

ALLIANCE DES ÉTATS DU SAHEL (AES) AND THE CHALLENGE OF FOOD SECURITY: A POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECURITY IN THE SUB-SAHARAN REGION

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Abstract

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, was formed amid geopolitical tensions and multidimensional crises gripping the Sub-Saharan region. Political instability resulting from military coups, armed conflicts, international sanctions, and the impacts of climate change have exacerbated food security challenges in the region. This study aims to analyse the link between political-security dynamics and food security in the AES region, and to evaluate the alliance's role in addressing complex humanitarian challenges and international relations. Using a qualitative approach with a desk study method, data were analysed through the framework of non-traditional security theory and the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. The findings indicate that a militaristic approach to food distribution, diplomatic isolation following the ECOWAS exit, and dependence on external actors such as Russia have deepened the crisis and weakened civilian capacity in the long term. Therefore, alternative strategies based on civilian development and more inclusive multilateral cooperation are needed to build sustainable food security and strengthen human resources in the Sahel region.

Keywords: Alliance des États du Sahel, Food security, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The formation of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) on September 16, 2023, marked a new chapter in the political and security dynamics of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel region encompassing Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. This alliance was born from the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter in response to external threats and the urgent need to strengthen collective defence amid increasing regional instability. The three AES member states, all led by military juntas following a series of coups between 2020 and 2023, formed this alliance not only as an effort to strengthen the legitimacy of military

governments, but also as a strategic step to address increasingly complex security challenges, including threats from armed extremist groups and potential external intervention (Adesoji, 2024).

However, the formation of this alliance also reflects a shift in political orientation that focuses more on military security than on a humanitarian approach, which in the long term can ignore fundamental issues such as food security and human resource development, which are the roots of instability itself.

Furthermore, food security challenges in the Sahel region are further exacerbated by the impacts of international sanctions and climate change. Sanctions imposed on military regimes in AES member states have complicated access to international aid and worsened domestic economic conditions. Climate change, on the other hand, is causing declining agricultural production, water scarcity, and an increased frequency of natural disasters such as floods and droughts.

Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows that cereal production in the Sahel has fallen drastically, leaving millions of people in acute food insecurity. Difficult geographic conditions, limited agricultural infrastructure, and weak technological adaptation capacity have further exacerbated the region's food security crisis (Hany Abdel Latif, 2024).

In this context, the AES alliance's heavy focus on military defense does not seem to align with the urgent need to build civil resilience, particularly in the food sector, which is the main foundation for long-term stability and sustainable political legitimacy.

The formation of the AES and its accompanying political dynamics not only impact security issues but also significantly impact food security and the well-being of people in Sub-Saharan Africa. The complexity of these issues demands a comprehensive analysis to understand the interconnectedness of security politics and food security challenges, while simultaneously seeking sustainable solutions to strengthen human resources and future regional stability (Afifah Rizqy Widianingrum, 2023).

Therefore, a security approach that is solely oriented towards militarism needs to be immediately criticized and complemented with an inclusive development strategy that places food security as a top priority, because without a foundation of civilian welfare, long-term stability will only be an illusion.

This research is motivated by the deteriorating food security situation in the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) region, comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, amidst increasing political instability and a regional security crisis. Furthermore, this research examines the role of the AES in the regional security system and how the international community's response to the alliance affects its capacity to ensure food security.

Therefore, the problem formulation of this research that will be examined by the author is: How are the political and security dynamics in the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) region and the international community's response to the alliance that affects food security in the region?

This research aims to analyse in depth how political dynamics, both internal and external, contribute to the current food crisis and explore the relationship between political security and food security in the Sub-Saharan region. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of non-traditional security studies, particularly on the issue of food security in conflict zones.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Non-Traditional Security

As a theoretical basis, the Non-Traditional Security theory in this study refers to the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, specifically in the book "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" (Cambridge University Press, 2003). In this work, Buzan and Wæver developed the concept of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which explains how security dynamics in a region cannot be separated from the interconnectedness of the countries within it, as well as how nonmilitary threats such as food and migration also influence regional political stability.

