meetings held on site in Abuja under the auspices of the ECOWAS Commissioner for Infrastructure, Energy and Digitalisation (ECOWAS 2023b). One of the meetings coincided with a convening of the ECOWAS foreign ministers in July 2024, during which the ministers were conducted around the building by managers from the Chinese company undertaking the construction work, the Shaanxi Construction Engineering Group Company (SCEGC) International Corporation, and Chinese embassy officials (ECOWAS 2024a). During an inspection by the ECOWAS Commission's Vice President, Damtien L. Tchintchibidja, in November 2025, it came to light that aspects of the construction under the Nigerian government and the Federal Capital Territory Administration (in charge of Abuja) were lagging (while, ostensibly, the Chinese part of the construction was progressing well) (ECOWAS 2025a).

When the Chinese ambassador to ECOWAS, Cui Jianchun, bade farewell to the ECOWAS Commission President, Omar Alieu Touray, in March 2024, the donation of the ECOWAS headquarters was pointed out as a major highlight of his tour of duty. More importantly, the

Chinese ambassador invited ECOWAS to participate in the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) scheduled for later that year. This would ostensibly showcase the new headquarters as a testament to the importance of the ECOWAS-China relations (ECOWAS 2024b). When the ECOWAS delegation ultimately travelled to Beijing for the FOCAC summit in September 2024, the Commission's President was tellingly accompanied by the Commissioner for Infrastructure, Energy and Digitalisation (ECOWAS 2024c).

China's construction of the ECOWAS headquarters followed over two decades of ever-increasing engagements. Infrastructure development has been the main area of engagement. For instance, when ECOWAS signed an agreement and established a cooperation committee with China in 2012, infrastructure was highlighted as a major area of need for ECOWAS. During that occasion, the then Vice-President of the ECOWAS Commission, Toga Gayewea McIntosh, pointed out that the "2,000-kilometre Trans-African Highway between Dakar and Lagos" linking the subregion's fifteen states would "contribute to facilitating intra-community trade and movement of citizens" (Chinese Embassy in South Africa 2012).

The donation of the ECOWAS building is a perfect case where critical and supportive sentiments came to the fore. Positive sentiments included China's aid to a subregional organisation whose old office facilities had reduced its capacity for effective. It was pointed out that the member states were cash-strapped and could not have mustered the resources to put up the ultra-modern building. In fact, at that point, some member states were falling behind in their membership contributions to the organisation (see Marsh 2012).

The ECOWAS headquarters donation is but one in an ECOWAS-China relationship founded on strong trade and investment engagements. Fundamentally, China is the number one trading partner of the subregions. Chinese financing has provided many ECOWAS member states with alternative sources of development funding at a time when Western funding has lessened (see Akyeampong 2015: 11-12). Infrastructure deficits remain a major constraint to economic growth. China has contributed significantly to addressing the region's infrastructure deficits

and supporting broader economic development objectives. This is not a direct ECOWAS-China phenomenon. In a roundtable for ECOWAS ambassadors accredited to Beijing, for instance, it was recommended that "Chinese partners should also look to support cross-border and regional programmes to support regional integration effectively" (Development Reimagined ND). It, however, creates an environment in which ECOWAS as an institution engages with comfort with the Chinese. The Chinese ambassador to ECOWAS, Yu Dunhai, stated as much in an article in Nigeria in April 2026. He said that "leveraging the FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative, bilateral cooperation [had] extended from traditional infrastructure, such as roads and ports" (Yu Dunhai 2026).

Nevertheless, debates persist regarding the long-term implications of China's growing economic presence, particularly with respect to debt sustainability, local industrial development, technology transfer, and economic dependency. Negatives in the donation of the ECOWAS headquarters, for instance, included that, first, the building would be used by Chinese actors for surveillance of ECOWAS activities. This was particularly in the wake of charges that the Chinese were doing espionage on African leaders through tech insertions on the African Union headquarters, which they had donated in 2012. The insinuation was that the China-constructed building could be used for espionage and hacking on ECOWAS activities and data (see Marsh 2018). Second, there was no honour for ECOWAS, a 15-member organisation established in 1975, to require Chinese assistance in putting up a building to house its operations. Third, China's donation was a form of soft power to influence a favourable environment to close deals beneficial to it in the subregion through aid. Some saw the donation as a strategic calculation rather than an altruistic move that helped boost China's geopolitical position vis-à-vis Western competitors. Others insisted that the donation was genuine and well-meaning. This sentiment came from Chinese commentators who saw criticism as largely Western-driven rather than coming from ECOWAS sources. Moreover, the visibility of the Chinese-funded headquarters contributed to projecting China's soft power through infrastructure diplomacy (Olander 2026). This reinforced China's image as a development partner committed to addressing Africa's infrastructure

challenges and strengthening its strategic presence in a subregion of geopolitical significance.

The image of strong ECOWAS-China relations belies areas of positive and negative complexities. For instance, when ECOWAS sought a United Nations Security Council resolution for sanctions on a then-ECOWAS member, Mali, China and Russia used their veto power to reject the bid (Al Jazeera 2022). Yet, China has, in the past, channelled resources for peace and security in Mali through the UN (Soule 2021).

There is a need for further research on ECOWAS-China relations, particularly because publicly accessible data and information are scarce. Overall, it is evident that China prefers engaging with individual West African states, with engagements through the ECOWAS being largely symbolic. Commenting on the Forum on China Africa Cooperation Summit held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2021, ECOWAS-China scholar Folashade Soule (2021) recommended an enhanced "bridging role" for ECOWAS to play in charting more productive relations.

Agency analysis

Like the rest of the continent, China has come from a low engagement base in the 1990s to the leading trade and economic partner with ECOWAS. Likewise, Chinese agency towards Africa has been increasing, and African agency towards China has been rising. Chinese agency towards ECOWAS is founded on the fact that it is a new and rising power in the region. As such, the novelty in the engagement is a point of mutual agency capital. In this scheme of things, it is generally thought that the Chinese benefit from the relations, and ECOWAS benefits too. Analysing the relations, however, shows that Chinese agency towards ECOWAS is far more pronounced than the reverse.

Infrastructure development is the sector in which the Chinese have agential capabilities and where Africans, including those in ECOWAS, have one of the greatest needs. As we see in the data on the engagements above, one of the first areas of agreement between China and ECOWAS in 2012 was primed with cooperation in which China would help ECOWAS to address massive transport infrastructure needs. While ECOWAS and

China act towards each other in the infrastructure sector, making it a case of mutual agency, it is the bigger actor in the relations, China, that has greater agency in the relations. This creates vulnerabilities, including real or potential to be exploited by China.

China's donation of the "Eye of West Africa", the new ECOWAS headquarters completed and handed over in 2026, is a good example for the analysis of agency in the engagements. It is indeed the main source of data on ECOWAS-China relations from the available data. From one viewpoint, this project is an example of Chinese soft power as a form of agency, built around infrastructure diplomacy. On the other hand, it is a case of ECOWAS's lack of agency as read from a dependency perspective. The basic premise for critics is that ECOWAS and China should indeed collaborate as much as possible. The question is how they should go about partnering in a way that creates equality and therefore mutual agency.

The fact that the agreement for the donation of the building was made during a joint trade meeting suggests that it has mutual trade benefits, which equals mutual agency between ECOWAS and China. Power asymmetry can, however, be seen in the fact that during the signing of the agreement in 2018, the ECOWAS president, representing the whole ECOWAS regional economic community (REC), signed the agreement for the Chinese donation, while the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS signed for China. Whether it was a logistical challenge or otherwise, the Chinese side could have been represented in the signing ceremony by someone higher up in the Chinese government or the ruling Communist Party of China. Agency was therefore more on the Chinese than the ECOWAS side. Chinese agency was again on display when an agreement for the construction work was entered into in 2019, when the ECOWAS president signed, with his counterpart being a relatively junior Chinese diplomat. Various reports on the project showed that Chinese officials, particularly ambassadors, were in constant contact with ECOWAS officials, making them perhaps the most valuable of foreign diplomats in Abuja.

The laying of the foundation during the heads of state summit in 2022 was a form of ECOWAS agency. The choice of the occasion provided an opportunity for ECOWAS leaders to showcase the project

as evidence of subregional projects being implemented. Chinese agency could be read as supporting an integration project. China was included in the commemorative event, thereby gaining soft power. ECOWAS agency was evident in the officiation of the launch of the construction by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, then Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, and President of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, and President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio. Nigerian agency was palpable by dint of being the physical location on which the facility was being raised. The presence of many leaders, the photo-op, and the ceremony were a form of joint agency for ECOWAS and China.

The fact that the ECOWAS headquarters donation was delivered through the China International Development Cooperation Agency (China Aid) lent the initiative a foreign aid character. One could compare this to foreign assistance through other development assistance entities, of which the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was the most prominent before its closure in July 2026. It may be that the USAID made much more in donations to ECOWAS. However, in donating a building, the Chinese reversed the narrative, which gave them much more agency, particularly as this happened as the US and other global powers were pulling back from the subregion.

