



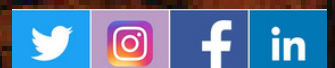
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THE EMERGENCE OF THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES (AES): FUTURE PROSPECTS AND THE POTENTIAL RISE OF AN 'AFRICAN NATO'

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Introduction

The announcement of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)¹ on 16 September 2023, by the Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali severed any remaining ties with France, their former colonial master. AES was adopted as confederation which reiterated the fundamental base of strengthening the mutual defence cooperation amongst them.

The incumbent leaders of Mali (Colonel Assimi Goita), Burkina Faso (Captain Ibrahim Traore), and Niger (General Abdourahmane Tchiani) respectively drafted AES's charter pushing for a mutual assistance framework. Interestingly the three heads assumed power after waging successive coups in West African region with Mali in 2021², Burkina Faso in 2022³, and Niger 2023⁴. The AES charter outlines a mutual assistance framework, stating, "Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more contracted parties will be considered an aggression against the other parties",⁵ – the lines very closer akin to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) thus aims to prevent or resolve any armed rebellions, particularly those fueled by Western-backed mercenaries.

However, the alliance turned confederation still leaves an important question unanswered: Can AES rise up as an African NATO by overcoming regional tensions and age old disputes? Or will it remain just like any other regional organisation.

Armed Rebellion in Sahel Region: A History and Why so Relevant Now

AES while aiming for a stronger regional organisation is set to face series of challenges, of which the foremost being the ongoing local armed rebellion. During the alliance's signing a Russian delegation led by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the Deputy Defence Minister of the Russian Federation was also present.⁶ Russia has pledged to support AES's counter terrorism efforts in the region, a role previously undertaken by France through G5 Sahel alliance (formed in 2017). The G5 Sahel alliance was established towards countering armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) groups working the region.⁷ The G5 Sahel, which included Chad and Mauritania besides Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger dissolved in late 2023. The dissolution of G5 Sahel alliance was initiated as per Article 20 of the founding convention that mentioned of the dissolution of the alliance with request from at least three member states.⁸

The region comprising porous borders face continuous threats from foreign backed insurgent groups, especially as the Russia-Ukraine proxy war extends into the Sahel. The attack by the Tuareg rebels over joint convoy of Malian soldiers and The African Corps (TAC) or the rebranded Russia's Wagner group, exemplifies the threat.⁹ The incident was acknowledged by Andriy Yusov, spokesman for the Ukrainian Defense Ministry's Intelligence Services (GUR), confirming the involvement citing efforts to target Russian entities accused of killing innocent Ukrainians.¹⁰

Another challenge that arises is within Africa itself or within the West African region itself, as the democratically elected African countries reject coup-led or junta governments. The Economic Community of West African States or ECOWAS even imposed sanctions on Niger, later lifting them¹¹, thereby complicating AES's expansion or potential partnerships with other African nations.

All three AES member states face severe economic crisis despite being adequate of resources. Poverty among its society also halts their vision of funding and modernising

their armed forces. External partnerships especially with Russia, Turkiye (Turkey) and China may provide some boost, but each has its own limitations. Russia's ongoing losses in Ukraine war will limit the capacity¹², Turkiye being a NATO member may only offer arms sales specially its advance drones and not full military support. China on the other hand might be most equipped to supply the needed technology and manpower but risks a 'debt trap' which might eventually face pressure for Chinese military bases.

Can the Alliance Evolve into an 'African NATO'?

The junta led AES though not mentioning NATO, has already aimed towards becoming an 'African NATO', with its emphasis on collective defence and mutual assistance framework. The NATO which presently has 32 member states, started with 12 economic powerhouses as the founding members, giving it a strong foundation.¹³ AES on the contrary comprises some of the world's poorest nations, relying on foreign aid.

France one of the NATO's founding members and former colonial master of AES countries, has been forced to withdraw its troops from the Burkina Faso and Mali. Mali even forced for withdrawal of Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali or the MINUSMA working under the UN peacekeeping mission to leave the country.¹⁴ The third confederation member Niger have asked France to even recall it's ambassador, since France had openly refused to recognise the new junta leadership.

Currently, cordial relations exist within AES, however it is doubtful as to what extent it will go. Burkina Faso's young president Captain Traore, is credited to be dynamic of them all and rest only following his footsteps. Burkina Faso has brought widespread reforms initiating his journey towards overcoming the colonial blanket. Reforms include the decision to ban colonial-era barrister wigs and clothing, reclaiming cultural identity and moving away from remnants of colonial influence. Burkina Faso has also launched the Postal Bank of Burkina Faso and the Treasury Deposit Bank,¹⁵ showcasing a progressive shift in financial strategies aimed towards moving beyond the currency CFA Franc which is tied to France. However, a potential joint currency under AES could spark tensions in the alliance if Burkina Faso dominates economic policies.