In the context of the AES, this theory is used to map key variables such as: a) internal political instability; b) international responses to the AES alliance; and c) the food security crisis as a form of non-traditional threat.

Thus, Buzan and Wæver's Non-Traditional Security Theory aligns with the focus of this research, as it bridges the gap between international security studies and issues of development and human well-being. This theory also helps explain how food security is inseparable from power relations between states, as well as from the political policies adopted by both domestic regimes and external actors.

This approach allows for a more comprehensive and critical analysis in examining the position of AES in the international system, while highlighting the urgency of transforming the security approach from one that is coercive to one that is oriented towards fulfilling basic human needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with library research as the primary data collection technique. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in-depth the relationship between political and security dynamics in the SubSaharan region and the food security crisis experienced by member countries of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES).

The data used in this study comes from official documents of international institutions such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), the WFP (World Food Programme), and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), as well as scientific journal articles, international news reports, and relevant academic publications.

In data collection, the authors relied on a documentation method focused on credible secondary sources. This technique was chosen because it is highly relevant for exploring geopolitical dynamics and their implications for food security, particularly when direct field observations are difficult due to unstable security conditions in the Sahel region.

All collected data was then analysed using content analysis and narrative analysis methods, in order to understand the historical context, political actors, and interaction patterns between AES, the international community, and the condition of community food security.

To support the conceptual analysis and ensure alignment between theory and data, this study employs Non-Traditional Security theory in the study of International Relations. This theory is used to examine security issues that go beyond conventional military threats, such as food security, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises.

This approach is relevant because it illustrates how the food crisis in the AES region is not simply a result of insufficient food production but is part of an interconnected political, military, and diplomatic complex. This theory also recognizes that human security is a crucial element in building long-term peace and stability in conflict areas.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Current State of Food Security in the AES Region

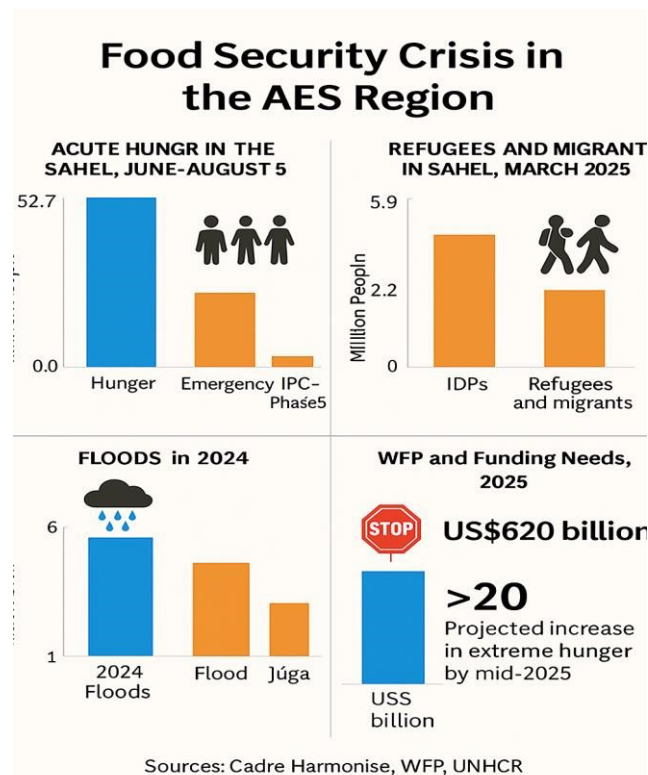


Figure 1. Hunger, displacement, and limited access to food.

The Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) region, comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is currently facing a very serious food security crisis. According to the latest analysis by Cadre Harmonisé, released in December 2024, an estimated 52.7 million people in the Sahel region will experience acute hunger between June and August 2025, with 3.4 million at emergency levels (IPC-Phase 4) and 2,600 people in northern Mali at the most severe level of hunger (IPC-Phase 5). Furthermore, catastrophic flooding in 2024 has exacerbated the situation, affecting more than six million people across the region, hastening the onset of the lean season, and increasing food insecurity (Madjiangar, 2025).

This situation demonstrates that the food security crisis in the AES region is not solely a result of natural resource scarcity but rather a result of failed political governance and weak disaster mitigation capacity. Therefore, the solution to this crisis cannot be simply emergency food interventions; it must be accompanied by policy restructuring that addresses the roots of structural inequalities and strengthens state capacity to address climate risks.

This situation is exacerbated by high displacement rates and limited access to food. As of March 2025, 5.9 million people were internally displaced (IDPs) and 2.2 million were refugees across borders in the Sahel region, representing increases of 6% and 20%, respectively, compared to the previous year. Many of them are trapped in conflict-ridden areas, severely limiting access to humanitarian assistance. In Burkina Faso alone, more than 2.1 million people are internally displaced, while in Niger and Mali, millions more live in acute food insecurity due to forced displacement and prolonged armed conflict (UNOCHA, 2025).

This fact demonstrates that the refugee crisis is not merely a consequence of conflict but has become a reinforcing factor in food insecurity. When mobility is forced to replace stability, the food distribution system collapses, along with the destruction of local social structures. Therefore, food security in the AES region cannot be separated from conflict resolution efforts and human rights-based civilian protection.

Dependence on international aid is a key feature of the food crisis response in the AES region. Organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR are the primary sources of support for millions of people affected by the crisis. However, by 2025, the WFP faces a serious funding shortfall, potentially halting food and nutrition assistance to two million people in the Sahel and Nigeria starting April 2025, including refugees and vulnerable groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The WFP requires US\$620 million through August 2025 to ensure continued assistance, as the proportion of the population facing extreme hunger is projected to increase by more than 20% by the middle of this year. This funding crisis is exacerbated by a drastic reduction in foreign aid, particularly from the United States, which has been a major donor (Donare, 2025).

The food security situation in the AES region is affected not only by conflict and displacement but also by the impacts of climate change, declining agricultural productivity, and volatile food and fuel prices. The combination of these factors makes recovery and development efforts increasingly complex and demands stronger international collaboration and innovation in crisis management strategies. Without adequate interventions and sufficient funding, millions of people in the AES region are expected to remain trapped in a prolonged cycle of hunger and poverty.

B. Political and Security Dynamics Affecting Food Security



Figure 2. Political and Security Dynamics

The military coups that occurred in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have drastically changed the political and security landscape in the Sahel region. The three countries formed the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) in response to pressure from the international community and the threat of military intervention from ECOWAS, which rejected the legitimacy of the military junta governments. The AES's decision to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2025 and form a new confederation marked a significant geopolitical shift in West Africa, leading to diplomatic isolation from Western countries. This isolation exacerbated the security and food security crises by hindering international aid and regional cooperation that had previously been a pillar of stability in the region (Dideberg, 2025).

This situation demonstrates that political choices driven by the regime's defence interests can have long-term detrimental consequences for the people, particularly in terms of access to aid and development. Rather than strengthening sovereignty, geopolitical moves

like leaving ECOWAS could weaken a country's internal capacity to ensure human security, including food security.

Furthermore, the role of non-state actors such as local militias, terrorist groups, and separatists further complicates the security situation in the AES region. Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Azawad separatist movement in Mali continue to carry out attacks that create instability and displace millions of people. This disrupts food production and distribution, exacerbating existing food insecurity. The AES has sought to address these threats by establishing a joint military force of approximately 5,000 personnel tasked with countering extremist groups across the region, and by replacing the Western military presence with Russian security contractors, particularly the Wagner Group, which has heightened geopolitical tensions in the region (Najimdeen, 2025).