Chinese agency was evident in the fact that China Aid had only been established in 2018 and was delivering a tangible brick-and-mortar donation. Chinese agency as a strategy can be deduced from the statements made by Chinese officials, linking the donation to China's capacity and capability in infrastructure development. The implication was that, just as with the ECOWAS headquarters, Chinese actors could assist ECOWAS in addressing the many infrastructure gaps it faced. In using the language of "brotherhood," the Chinese were striking chords of fraternity, a key trope that China has leveraged under the rubric of South-South cooperation. This created a sense of mutual agency in the sense that China and ECOWAS were being treated as equal partners.

ECOWAS lost agency in the donation of the building because ECOWAS member states relied on an external actor to put up the buildings in which important official business, such as the Commission, Court of Justice,

and Parliament, is conducted. The image presented was that ECOWAS needed the building because its former facilities were dilapidated and too small to accommodate a growing number of officials. This was a loss of agency for ECOWAS because it exposed its vulnerabilities to China, over and above the questionable logic of running an organisation if it couldn't muster resources to house the various officials. Critics sought to cast the building as a danger to ECOWAS. The surveillance trope that accompanied the construction process was reputational damage to China and, therefore, a loss of agency. Similar negativity, such as China's role in the debt burden in the subregion were thrown into the analysis, requiring China to respond in damage control mode.

Interestingly, the ECOWAS officials took their role in the construction of the building quite seriously, by, for instance, setting up a construction committee comprising representatives from several member states. This is a form of partial agency because, on the one hand, there is a sense of ownership; on the other hand, the construction committee was working on a project donated by an external actor. It could have been a case of the ECOWAS agency if such a committee had mobilised resources from member states for the construction of the headquarters. Indeed, it was a loss of agency when viewed from the perspective that China was "donating" the building to ECOWAS on ECOWAS's own soil or, in a manner of speaking, a visitor came to a homestead and built a house for the homestead owner.

Chinese agency is seen in the fact that the Chinese company in charge of the construction work, Shaanxi Construction Engineering Group Company (SCEGC), was marketing itself to the foreign ministers as they inspected the works. The Chinese embassy officials who frequently updated ECOWAS member states and officials were making useful connections with influential foreign policy actors at the ECOWAS member state and ECOWAS secretariat levels. In the revelation that the Nigerian contractor handling aspects of the construction was behind schedule, ECOWAS lost agency because it was compared directly with Shaanxi Construction Engineering Group Company's meeting of its timelines.

Mutual agency can be seen in the Chinese ambassador's invitation

to ECOWAS officials to attend the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) conference in 2024. Although the Chinese extended the invitation, ECOWAS honoured the invitation, thus making it a mutual engagement. It is noteworthy that an ECOWAS official responsible for infrastructure was in the delegation, at the very least signalling appreciation for the headquarters donation, but also perhaps showing ECOWAS interest in continued partnership in infrastructure project funding. From such viewpoints, we see agency playing out at the level of the Chinese, for their invitation of ECOWAS to the FOCAC conference, and at the level of ECOWAS, for strategically including an infrastructure official in the delegation.

The building was handed over in April 2026, and a ceremony was held in July 2026. The holding of these two events nearly back-to-back was clearly a marketing and positioning strategy to publicise and raise its visibility. This is the case when you consider the many other occasions that were crafted around the project from its initiation. But publicity has an agential objective. In the 2026 events, it was stated that China was keen to collaborate with ECOWAS under the framework of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This was strategy as agency because there were no clear links between the building, ECOWAS, and BRI. If indeed there are BRI projects in the subregion, it appears that ECOWAS has not played much of a role in their being rolled out. Yet, the ECOWAS officials had been granted an opportunity to negotiate with their Chinese counterparts for subregional BRI projects. These were quite feasible given that China has demonstrated the capacity to fulfil infrastructure projects when it is committed to them.

While direct ECOWAS-China agency is positive, though imbalanced, agency shifts into negative for China from an ECOWAS official when China's broader interests come into play. A case in point, as discussed above, was China's use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to support the separatist Sahelian nation of Mali when it faced UN sanctions. Generally, China has not been supportive of ECOWAS's peace and security initiatives in the restive Sahel region, where military coups and terrorist-inspired instability have rendered life quite precarious. China is seen as sympathetic to ECOWAS's breakaway nations of Mali,

Niger, and Burkina Faso. It showed that mutual agency disappears when interests differ.

ECOWAS and European Union Relations

Evolution of the relations

Of all ECOWAS-global powers relations, the ECOWAS-European Union (EU) relationship is the most established, at least going by publicly available information. It is worth noting upfront that this analysis is partial for various reasons. First, this section of the chapter starts with a brief comment on the history of the relations, fully aware that an extensive historical account is necessary given the equally extensive engagements going back to colonial times. Second, there are several sources of data and information on the ECOWAS-EU relations. Analysing most, if not all, of the sources is not feasible due to space limitations. One such source left out, and potentially a source of future research, is the European Development Fund.

A brief historical trajectory of activities and projects provides a pathway for understanding how agency plays out between ECOWAS and the EU. Analysts have argued that the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 was inspired by the European integration process that ultimately led to the creation of the EU (UK Essays 2025). The relations were, however, formalised only in 1998. Two years later, in 2000, the first ECOWAS-EU ministerial meeting, which would become an annual diplomatic fixture of the partnership, was convened at the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2000). After this meeting, a troika meeting system in practice to date was established. ECOWAS representatives in the troika include the Chairperson of the Commission or his/her representative (usually the head of a state), the incoming and outgoing chairpersons, and the ECOWAS President, who is the head of the secretariat. On the EU side are the foreign ministers from the EU nation holding the presidency and representatives of the incoming and outgoing EU presidencies.

During the first convening referenced above, the reasons motivating

the formalisation of the relations were that the EU wanted to "play its role fully on the international arena, in particular by developing a common foreign and security policy" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2000). ECOWAS, on the other hand, was "intensifying efforts to achieve wider regional consultation and deeper cooperation … to create a single regional market in West Africa based on trade liberalisation, a common external tariff and a single monetary zone" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2000). The partnership would ostensibly help the partner organisations achieve these respective objectives.

At this point, much of the EU aid was channelled directly to West African member states under the now-moribund European Development Fund (EDF) rather than through ECOWAS. During that first ministerial meeting, a financing agreement worth € 1.95 million was reached, towards boosting regional trade. The funds were to be provided to member states through ECOWAS. A similar amount went to support conflict prevention and stability in the ECOWAS region (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2000). Similar planned meetings were held on the issues of conflict prevention and peace mediation, alternating between a European capital and an African one, often accompanied by financial support from the EU (see, for instance, ECOWAS 2024).

For the EDF funding cycle between 2002 and 2007, a new practice emerged. Policy formulation and implementation were agreed collectively between the EU and ECOWAS, giving the latter an influential role (Saleh 2025). This collective approach was short-lived, as a major change occurred in 2008. This is captured thus:

> "Starting with the 10th EDF (2008–2013), the EU raised concerns about ECOWAS's limited absorption capacity, implementation delays, lack of transparency, and failure to meet EU pillar assessment standards. As a result, the EU reduced the funds ECOWAS could directly manage. By the 11th EDF (2014–2020), ECOWAS was no longer entitled to manage funds directly and retained only limited oversight over fund management and allocation. This has led to

> friction in the relationship between ECOWAS and the EU, with ECOWAS seeking more ownership over the funding, while the EU favours implementing projects through intermediary bodies, such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), to manage the funds" (Saleh 2025).

Following the change in funding methods in 2008, the next major shift came in 2021 when the EU changed its external funding model. This is when the EU scrapped the EDF approach and launched the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe as an aid and development finance vehicle. It constituted a lessening of ECOWAS-EU relations on several fronts. First, it further reduced the amount of money that would be channelled to or through ECOWAS. Second, it also broadened engagement partners to include non-state actors. Third, it prioritised the EU over ECOWAS's issues, thus reducing the latter's sense of ownership in the relationship (Saleh 2025).

The third shift in EU-ECOWAS relations was evident in 2023. In a communique after a ministerial meeting, it was stated that the parties would "boost public and private investment in support of large-scale sustainable investments in West Africa, supported by Team Europe Initiatives, under the EU's Global Gateway strategy" (EU 2023). The EU's Global Gateway is an ambitious initiative launched in 2021 to mobilise billions of Euros for worldwide investment in digital technologies and energy, transport, and other sectors.

Institutional and organisational engagements

As such, EU reporting on EDF funding for the 2014 – 2020 period could not be said to benefit ECOWAS alone, but to benefit other actors, including non-state actors, in the West African region broadly. Although ECOWAS has had a circumscribed role in EDF funding since 2008, formal relations have continued. This is particularly in the regional peace and security domain. A few examples suffice. The EU provided €29 million between 2013 and 2019 (Saleh 2025). A further €20 million,

jointly cofinanced by the EU (€16.4 million) and the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, BMZ (€4 million), in the peace and security sector, was made between 2019 and 2023. In the period 2016 to 2018, the EU supported the implementation of the ECOWAS Anti-Terrorism Strategy in countries in the Chad Basin region, providing resources to operationalize the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (EU 2017).

EU's support for ECOWAS as an institution, including its day-to-day running, has been a continuous area of engagement over the years. Perhaps in appreciation of the EU support, ECOWAS awarded a certification of recognition to the Head of the European Union Delegation to Nigeria and to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Samuela Isopi, in 2023 (ECOWAS 2023e). Institutional and organizational support for the ECOWAS secretariat and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) garnered €4 million between 2019 and 2023. This was co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (Saleh 2025). This was a case of the EU and Germany institutionally supporting an ECOWAS financial institution, the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development. In a 2023 workshop to assess ECOWAS's compliance in donor-funding engagements with the EU, four areas were identified as needing improvement: a) internal control; b) exclusion from access to funding; c) publication of information on recipients; and d) protection of personal data (ECOWAS 2023c).

In a joint ministerial meeting in 2018, the EU lobbied for ECOWAS institutions such as the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) and the West African Development Bank (BOAD) to be more involved in the partnership. This was meant to "foster ownership of financing mechanisms" (EU 2018B). This was in the specific context of the roll-out of the EU External Investment Plan (EIP) (EU 2018B). In 2023, it was also reported that the EU and the German Agency for International Development (GIZ) were assisting ECOWAS in improvements in data protection and ownership of development aid programmes. While the EU lobbied ECOWAS member states to sign the Economic Partnership

Agreements (EPAs), the ECOWAS side was more desirous of "greater flexibility on the issue of the EPA, in particular the implementation schedule of the interim EPAs" (EU 2018b).

Peace, Security, and Stability

It is worth noting upfront that the area of armed conflict and stability has been a mainstay of EU-ECOWAS relations year in, year out, from the elections-inspired turmoil in Côte d'Ivoire in the early 2000s to military coups in present times. Over the years, the EU has sent observer missions during elections in the region, working alongside ECOWAS's own observer missions. The EU also supported the return to democratic governance in the Gambia, through the ECOWAS Mission to The Gambia (ECOMIG), and in Guinea-Bissau through the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau (EU 2017). The EU and Germany are equal financiers of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations (EPSAO). The EU encouraged the sub-region to diversify sources of funding. A communique stated that there was "the need to explore more avenues to increase the financial contributions by the AU and regional organisations such as ECOWAS to peacekeeping and other security-related missions on the African continent" (EU 2017).

The two organisations were aligned on the linkage between the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy and the EU Strategy and Action Plan for the Gulf of Guinea maritime problems, such as illegal fishing and piracy (EU 2017). The EU provided support for institutions and initiatives such as the Multinational Maritime Coordination Centres (MMCCs), the West African Regional Centre for Maritime Safety (CRESMAO), the Programme to Support the West African Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (SWAIMS), and the Programme for the Enhancement of West African Regional Fisheries Governance (PESCAO) (EU 2018b). Implementation was, however, not proceeding as planned on some of these initiatives. In 2023, for instance, a delay in the operationalisation of the Multinational Maritime Coordinating Centre (MMCC) was reported. It was to be based in Cabo Verde (EU 2023). The finger of blame was implicitly pointed at ECOWAS for this delay.

Support to counter organized crime and cybercrime for the period 2020 to 2024 was reported at €41 million (Saleh 2025). Projects were thereafter devolved to the national level, but still through ECOWAS. An example is the donation in 2022 of a digital laboratory to the Gambian authorities under the EU-funded project "Organised Crime: West African Response on Cybersecurity and fight against Cybercrime" (OCWAR-C) (ECOWAS 2022b). The donation was made through a public event in Banjul. To combat crime, the two partners held a series of meetings under the auspices of the "Organized Crime: West African Response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T) project" to plan and implement mitigating action, with Germany providing some of the resources (ECOWAS 2023f). A similar project was launched for Burkina Faso in the same period as a partnership of ECOWAS, the EU, and France (ECOWAS 2021).

In January 2024, three then-member states, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, announced plans to withdraw from ECOWAS. This was after ECOWAS imposed sanctions following military coups in each of the three countries with continuous borders, inspiring the phrase coup belt. In July 2024, they formed the Alliance of Sahelian States, effectively a new African REC. This was a development around which the EU and ECOWAS closed ranks. A review of meetings over this period showed an increased focus on commitment to democratic values and condemnation of unconstitutional changes of government in many joint convenings from 2024 onwards. Due to the seriousness of the instability, the EU started appointing an envoy for the Sahel, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, in 2013. Indeed, the EU was visionary in creating the position of a Sahelian ambassador because, the following year, the G5, comprising the five Sahelian nations, was established in what some saw as a snub of ECOWAS conflict resolution efforts in the enclave of the broader subregion (see Welz 2022). The EU special representative appointed in 2024 is former Portuguese foreign minister João Gomes Cravinho (European Council 2024). He continued engaging on the instability in the region through ECOWAS, even as he attempted to persuade the so-called "Sahelexit", a name coined to mimic the exit of Britain from the EU – Brexit.

A link between ECOWAS, the EU, and the African Union was evident

when a workshop to review an EU-funded African Peace & Security Architecture project was held in 2023. The workshop was convened as the project was ending; it aimed to "reinforce the ownership of the project by the respective stakeholders", among other monitoring and evaluation objectives (ECOWAS 2023d). Participants, including those representing ECOWAS Peace Fund and early warning system entities, explored "other funding provisions under the European Union" and recommended continuation of the support (ECOWAS 2023d).

Migration

Migrations from the ECOWAS region to Europe were of particular interest to the EU. In 2018, it appeared the EU was keen on tackling the root causes of migration, while ECOWAS "reiterated the importance of the full implementation of the ECOWAS flagship Protocol on Free Movement of Persons to encourage skill, labour and talent mobility" (EU 2018b).

One of the major outcomes of the 2023 ministerial meeting (referenced above), during which the EU aligned its engagements with the Global Gateway strategy, was the announcement of a €100 million agreement between the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). Concluded under the auspices of the EU, the money was to support climate action and environmental sustainability projects in the ECOWAS region with an emphasis on clean and renewable energy (European Investment Bank 2025). Climate change and energy as the nexus of the relations was evident in the launch of a postgraduate scholarship programme in 2022 (ECOWAS 2022c). Funding came from the EU, and nine universities from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Cape Verde were selected competitively to host students. Partnership in the education sector has included a comparative exchange of ideas on the relevance of education to developmental and regional integration goals. Such was the case when officials from the two subregions met in 2025 under the Africa-Europe Partnership to Exchange on Education Reforms (PEERs) programme, with the French Agency for International Development, Expertise France, providing technical advice (ECOWAS 2025a).

Agency analysis

Based on an analysis of the sources accessed during this study, the relationship between ECOWAS and the EU is, for the most part, mutual from an agency perspective. A major contributor to this is that ECOWAS and the EU have a long-running relationship. ECOWAS officials know the EU better than other global powers, for better or for worse. The fact that the EU integration was already underway when ECOWAS was established in 1975 has been latched onto to argue that the EU provides a model that ECOWAS should emulate. Agency is therefore fundamentally with the EU rather than ECOWAS at this fundamental ideational level. The fact that formal relations between the two parties commenced only in 1998 shows a mutual lack of agency towards each other until relatively recently.

Once formal relations were solemnised, structure emerged quite quickly. The consistency of ministerial meetings since 2000 has created a stable engagement mechanism within which the partners exercise agency towards each other. The composition of the troika system suggests that each side is well represented and that the agendas are mutually agreed. Differing agency emerges once one delves into the nature of engagements. The rotation of meetings between an ECOWAS capital and an EU capital suggests mutual agency.

From the first ministerial meeting in 2000, it was evident that one of the top EU objectives was to use the partnership with ECOWAS as a showcase on the international stage. ECOWAS, on the other hand, looked to the EU to deepen internal integration at home. The EU agency motivations are therefore much more ambitious and global, while ECOWAS agency interests in the relations are quite domestic.

Over the last twenty-six years (as of 2026), the relationship has been one of donor-recipient, where agency lies with the donor. The financial support that the EU provided to ECOWAS through the European Development Fund in the early 2000s was lopsided because, although agreed multilaterally, the funding was disbursed directly to ECOWAS member states. This was a case of partial agency on the part of ECOWAS. This was corrected for the period 2002 to 2007 as a semblance of mutual

agency emerged as ECOWAS had an input in the EU's financing. This collective agency was short-lived.

From 2008 onwards to the present, the EU progressively increased its agency in the relations, just as ECOWAS has progressively ceded agency. In that year, the EU changed the terms of engagement only a decade after formal relations were established. Before the 2008 changes, ECOWAS had been managing the funds for subregional projects. The EU created new layers for disbursement of funds to ECOWAS, such as GIZ, in a manner that gave more agency in overall terms. This was in response to various concerns discussed above, including suggestions of impropriety and inefficiency. These charges were, in essence, the cause of ECOWAS's loss of agency in the relations. The friction between the two partners that was reported at the tail of the 2010s decade was a show of contestation over agency. In a donor-recipient relationship, however, ECOWAS had to make do with reduced agency because it couldn't force the EU to channel its resources to it rather than directly to member states. In fact, member states probably appreciated receiving the funds directly.

The changes in the relationship in the mid-2010s further eroded ECOWAS's institutional agency. Rather than use the good offices of ECOWAS, the EU included non-state actors, some of whom might have been critical to ECOWAS as an intergovernmental body.

The changes in the early 2020s further reduced ECOWAS's agency. It was a form of competitive agency because the EU's launch of the Global Gateway strategy, as discussed above, was partly aimed at countering China's Belt and Road Initiative globally. This shift could be read as an extension of the EU's further reduction of aid to ECOWAS in favour of investments with returns or a return on investment. Essentially, EU aid or charity was being replaced by a hard-nosed and self-interested proclivity as the region (EU) faced an economic downturn.