However, militaristic efforts focused on a hard-line security approach without a civilian protection strategy and strengthening humanitarian infrastructure, risk creating a new cycle of violence. Reliance on external actors like the Wagner Group also reflects weak internal defence capacity and increases the potential for proxy conflicts, thus undermining the primary goal of maintaining stability and sustainable food security.

This prolonged conflict and political tension have severely disrupted the agricultural sector and food distribution, the backbone of the Sahel's economy. Diplomatic isolation and international sanctions imposed on the military regime have limited access to food aid and modern agricultural technology for AES countries. Dependence on humanitarian aid has increased, but this assistance is often hampered by unstable security conditions and difficult access to affected areas (Council, 2025).

Thus, these complex political and security dynamics are the main factors hampering efforts to improve food security in the AES region, demanding a more integrated approach between security and socio-economic development.

C. Militarization of Food Distribution

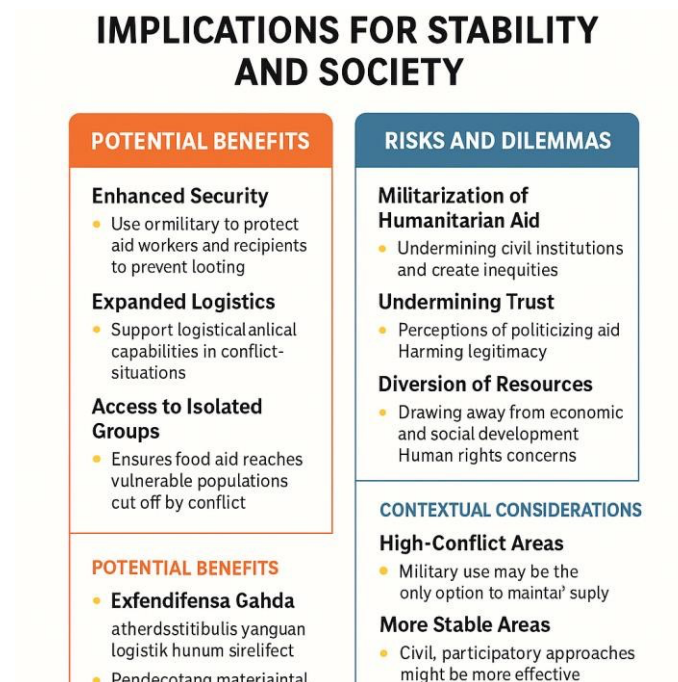


Figure 3. Implications for stability and society

The Sahel Alliance (AES) faces complex challenges in achieving food security amidst regional instability. One strategy adopted is the militarization of food distribution, the use of military force to secure and regulate food supplies to communities in need. This step was taken in response to increasing conflict and insecurity that disrupted traditional distribution channels and to ensure food aid reaches vulnerable groups isolated by conflict (Nations, 2023).

However, this strategy poses a complex dilemma. On the one hand, it promises broader logistical reach, but on the other, it risks strengthening the dominance of armed forces in humanitarian affairs, weakening civilian institutions, and creating inequality of access based on political affiliation. Therefore, the militarization of food distribution should be seen not as a long-term solution, but as an emergency transition that needs to be immediately directed toward more inclusive governance based on community trust.

The militarization of food distribution has dual implications for the social and economic stability of communities. On the one hand, a military presence can provide a sense of security for humanitarian workers and aid recipients and prevent looting or misappropriation of food aid by armed groups. However, on the other hand, militarization

can also undermine the image of humanitarian aid as a political tool, potentially eroding public trust and increasing the risk of attacks on humanitarian personnel (Yahia H. Zoubir, 2023). Furthermore, military involvement in food distribution can divert resources from economic and social development and reinforce a culture of impunity and human rights violations.

The effectiveness of the militarization of food distribution depends heavily on the local context and how the strategy is implemented. In areas with high levels of conflict and weak governance capacity, militarization may be the only option to ensure food aid reaches those in need. However, in more stable areas, a more civil and participatory approach may be more effective in building long-term food security and reducing dependence on external aid. Therefore, it is crucial for the AES to carefully consider the social, economic, and political implications of the militarization of food distribution and to develop a more comprehensive and sustainable strategy to address food security issues in the Sahel region (Sahel, 2022).