Realism can, however, be read in the fact that the ECOWAS has continued to engage with the EU. ECOWAS leaders and officials must have concluded that there was little they could do as the EU consistently amassed more power in the relations. Once the EU raised its agency, ECOWAS seemed to settle into the role allocated to it, particularly because the bigger partner was providing the resources. And indeed,

the reporting throughout the years shows that the EU has continued to disburse resources to the subregion, whether directly through the institutional architecture of ECOWAS or to the ECOWAS member states and non-state actors. This can be read as realistic mutual agency in that ECOWAS still, supposedly, benefits from the EU.

If ECOWAS had stood its ground to insist that the engagements be conducted on an official ECOWAS-EU basis, the relations could either have broken down or the EU could have relented. A major probable factor that led ECOWAS to live with reduced agency is that the EU funded and continues to fund its organisational operations. While this can be read as mutual agency, the fact that the EU institutional funding for ECOWAS extends its influence into practices, including decision-making, implies that the EU has great agency in the relations. The reporting on the EU's support of ECOWAS as an institution brings indications of administrative and managerial challenges in the organisation. While this is a case of mutual agency indicative of areas in which the EU assists ECOWAS to improve on delivery, it is also a case of ECOWAS's loss of agency because a partner is essentially pointing out areas that need improvement when this could have been done internally.

The EU's support for the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) is another layer of its agency vis-à-vis ECOWAS. This is intriguing because institutional or organisational support is expected to go to other parts or sections of ECOWAS, not the financial institution. It could have been mutual agency if it were an agreement on a joint financial agreement or project. In many instances, the EU has encouraged ECOWAS to take greater ownership of the joint projects. In other words, the EU is desirous of ECOWAS supporting its vision of the partnership, given that the agendas are for the most part set in Brussels. This is a case of the EU steering ECOWAS towards mutual agency on its own terms.

The one area where ECOWAS and the EU have had differing agency objectives of the partners is the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). Over the years, the EU has aggressively pushed the EPAs in a manner that suggests it has a bigger stake than ECOWAS. ECOWAS's resistance is a form of agency, suggesting that the organisation does not

see the EPAs benefiting it and that attempting to buy time is meant to enable it to prepare to understand EPAs to boost its agency.

Overall, peace, security, and stability are the greatest issues of focus for the EU. Agency is directed towards creating peace so that productive relations in trade can be structured. In nearly all the peace and conflict resolution initiatives, ECOWAS loses agency by the mere fact that an external actor is involved in the internal affairs of a supposedly independent subregion. EU's support for the ECOWAS Mission to The Gambia (ECOMIG) and the ECOWAS Mission to Guinea-Bissau, for instance, shows limited internal weaknesses.

The biggest loss of agency for both ECOWAS and the EU is the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS and their establishment of the Association of Sahel States (AES). The main external actor that benefited from the unprecedented development is Russia, as we shall see below.

The EU was prescient in creating the G5 sub-organisation comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in 2013. It was a loss of agency for ECOWAS as it was being bypassed, perhaps due to its incapacities. Even when we consider the EU's continued appointment of envoys to the G5, it is still a loss of agency because the G5 organisation would not have been necessary had the security issues in the subregion been handled proactively.

In some of the engagements, there is a sense of EU donor fatigue. This comes through when the EU responds to calls for support by urging ECOWAS to diversify sources of funding and to mobilise internally. This is a form of EU agency because the global power is telling ECOWAS that peace and security funds should primarily come from the affected countries, the subregion, and Africa more broadly. It would have been a case of the ECOWAS agency had it taken up the challenge, making it unnecessary for the EU to express frustration at the begging from the subregional body. At the same time, this would reduce the EU's agency.

An area of close partnership, as we saw above, relates to maritime resources in the Atlantic Ocean. It is a matter of mutual agency as both parties lose out on illegal fishing. The EU region gets the bulk of its fish supplies from the subregion. Fishing is also big business, with many EU

businesses and industries involved. ECOWAS countries benefit from trade and related fishing industry activities. This raises the question of which actors are involved in illegal fishing so much so that they attract a mutual ECOWAS-EU partnership. Apart from independent cartels' involvement in illegalities, Chinese actors have been involved in the recent past. EU agency is therefore partly aimed at curbing Chinese involvement, legal or illegal, in the Atlantic Ocean.

As we saw earlier, in the delays in setting up the Multinational Maritime Coordinating Centre (MMCC) in Cabo Verde, the finger of blame was pointed at ECOWAS. The EU's expression of frustration with this project is a form of circumscribed agency, and ECOWAS's agency is limited due to a failure to meet its side of the agreement. However, why was ECOWAS not acting expeditiously in setting up the facility? It could be that this was not a priority for ECOWAS as it was for the EU.

For the most part, the EU generally favours bilateral agreements, while maintaining the subregional facilitative role of the ECOWAS agency. The security is a case in point. Ordinary crime and cybercrime, as we saw above, are among the areas where ECOWAS plays a coordinating role. This gives the ECOWAS agency. The donations of digital anti-crime gadgets and devices, in several public events in member states, are a symbolic show of mutual agency, which can, however, be read as more of an EU than an ECOWAS agency because the EU is the donor. Probably the EU opted for mutual agency because organised crime, including terrorism, transgresses borders and is better done through the subregional coordinating capacity of ECOWAS.

In the area of migration, ECOWAS and the EU have different agency motivations. A review of the engagements shows the EU was more focused on the issue compared to ECOWAS. The EU pushed for policies and projects that would stem the flow of African migrants to Europe. ECOWAS, in a laissez-faire manner, sought support for regional trade integration as a means of boosting trade as an avenue for development.

ECOWAS and the United States of America Relations

Recent evolution in relations

The most recent and perhaps the first official agreement between ECOWAS and the United States was entered into in 2014. This was a trade and investment agreement, which, among other things, established a United States-ECOWAS Council on Trade and Investment, with representation by the ECOWAS Commission and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2014). The agreement followed a 2013 meeting between President Barack Obama and the presidents of Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Cape Verde in Washington, during which the trade partnership framework was agreed (USTR 2013). The Council was meant to meet annually. However, no publicly available information shows the convening of these meetings. In 2018, ECOWAS established a technical working group to implement the agreement to "optimise the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to boost the economy of the region through trade" (Trade Law Centre 2018). Beyond the announcement of the establishment of the technical team, however, there is no further information on the implementation of the pact. There are two speculative ways one can interpret the lack of information on the pact on online platforms. One, the agreement may have been implemented without information being divulged. Second, it is also entirely possible that the agreement was not implemented at all for any number of reasons. The latter is perhaps the most plausible explanation, because some form of information, even indirectly, would be accessible.

ECOWAS actively sought assistance from the US, sometimes in open and explicit ways. In March 2018, for instance, it was reported that then-President of the ECOWAS Commission, Jean-Claude Kassi Brou, had "called on the United States of America to continue its support of ECOWAS programmes and activities in order to achieve economic integration and peace and security in the region" (ECOWAS 2018b). This solicitation was made during an event for ECOWAS ambassadors hosted by the US Ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS, in Abuja (ECOWAS

2018b). In November 2018, Brou advocated closer cooperation between ECOWAS and the US, focusing on the assistance the US would provide vis-à-vis the many political and stability challenges in the subregion. He is reported to have said this "while highlighting the need for the US to sustain its global role and influence given its strategic importance to West Africa" (ECOWAS 2018c). This was when a visit by then-US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy (ECOWAS 2018c).

The Pre-Trump II period

Before its closure in July 2025, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was the primary mechanism around which an ECOWAS-USAID engagement architecture was built. Engagements were structured through the USAID regional office for West Africa, which was based in Accra, Ghana. In 2016, for instance, the US, through USAID, committed to providing $221 million over the period of five years, up to 2019, to "strengthen democratic institutions, enhance economic growth, Trade and investment as well as Peace and Security in the region" (Anyanwu 2016). During the event for an agreement accompanying this funding, the then US Ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS, W. Stuart Symington, revealed that the US's goal was, as reported, "to support key U.S. Government initiatives including Trade Africa, Feed the Future, Global Health, Global Climate Change and the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership" (Anyanwu 2016). In mid-2024, it was reported that ECOWAS and USAID were discussing a new partnership agreement. In a meeting with ECOWAS officials, the then USAID regional director for West Africa, Jo Lesser Oltheten, stated that the partnership would be for five years, with a $1 billion budget (ECOWAS 2024e). The ECOWAS side presented "stabilisation and consolidation of democracy, and peace and regional security" as the potential areas of the new partnership (ECOWAS 2024e). The US representative presented "interventions in the fields of industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resource management, trade, and monetary and financial issues" (ECOWAS 2024e).

In the same year, 2024, USAID partnered with the ECOWAS Center

for Gender and Development for a project on gender equality and the economic and social empowerment of women and girls, funded by the former (ECOWAS 2024f). ECOWAS's appreciation of USAID's general assistance across security, economic development, humanitarian assistance, democratic governance, and institutional strengthening was evident when ECOWAS's Vice-President, Damtien Larbli Tchintchibidja, met a US delegation led by congresswomen French Hill and Chrissy Houlahan in June 2024 in Abuja (ECOWAS 2024g). Environmental programming was another area in which USAID partnered with ECOWAS from 2021 to 2024. In September 2024, it was reported that USAID had provided ten grants worth more than $6 million to eight community organisations in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The support was under a West Africa Biodiversity and Low Emissions Development project covering the management of forests and combating wildlife trafficking (ECOWAS 2024h).

Peace, Security, and Stability

Peace, security, and stability are major themes in the ECOWAS-US relations. Examples attest to this. As mentioned above, ECOWAS officials prioritised the capacity of the US to assist in managing conflicts in the region, ranging from election-related violence, military coups, and violent extremism. From March 2019 to April 2022, ECOWAS and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) engaged in a series of conflict prevention and management exercises. These included crisis scenario planning, early warning preparedness, preventive diplomacy, social inclusion, and prevention of election-related violence as the subregion faced mounting internal and external armed attacks (ECOWAS 2019b; ECOWAS 2019c; ECOWAS 2020; ECOWAS 2022c).

The ECOWAS and the US have always closed ranks when militaries topple civilian governments in the ECOWAS region. This is a region that has experienced the highest number of military coups, not only in Africa but globally. Such was the case in 2009 when the military took power,

with the US State Department issuing a statement that has become a standard template for subsequent coups. It read thus:

> "The United States welcomes the decision by the heads of government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to suspend Guinea's membership until elections are held. We support the efforts of ECOWAS and the African Union to speed Guinea's transition to civilian rule. We reiterate our call for a return to civilian rule and the holding of free, fair, and transparent elections as soon as possible … The United States has suspended assistance to Guinea, except humanitarian aid and programs supporting the democratic process" (Africom 2009).

When the military took power in Mali in 2020, the US supported ECOWAS's decision to impose sanctions on the country. The US supported ECOWAS's further sanctions when the military junta failed to hold elections in 2022, as it had promised (US Department of State 2022). A statement at the time stated that the US was aligned with "ECOWAS's concern over the likely destabilising impact of Russia-backed Wagner Group forces in Mali" (US Department of State 2022a). The US State Department stated in the same terms when a military coup toppled a civilian government in the neighbouring Burkina Faso. The statement stated that "extra-constitutional seizures of power erode the legitimacy of governance and limit the ability of the United States and other international partners to help the country advance peace and security", a statement that aligned with ECOWAS's decision to sanction the Burkinabè junta (US Department of State 2022b).

In the military takeover in Niger in 2023, the US, through Secretary of State Anton Blinken, not only supported ECOWAS's threat of military intervention but also echoed "ECOWAS's condemnation of the illegal detention of President Mohamed Bazoum, his family, and members of the government, as well as the unacceptable conditions under which they are being held" (US Department of State 2023). In 2024, Major General Kenneth Ekman of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) participated

in a media roundtable during which he explained that while the US helps ECOWAS where it can, the approach of choice was "bilateral security cooperation with ECOWAS members". He justified the US's preference for addressing fundamental causes of insecurity as emanating from underlying causes such as poor governance, lack of "access to services, competition for limited resources, and climate change". He also stated that US military assistance was linked to "mutually beneficial trade and investment" (African Perceptions 2024).

In August 2024, the ECOWAS Commission Vice President led the organisation's peace and security team in consultations with the then-US Deputy Secretary of State, Mallory Stewart. Discussions centred on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, hand-made weapons, and maritime security (ECOWAS 2024i). The ECOWAS officials' appreciation of the US support indicated that the US Government was funding security and anti-crime activities. There was also an indication that ECOWAS was coordinating with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in the Gulf of Guinea, which transcends the areas of jurisdiction of the two RECs, particularly in matters of maritime security (ECOWAS 2024i).

Friction in the relations

The ECOWAS-US relations plummeted to perhaps an all-time low when President Donald Trump returned to White House in January 2025. First, the USAID was scrapped, and with it, the end of this foreign aid mechanism of ECOWAS-US engagements. Second, in July 2025, Trump bypassed ECOWAS and invited the leaders of four ECOWAS member states, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, and Senegal, to Washington. Discussions were based on the America First doctrine that Trump had re-introduced as the guiding principle of the US engagement with the rest of the world (Bose, N. et al. 2025). In this context, ECOWAS-US relations are off the radar, at least for the remainder of the Trump administration. Third, far from ECOWAS and the US collaborating, or even differing with decorum, open rebellion against the US has emerged. When President Trump alleged genocide against Christians in Nigeria in November 2025,

for instance, ECOWAS issued a statement partly stating that it "strongly rejects these false and dangerous claims that seek to deepen insecurity in communities and weaken social cohesion in the region" (Adeuyi 2025). Never had ECOWAS levelled such condemnation at a sitting US president before.

Agency analysis

Mutual agency expressed through a formal partnership between the US and ECOWAS is a recent development, only structured and signed in 2014, compared to ECOWAS's formal engagements with the EU, which started in 1998. This partnership took the form of a trade and investment framework agreement. The fact that the council that was established to oversee the partnership didn't commence work indicates mutual loss of agency. However, Washington is likely the one that dropped the ball. From 2016 onwards, the US administration under Trump had little interest in such a partnership. Such disinterest can also be said to be disinterest in agency. It also speaks to a shifting agency towards ECOWAS from one US Government to another. The lack of information about a technical committee established in 2018 to enhance partnership around AGOA indicates a further lack of agency on both sides. This is because the information gap suggests that the committee might have only had minimal achievements, if any at all.

ECOWAS officials have had no qualms appealing to ECOWAS for assistance on a wide range of needs, from peace and security to the internal integration of ECOWAS economies. This is the practice during the meetings that ECOWAS officials hold with their US counterparts, as we saw above. It is a loss of agency for ECOWAS, as seen through the dependency lens and the begging bowl analogy. By contrast, US officials have sometimes been brutally honest about their goals in partnering with ECOWAS. As we saw above, on one occasion in 2016, a US ambassador was clear that funding and other forms of USAID were in support of US interests. This was a blunt way of expressing US self-interest as US agency. This is an example of candid words that express US agency unambiguously, which became conventional during the Trump I and the current Trump administration.

As argued earlier, the ECOWAS-US relationship swings from periods of mutual agency to periods of weakened agency on either side, depending on the administration in power in Washington. The 2024 announcement of an imminent partnership agreement between USAID and ECOWAS was a case of mutual agency, particularly regarding alignment in peace and security and trade and investments. This was during the Joe Biden administration, which came to an end in November 2024. This is but one among many other initiatives that gave the US a pathway for agential engagement with ECOWAS in 2024. A few months later, USAID itself was no more. The closure of USAID meant the end of the structures and mechanisms through which the US and ECOWAS could engage. Even before its closure, the USAID West Africa office had been in Accra, Ghana, rather than Abuja, where the ECOWAS headquarters is based. This was somewhat a loss of agency for the Abuja-based ECOWAS.

Activities such as joint non-military peace and security exercises between ECOWAS and USAID officials in March 2022 are another example of mutual agency. However, an upper hand for the US agency can be seen in the fact that the US went to the ECOWAS territory to assist in conflict preparedness training, which seems entirely doable by ECOWAS actors. While the US collaborates with ECOWAS on peace and security broadly, the statement by an AFRICOM official cited above that military cooperation is undertaken bilaterally shows that ECOWAS has limited agency in these matters. The US prefers to exercise agency in the form by dealing directly with the armed forces of individual countries.

Given that the US and ECOWAS have invested in conflict prevention programmes over the years, it is a loss of agency, since the initiatives have not helped to stem coups in the subregion. The fact that ECOWAS and the US agree on an iron-clad opposition to unconstitutional changes of government is a case of mutual agency. However, it is a show of limited agency when the many instances of defiance by military coup leaders are factored. It is apparent that the edicts calling for a return to civilian rule and the sanctions against the coup leaders in the Sahel have not quite worked, exhibiting circumscribed agency. The coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are an indictment of ECOWAS and, therefore, a loss of

agency for ECOWAS because it presides over a coup-prone region. The US secondarily shares in this limitation to agency because its threat of military intervention alongside ECOWAS, as in the case of Niger IN 2023, did not materialise. That the former Nigerien president, Mohamed Bazoum, hitherto a strong ally of the US, could not be rescued from the detention that the military junta imposed on him shows that the US has little agency in standing up for its allies. The expulsion of the US military and the risk imposed on its military assets is another case of loss of agency. Mutual loss of agency emanates from the fact that the strong-worded statements issued by the partners over the years have not stemmed the recurrence of the coups. The condemnations are therefore hollow. The coup plotters in the region have realised that condemnations from ECOWAS and the US are hollow, therefore appropriating agency and acting contrary to subregional and international law.