In this context, food policy should not be viewed solely as a technical-logistical matter, but rather as a reflection of the country's chosen political direction. If the AES fails to balance a military approach with civilian empowerment, emergency food distribution efforts could degenerate into a normalization of authoritarian control, prolonging vulnerability and weakening grassroots resilience.

D. International Roles and Diplomatic Challenges

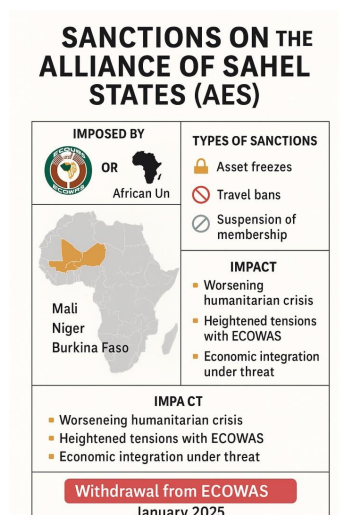


Figure 4. Sanctions against AES

The sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and the African Union on the AES member states (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) following the military coup have created significant diplomatic challenges and worsened socio-economic conditions in the region. These sanctions, which include asset freezes, travel bans, and suspension of membership in regional organizations, were intended to restore civilian and constitutional rule. However, they have negatively impacted civil society, exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, and increased tensions between the AES and other ECOWAS member states. In January 2025, the AES formally withdrew from ECOWAS, further deepening diplomatic isolation and threatening regional economic integration (Mwangi, 2025).

From these developments, it is clear that the sanctions approach taken by ECOWAS and the African Union has not only failed to achieve its goal of restoring political stability but has also been counterproductive by exacerbating the suffering of the people and triggering regional disintegration.

Rather than forcing change, external pressure has pushed the AES to take the radical step of withdrawing from ECOWAS, potentially weakening the organization's influence in West Africa. If regional peace and security are the primary goals, then dialogue and an inclusive approach that addresses root causes, such as dissatisfaction with the previous government, should be prioritized. Without a policy reassessment, sanctions will only exacerbate polarization and compromise the interests of the communities they are intended to protect.

Amid the declining role of Western powers, Russia has increased its involvement in the Sahel region, particularly through military and economic cooperation. The AES views Russia as an alternative strategic partner that can help address security threats and reduce dependence on Western aid and influence (Aboagye, 2025).

This Russian involvement includes providing military training, arms supplies, and political support to military regimes in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. However, the presence of the Russian-linked Wagner group has also raised concerns about human rights abuses and the potential for further destabilization in the region.

These shifting alliances and power dynamics create complex diplomatic challenges for Sahel countries and international partners. Mediation and dialogue efforts between the

AES and ECOWAS have been hampered by mistrust and differing views on political transition and security.

Meanwhile, Western countries face a dilemma in balancing support for democratic governance with the need to address the threat of terrorism and prevent regional destabilization. In this context, effective and inclusive diplomacy is crucial to build bridges between the various parties involved, address the root causes of conflict, and promote sustainable solutions to food security and development challenges in the Sahel region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The food security crisis in the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) is deeply rooted in political instability, military rule, and regional conflict, not merely environmental factors. Diplomatic isolation following AES's withdrawal from ECOWAS has worsened humanitarian conditions, disrupting aid and intensifying geopolitical polarization. Addressing this crisis requires a shift from militarized responses to a non-traditional, human-centered security approach that strengthens civil infrastructure, supports local agriculture, and ensures inclusive governance. Sustainable solutions demand international collaboration grounded in humanitarian principles, with active involvement from non-state actors and local communities. Ultimately, the Sahel must pursue adaptive, multilateral cooperation beyond ECOWAS to achieve long-term food security and regional resilience.

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