The peace, security, and stability sector brings the Western powers and ECOWAS together, with collective agency, opposed to Russia and China. The US is the senior partner in this Western alliance, which nominally gives it much more agency than its Western allies. The US-led Western alliance has an upper hand in its engagement with ECOWAS compared to Russia and China, individually or collectively. The US-led Western powers have more agency compared to Russia and China as far as the condemnation of coups is concerned. However, an agency analysis changes to negative for the US and ECOWAS when one considers that Russia is today a major ally of the military regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

President Donald Trump's second term in office had seen a drastic shift in agency calculations between ECOWAS and the US. ECOWAS lost agency as the US shifted to bilateral rather than collective relations in the West African subregion. An ECOWAS that was dependent on US foreign aid lost agency, as there was little, if any, interest in charity from the US. However, there are perspectives in which the US both gained and lost agency, depending on the viewpoint an analyst takes. It is a loss of US agency when one considers that long-standing engagement mechanisms and platforms were gutted. It is a gain in agency from the viewpoint of the US regaining its right of choice in focusing on its interests, the America

First agenda, over those of ECOWAS. It is also a gain in agency because the US can negotiate deals more beneficially with individual countries as opposed to negotiating with a bloc. After all, blocs are strengthened when they negotiate in solidarity.

As discussed earlier, a mix of ECOWAS and US agency was on display when the US-Nigeria fallout occurred over Trump's claims of the persecution of Christians. US agency was seen in its attempt to address jihadist terrorism in Nigeria, whether rightly or wrongly. Indeed, when the US proceeded to fire airstrikes on parts of northern Nigeria in early 2026, ECOWAS seemed to have gone quiet, which can be read as a loss of agency given its strong-worded statement earlier. Nonetheless, ECOWAS's statement against Trump was a form of agency in standing up to the US threat. It was the REC's defence of a member state. Still, it was constrained agency, because the statement was merely issued from ECOWAS but was not attributed to any ECOWAS official.

ECOWAS and France

As will be evident in this section, France is the global power that has had the most difficult relations in the ECOWAS region over the last decade. Two issues define and shape current ECOWAS-France relations, both tied to colonial histories. First is the poor relations with several former colonies. The epitome of the bad relations has been with Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The three countries formed the Alliance of Sahelian States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) in September 2023 after coups in 2021, 2022, and 2023, respectively. They subsequently left ECOWAS in January 2025 despite attempts to retain them in the REC and solemnised their membership in the AES, which had been established in September 2023 (see Calcagno 2025).

Commentators have blamed France for the emergence of what is popularly known as Africa's coup belt (see Aina 2023). It is tempting to stick with this analytical strand. However, such an analysis would take us away from the explicit focus on ECOWAS-France relations into generalised France-West Africa relations. When the focus is trained on

the ECOWAS-France relations regarding the coups and the emergence of AES, convergence in their responses is evident. France was not only unequivocal in its condemnation of the coups, but it also more significantly threw its weight behind ECOWAS sanctions and threats of military intervention in the coup countries. From the perspective of the AES member states, France and ECOWAS share the ignominy of having failed to fend off violent jihadist attacks on their territories, the main justification by the military rulers, Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso, General Assimi Goïta of Mali, and General Abdourahamane Tchiani of Niger. Moreover, the inflexible sanctions imposed on the three countries by ECOWAS with France's full support only served to motivate them to establish the AES.

The second issue is monetary and concerns ECOWAS's recent moves to create a single currency, Eco. An abbreviated context is necessary. France has sought to explain what it terms "misconceptions" about its monetary links in the ECOWAS region (French Ministry of Europe and External Affairs ND). France formally engages with the West African Monetary and Economic Union (WAEMU or Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine, UEMOA, in French), which includes former French colonies: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. This contrasts with the West African Monetary Zone, which brings together the Anglophone ECOWAS member states of Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the only French-speaking country in this organisation, Guinea. The West African Monetary Zone is not tied to the UK monetary system, in contrast to the France-ECOWAS-CFA arrangement. The West African CFA franc is the currency used in the Francophone WAEMU region. It is pegged to the French monetary system, and through it to the Euro. This has been a source of long-running anti-colonial criticism.

A new agreement between France and WAEMU was reached in 2019, including the proposed conversion of the West African franc into the Eco in line with the broader ECOWAS monetary union aspirations (see Dewast 2019). The Eco was supposed to be launched in 2020. Tension between Anglophone countries and Francophone countries is,

however, one of the reasons that has delayed the issuing of the Eco. As one researcher put it:

> "These elements have been the source of misalignment between French-speaking and English-speaking countries in terms of their preferences over the design of the Eco. Broadly, English-speaking countries want the Eco to be detached from France, while French-speaking countries, led by Côte d'Ivoire, envision it replacing the CFA franc while retaining key institutional ties with France" (Niang 2025).

Despite these challenges, ECOWAS and France have continued forging ties. During a meeting between the ECOWAS Commission President, Omar Alieu Touray, and the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonnat, in November 2023, it was pointed out that the French Development Agency had provided €8 million to support food security projects (ECOWAS 2023g). During this meeting, the customary commitment to democracy and human rights, including opposition to unconstitutional change of government, was restated. In contrast to the AES member states' withdrawal from the International Organisation of Francophonie, a French world cultural organisation (see Radio France International 2025), ECOWAS embraced French culture, at least at the official level. In May 2025, for instance, ECOWAS celebrated the International Francophone and French Language Day. The aim was stated as highlighting "the role of the French language as a tool of work, communication and integration" (ECOWAS 2025b). Several officials expressed supportive sentiments for the continued relevance of France and the French in the subregion.

Agency analysis

From the description of events and developments between France and ECOWAS above, France is the single global power that has massively lost agency in the ECOWAS subregion over the last one and a half decades.

The biggest blow was the string of coups in the Sahel and the eventual exit of the Alliance of Sahelian States. As discussed in the EU and US cases, ECOWAS is implicated in this erosion of agency. In the case of France, however, the loss of agency is linked to negative sentiments emanating from its colonial legacy. ECOWAS's loss of agency in the departure of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the establishment of the AES went in tandem with France also losing agency in losing the three former ECOWAS allies. It was a loss of agency for ECOWAS and France, not only because the sanctions they imposed did not bring the exiting countries back to its fold, but also because ECOWAS eventually attempted a diplomatic appeal approach towards the military leaders, which also did not work. It was a loss of face for both France and ECOWAS. These rapid developments, in turn, fuelled anti-France sentiments throughout the ECOWAS region. The Senegalese elections in 2024 that brought the youthful President Bassirou Diomaye Faye to power were, for instance, based in part on an anti-France agenda.

France was involved in the plan that included ECOWAS and the US for military action in Niger, discussed earlier. It was a loss of agency because the threat of military intervention by ECOWAS and France did not materialise. France, more than other global powers, was blamed for not just failing to address the underlying economic and political problems that had caused the instability, but also for exploiting the subregion for its own economic and political gain. The lack of agency in France's responses was therefore a product of lost moral ground. Some analysts went as far as to conclude that France was part of the problem, not the solution.

As if the instability troubles France has faced in the ECOWAS subregion were not enough, the regional economic community's move to create a single currency, the Eco, further reduced its agency. We see this concern in the explanation by the French Ministry of Europe and External Affairs. Attempting to explain France's complicated monetary relations with the ECOWAS subregion can be read as aimed at boosting its agency against a rising tenor of criticism, whether accurate or inaccurate. In claiming that there were misconceptions and sometimes outright disinformation, as shown above, France was responding to reputational

damage it was encountering.

The fact that France engages with ECOWAS through the West African Monetary and Economic Union (WAEMU) is a matter of mutual agency. This turns into a loss of agency for France when the fact that WAEMU is keen to delink the current CFA arrangement tied to France's treasury. Part of the reason for ECOWAS's push for a single currency is not only fiscal consolidation but also a strategic move to harmonise the Francophone and Anglophone monetary traditions. This is a form of the ECOWAS agency because the arrangement with France is quite complex, and simplifying it makes a lot of sense.

France's resistance to the creation of the Eco is a form of agency, but it is failing agency because France's resistance only begets further negativity from the ECOWAS region. France seems to have been ambivalent, attempting to ensure the longevity of the CFA franc while also bending to the demands to let go. An example of the latter was in a 2019 framework agreement. The agreement reached between ECOWAS through the WAEMU and France in 2019 was nonetheless a pragmatic step by France, which essentially involved signing away the monetary advantage it had enjoyed for many years. Even though France agreed to the conversion of the CFA franc to the Eco, it was still a loss of agency and a gain for ECOWAS. Mutual agency is seen in another aspect of the agreement, providing that the Eco, when it became legal currency, would still be convertible to the Euro, in which France is a major stakeholder.

Long-running divisions between Anglophone Africa and Francophone Africa emerged in the renewed push for the single currency, as described earlier. This is a case of split agency on the part of ECOWAS, and a form of agency for France in the fact that some of its former colonies still value monetary connection.

Even with the differences between ECOWAS and France, relations were not completely terminated, a pragmatic form of mutual agency. As we saw above, entities such as the French Development Agency continued to engage on mutual developmental matters, where mutual development essentially means ECOWAS attracting French donations. And as we have seen in the cases of US, Chinese and European relations, donations are

tantamount to ECOWAS's deep dependency on France, even amid the equally deepening differences.

Perhaps the most perturbing development for French foreign policy strategists was the dent that French culture encountered with the AES countries' declining participation in the International Francophone and French Language activities. It was a loss of agency in the form of France's cultural diplomacy in one part of the ECOWAS region, even as other parts of the ECOWAS continue relations, albeit on a scaled-down level. Cultural diplomacy is the ideological dimension of linking France to its former colonies, providing a soft landing for trade and economic engagements. Perhaps due to the widespread antipathy, France shifted its Africa Forward summit to Kenya, an Anglophone country, in 2026, in what was interpreted as France taking the agency to try its African policy elsewhere on the continent.

ECOWAS and Germany

Of all the European powers, Germany has some of the most extensive relations with ECOWAS. Already, in the section on ECOWAS-EU relations, it was evident that Germany plays an important role in terms of funding projects and initiatives. Upfront, this section of the chapter is indicative only of the engagements, based on an analysis of online data and information from the ECOWAS website. A perusal of the GIZ, or Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, and the German Corporation for International Cooperation in English shows that there are one hundred and four data points that can provide further details on the engagements.

One has to start with the point that the development of the ECOWAS Vision 2050, the comprehensive strategic document to guide the subregion's development priorities and approaches, was not only funded by GIZ, but also handed over to ECOWAS after completion in 2022 (see News Ghana 2022). It appears that GIZ is the new USAID of ECOWAS. A comprehensive analysis of these and other data sets would stretch the chapter beyond the limits of this edited volume. Instead, the chapter used

the ECOWAS website to try to provide some of the projects that indicate areas of cooperation.

Migration is a major issue around which the relations are structured. In a meeting between the ECOWAS Vice President, Finda Koroma, and the German ambassador to ECOWAS, Bernhard Schlagheck, in 2018, there was concurrence on the need to address the root cause of illegal migration of youth from West Africa to Europe (ECOWAS 2018). ECOWAS officials saw migration as a form of brain drain, while the German ambassador highlighted its negative impact on Germany, Europe, and West Africa itself. It was apparent that Germany was supporting ECOWAS in handling the problem.

In a structured two-day event in October 2019, the partners identified regional trade competitiveness, enhanced institutional support for the ECOWAS secretariat, alignment of ECOWAS and German priorities, and stability through sustainable development as areas of mutual engagement (ECOWAS 2019d). The consultations led to the signing of an agreement, including the establishment of the Fund for Regional Stabilisation and Development (FRSD), focused on fragile regions in the subregion (ECOWAS 2019).

As with the US, the EU, and France, peace and security are a priority area of engagement between ECOWAS and Germany. An example is the February 2020 meeting between the ECOWAS President Jean Claude Kassi Brou and the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Gerd Müller. The former sought the support of Germany and the international community to stem the tide of terrorism-inspired attacks arising from state collapse in Libya. While agreeing that international partners needed to do more, Müller also "called on African countries to step up their contributions" (ECOWAS 2020b). In the same month of 2020, when Philipp Ackermann, the Director General for Africa in the German Foreign Office, called on the ECOWAS secretariat, ECOWAS officials had several requests to make. Key among these was a donor conference scheduled for later in the year and aiming to raise $1 billion for the implementation of a security strategy (ECOWAS 2020c).

A high point in the relations was the visit to the ECOWAS

headquarters in Abuja by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in October 2023 (ECOWAS 2023h). Granted that Scholz detoured to the ECOWAS headquarters as part of his official visit to Nigeria. Still, few heads of state pay courtesy calls on ECOWAS when they visit Nigeria. It was noted that ECOWAS and Germany had entered into a cooperation agreement worth €80.75 million for the period 2023-2024 to support projects in peace and security, climate, energy, and youth training, among others. Scholz emphasised peace and security, an indication that stemming developments such as unconstitutional changes of government and terrorism are priority areas for Germany. Peace and security were the subject of discussion, and German support was discussed in another consultation in May 2024 (ECOWAS 2024j). Another high-level visit followed this in December, that of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Reporting on the event categorised areas of partnerships in apparent order of importance as: "(i) building peaceful and inclusive communities, (ii) climate and energy, a just transition, (iii) sustainable economic development, training and employment, and (iv) health, social protection and demographic policy" (ECOWAS 2024k).

During the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, ECOWAS security problems were linked to water and energy, sustaining the theme of peace and security as the priority area for ECOWAS-Germany relations (ECOWAS 2025c). The Munich Security Conference is one of the leading global convenings on international security. The discussion on ECOWAS issues provided a good platform for ECOWAS to amplify the security challenges in the subregion to the global security policy community. Peace, security, and governance were again the core of a cooperation entered into in November 2025, with Germany providing €49 million (ECOWAS 2025e). This latest partnership framework is based on finding and implementing commonalities between ECOWAS Vision 2050 and Germany's Africa Strategy.

Agency analysis

It is quite a contrast that France and Germany are neighbours in central-

western Europe, yet perceptions about them in the ECOWAS subregion are drastically different. Whereas France's agency has disintegrated to a very low base since its days as a colonial power, Germany's agency is perhaps the most prominent of all EU member states. This is not to say that Germany has not experienced a loss of agency. Where the EU falters in terms of agency in the ECOWAS subregion, Germany also suffers a collateral agential loss. From an ECOWAS viewpoint, we see mutual agency because the many engagements must have occurred because of positive reciprocal responses to Germany's interest and engagement.

The fundamental source of Germany's agency towards ECOWAS starts from the fact that it is a major funder of ECOWAS's institutional operations. As we have argued in the cases of other powers, foreign institutional support is a loss of agency for ECOWAS because institutional matters should be a basic mandate, an internal matter that shouldn't be funded by external actors.

This role goes even deeper, as the core ECOWAS development strategies have a German imprint. The current ECOWAS 2050 Vision was developed through funding from GIZ. This is a gain for the German agency because the development of the Vision, which is essentially a set of short, medium, and long-term goals, objectives, priorities, and implementation timelines, gives it an understanding of the direction that ECOWAS is taking. This, in turn, provides information on how Germany can gain from the relations. It is also even feasible, though speculative, that Germany may have included its own strategies in the Vision.

Germany's gain in agency can be interpreted as a loss of agency for ECOWAS. That ECOWAS relied on Germany for the development of its development strategies and long-term planning is an extreme case of dependency. At the level of self-esteem alone, agency would demand that ECOWAS be self-reliant not only in the generation of ideas and thoughts about its future planning, but that it also fund activities such as convenings that lead to the production of its master plan.

Germany's agency, as measured by the number of engagements, has reached a level of foreign aid provision to ECOWAS, superseding all the other European powers and approaching or approximately equivalent to

that of the US and China. It has long been agreed that foreign aid is a major avenue for the influence of global powers in developing countries. Influence is indeed a key characteristic of agency. Even though Germany is generally one among other global powers that have scaled back development aid to ECOWAS, it has not completely disappeared, as is the case with powers such as the US.

One area in which ECOWAS and Germany have been engaged in continuous consultation is migration. In the 2018 negotiations described above, the agency was on the German side because it was the one that initiated consultations. In that negotiation, we see mutual agency because Germany and ECOWAS agreed that migration was a big problem for both. German agency is seen in the fact that it wanted to stem the migration flows from the ECOWAS region. Germany has a big motivation in trying to stop migration because the arrival of migrants in Germany is a major political issue at home. ECOWAS has little agency in migration issues because it is doubtful it is serious about stemming the migration flows. On the other hand, ECOWAS seems helpless on migration issues because it is unable to address the root causes, nor does it seem able to help citizens from member countries who make the perilous gamble of crossing the Sahara to reach Europe.

Mutual agency is evident in the peace and security sector, going by the instances in which ECOWAS appeals for assistance, and Germany positively responds to the calls. However, the event in 2020, where a German official called on Africans to take responsibility for funding conflict resolution problems, is an example of a loss of agency for ECOWAS. This was an example of Germany shifting responsibility from itself to ECOWAS. It called into question ECOWAS's agency. ECOWAS's convening of a donor conference to help may be seen as ECOWAS's exercising of agency to mobilise resources in the face of mounting instability problems. On the other hand, however, the whole idea of a donor conference can be read as transferring agency from ECOWAS to foreign actors. In any case, such a conference could have been convened only for ECOWAS member states rather than bringing in actors from outside the continent.

As we saw above, ECOWAS hosted the Germany chancellor and the President in 2023 and 2024. That is, two apex-level visits from Germany, year-on-year. These high-level visits were a form of German agency towards ECOWAS. It is also mutual agency because the visit couldn't have happened without good relations. Many heads of state of global powers have visited Abuja without stopping over at the ECOWAS headquarters. For instance, when the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Abuja in 2024, he didn't visit the ECOWAS headquarters. Leaders from global powers such as the US and France have not visited Nigeria in recent times and therefore have not engaged with ECOWAS at its headquarters for a long time. The German leaders' visits are therefore agential compared to those of other global powers.

As we saw above, during the German President's visit to the ECOWAS headquarters, the listing of the issues by an apparent order of importance went thus: i) peace and security, ii) climate and energy, iii) economic development, and iv) health. Because this priority categorisation was made during a German presidential visit, these are also the areas in which Germany was directing its agency. These issues are of mutual agency because ECOWAS officials would agree that peace and security are the top problems for the region. The ranking order of the other issues can be up for debate.

ECOWAS and Russia

ECOWAS-Russia relations are not as extensive as those with China, the US, the EU, France, and Germany. A record of the engagements shows ECOWAS officials attending the First Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, but with no specific ECOWAS-Russia discussions (ECOWAS 2019f). When ECOWAS officials attended the first Ministerial Conference of the Russia – Africa Partnership Forum in Russia in November 2024, their talking points included terrorist expansion in the subregion (ECOWAS 2024l). The reporting stated that "ECOWAS and the Alliance of the Sahelian States are bound by geography, history and culture and are therefore destined to collaborate in the fight against terrorism in West Africa" and

that "an attack in any of the Sahelian states is considered an attack on other states in West Africa" (ECOWAS 2024l). Omar Alieu Tourey, the ECOWAS Commission President, argued that pursuing the objectives of subregional integration and increased trade "would significantly help to address issues of terrorism in the region," which had become "the epicentre of terrorism in the world" (ECOWAS 2024l). In November 2025, the ECOWAS Commission President, Omar Alieu Touray, met the Russian Ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Andrey Podelyshev. No information was provided about the issues discussed beyond the mention of "mutual interest" (ECOWAS 2025f). During the second Russia-Africa Partnership Forum in Egypt, the ECOWAS President's meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was reported in an equally glib manner. The leaders expressed the need for cooperation around subregional integration and peace and security issues without details on how this would be done (ECOWAS 2025g).

The strain in the ECOWAS-Russia relations is quite evident. In 2023, as the ECOWAS ultimatum for Nigerien military leaders to release the detained former president Mohamed Bazoum loomed, the military leaders reached out to the Wagner Group, the Russian mercenary group, to fend off a then-imminent attack (Associated Press 2023). A fallout ensured, with an ECOWAS official stating that Russia would be held responsible in the event of the private military contractor, Wagner, violating human rights in Niger (Ogunseyin 2023). Ultimately, ECOWAS, initially thought to be supported by France and the US, failed to intervene militarily in Niger (Akinkuotu 2023).

From the content analysis on ECOWAS-Russia relations, it appears the relations are less pronounced compared to those of ECOWAS and China, the EU, the US, France, and Germany. The other global powers that have relations with ECOWAS but with limited publicly available information are the Gulf States, Japan, India, and Brazil. These powers should not be dismissed in studies of African agency in the ECOWAS. What is needed is more dedicated primary research to surface the areas of engagement as a starting point to determining their agency or, conversely, the ECOWAS agency towards them.

Agency analysis

The basic fact that ECOWAS-Russia relations are minimal compared to those of China, the US, the EU, France, and China means that an analysis of agency is equally low, weak, and limited from the perspective of gain, loss, and mutuality. This does not, however, mean that agency is completely off the map. Russia's invitations to ECOWAS officials to attend Russia-Africa conclaves are an indication of its interest in engaging, even if ECOWAS is part of a bigger African delegation during such events. In such events, agency is on the Russian side by the mere fact that it invited ECOWAS. It is, however, a weak form of agency because no tangible areas of partnership or projects seem to have been discussed. It is mutual agency because ECOWAS accepted the invitation. It is an agency loss because ECOWAS could have declined the invitation, citing Russia's enablement of the separatist AES member states. ECOWAS officials opted for diplomacy and decency in honouring the invitations, even as Russia acted in a malign way in sending mercenaries to prop up regimes that ECOWAS had sanctioned.

As we saw above, one of the points of discussion between ECOWAS officials and their Russian counterparts is responding to terrorism in the subregion. In such debates, Russia has some valid points to make because the reason it supports the Sahelian states is the promise to help them counter jihadist seriously threatening to overrun their countries. For sympathisers, Russia has some agency in responding to terrorism where the agency of the ECOWAS and Western powers has either been extremely weak or utterly failed. Russia loses agency on the points of approach and method. The use of mercenaries contravenes international, African, and ECOWAS laws. Supporting breakaway states reduces ECOWAS's core agency agenda of subregional integration. Russia's trade and economic motivations – particularly being paid for services through minerals – are seen as mercantilist rather than altruistic. The use of misinformation and disinformation as a tool against competitors such as France and the US is seen as an information war. The list goes on. Collectively, these factors make it impossible for Russia to gain agency in the wider ECOWAS region. But then, it appears that Russia has no ambitions of spreading its influence

beyond a couple of vulnerable states in the subregion. Thus, understands and is comfortable with the fact that its agency will remain limited.

Nonetheless, the mere fact that ECOWAS and Russian officials could converse around the issue of terrorism is a form of mutual agency, circumscribed as it may be. However, ECOWAS seemed timid in not raising the issue of the role of Russia in propping up the separatist AES member states, with counterterrorism as one of Russia's stated motivations in doing so. ECOWAS could have gained some agency leverage had it brought up the issue of Russia's malign methods. Indeed, ECOWAS might have raised the issue, but the reporting on ECOWAS's own website and other sources does not suggest this was the case, at least in the meetings in 2019 and 2024.

Lack of agency on either side can be seen in the fact that no information was forthcoming. When a meeting is held and no readout of some form is available, you know that the issues may have been so difficult and that no agreement may have been reached. Weakness in ECOWAS's agency can be read in ECOWAS officials being circuitous about the issue of Russia's negative role, suggesting that Russia's support for subregional economic integration could help staunch the spread of terrorism. A stronger pushback on Russia could have demonstrated ECOWAS's courage in confronting Russia's devious methods in the Sahel. Feeble agency, as it seems that the parties are only tolerating each other.

ECOWAS officials must bristle at Russia's brazen intrusion into their territory. The one occasion when this antipathy towards Russia surfaced was when Russia stood in to support the military junta in Niger. This is when ECOWAS mustered the agency to threaten military action in Niger, with the ostensible support of the US and France. In that development, however, Russia emerged with a gain in agency because the ECOWAS threat of intervention remained just that, a threat.

Conclusion

Overall, where ECOWAS has a loss of agency, it should attempt to investigate the factors that contribute to the weaknesses of agency towards the global powers. Where ECOWAS has an upper hand in agency

terms, it should seek to maintain such agency. Where ECOWAS enjoys mutuality in agency with global powers, it should seek to maintain such a balance of agency but also calculate how to convert mutual agency into larger agency vis-à-vis global powers. To do this, ECOWAS policy officials can undertake a dispassionate review of relations with global powers and determine areas in which they can boost their agency. Such an exercise could include think tanks, scholars, and civil society.

ECOWAS is overly dependent on global powers for just about every need. ECOWAS leaders should bite the bullet and draw a line on the areas where they absolutely must depend on internal resources and capacities. These include relying on China to build the ECOWAS headquarters, which is reputationally demeaning. Claims of Chinese espionage are not necessarily the major problem. The big dependency problem is that an external actor comes to, in a manner of speaking, your home to build a house for you.

Because China is a relatively new global power player in the ECOWAS region, ECOWAS can set new terms of engagement, drawing on lessons learned from its long-running relations with former colonial powers such as France. ECOWAS has much more negotiating leverage with China because China itself frames the relations as mutual. Infrastructure development is clearly an area in which ECOWAS can mutually negotiate with China. A detailed study of the Belt and Road Initiative to see where the ECOWAS agency can be applied in support of cross-country road, railway, and seaport infrastructure holds some potential.

The need for ECOWAS to build its own buildings applies more broadly to the need for the organisation to also pay for its own core operations. One would understand if an argument were made for the need for ECOWAS to lower its agency and request support for some of its secretariat operations, degrading as it may be. It is, however, indefensible for ECOWAS to rely on a donor such as GIZ for the development of its long-term plan. It is essentially like a family saying it has a secret for success, but that it is an open or public secret that can be realised by partnering with other families. Essentially, it is no longer a secret.

In engaging with nearly all, if not all, external partners, the ECOWAS

officials often invoke the need for subregional economic integration. This is clearly the core of the ECOWAS mandate and vision. Yet, when global powers arrive with their own agendas, ECOWAS officials seem to dial down on the integration agenda and align with the external powers' own interests. In the case of Germany-ECOWAS relations, one sees migration being elevated above ECOWAS subregional integration. ECOWAS should always insist on centering subregional integration if it is to raise its agency in relations with global powers. With a partner such as the EU, the correct question to ask is: how did the EU manage to integrate, how has it managed challenges (such as Brexit), and how is it maintaining the integration? The question shouldn't be how the EU can help ECOWAS integrate. It should be a question about ECOWAS advancing its own integration.

Global powers are shifting in their approaches to ECOWAS. Although further studies are necessary, it is fair to say ECOWAS is either responding to the shifts painfully slowly or not at all. This explains why ECOWAS is on the back foot in terms of agency with just about any global power. A case in point is the shifts in the EU, being implemented today under the Global Gateway strategy. The US's America First policy is another example. To increase its agency, ECOWAS should not merely respond to or align with these mega geopolitical dynamics. ECOWAS should instead invest in envisioning its role globally. This is an area in which ECOWAS could borrow from the Association of South East Asian States, which has done relatively well in mustering agency on a global stage dominated by hegemonic powers. It is quite feasible for ECOWAS to emerge as a global power in the decades ahead, ditching the current practice of swooning towards the current powers.

The biggest problem for ECOWAS is peace and security, manifesting in the so-called Sahelexit. This is an issue for which ECOWAS can't avoid global powers. While it engages with global powers, ECOWAS would do well to also engage with military regimes in the AES. Back channels and track two diplomacy can be rolled in these respects. Bringing back Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali into the ECOWAS fold should be the main driver of ECOWAS's engagement with Russia, France, the US, the EU, and China.

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