Challenges to the Alliance and Way Forward

As Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have signed the mutual defence pact, aimed towards supporting each other against possible threats of armed rebellion or external aggression, they face individual challenges as well. Mali is witnessing a constant hostility by Tuareg armed groups over the past months in breach of the 2015 peace agreement.¹⁶ Niger is facing rising armed rebellion from ISIS-Sahel (formerly known as ISIS-GS), Boko Haram, Islamic State-West Africa (ISIS-WA), and al-Qaida affiliate organisations, and also have faced devastating attacks from joint coalition of terrorist groups in the past.¹⁷

The Tillaberi region of Niger bordering Burkina Faso and Mali still remain highly vulnerable to regular attacks, highlighting that the AES's counter terrorism efforts are way behind to be considered as a force for collective security.¹⁸ Moreover, the economic limitations of these countries may further undermine the alliance's ability to project power and sustain prolonged military engagements. All three member states suffer from fragile economies and widespread poverty, limiting their capacity to fund and equip their armed forces adequately.

The alliance while being dependent on external partnerships, based on increased ties with Russia, China and Turkiye will still need significant economic and logistical resources to maintain a functional and cohesive military bloc and becoming an African version of NATO would require several conditions that are currently lacking, including economic strength, regional unity, and international legitimacy which can be broadly defined as:

Economic Strength: NATO's success relies heavily on the economic power of its member states, particularly the United States. In contrast, Sahel's AES and its members are among the poorest countries in the world, with limited military spending and reliance on foreign aid. It is still to be time tested whether Burkina Faso's attempt to take control of gold mine can help to bring the much-needed economic development.¹⁹ It is unlikely that the Sahel alliance can sustain the kind of robust military infrastructure that NATO possesses without its own economic might. Working towards bringing back its own talented individuals who went outside to study can contribute significantly towards bringing not just industrialisation and reforms but can

make the economy flourish in the region provided the feeling of nationalism or lucrative offers can be made.

Regional Unity: NATO is a transatlantic military alliance based on the shared values and strategic goals of its member nations. Whereas the Sahel's AES alliance, exists in a region having deep-seated disputes. Even the rift between the alliance and the region's largest group working towards regional unity the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) creates further difficulties in inviting other regional countries to join it. West African or the African nations at large view AES's military leaders as illegitimate, thus making it difficult to expand. AES must consider inviting nations as observers and conduct joint military and counter terrorism simulation exercises for promoting jointness from overseas who can build regional unity as other non-west bigger players can try convincing other African nations in joining for the combined military exercises and other military cooperations.

Strategic Outreach: AES members lack the access, limiting global trade and strategic outreach. The neighbouring democracies which can be of support in providing access or join the confederation include Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Cote d'ivore, Guinea, Senegal, Mauritania, Libya and Algeria, but given AES's junta leadership they might not accept it. However, another neighbour Guinea, which is also a junta led government but being close to France denied its support. It is stated Guinea's head Col Mamady Doumbouya who being part of French Legion and having served in missions in Afghanistan, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Central African Republic with training from International Security Academy in Israel will continue its alliance to France.²⁰

International Legitimacy and Support of International Organisations: International recognition forms an essential component of the functioning of any alliance. AES's diplomatic isolation complicates its effort for legitimacy. Although AES enjoys support from Russia and China, two UN Security Council veto powers; but it faces challenges from regional bodies like ECOWAS. Achieving recognition within African Union (AU) and working on its own governance mechanisms and human rights standards within the alliance members remain vital if it aims to be an African security pillar.

The recently held BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China and South Africa) summit underscored the rise of multipolarity,²¹ thus offering a potential opportunity to AES for

seeking BRICS (a prominent non-west group) in supporting their counter-terrorism operations. The actions will not only help in increasing the outreach of BRICS's influence as a prominent group but also enhance the AES's global reach while achieving its regional interests and goals.

Conclusion

The future of the confederation of AES largely depends on its ability to address their internal challenges and counter insurgencies. While securing national borders will likely remain bloc's top priority, as many regions are still under rebel occupation. The alliance may evolve into a more comprehensive regional force if it can attract new members and resources. One possibility for the bloc is to look for enhanced cooperation with neutral countries like India alongside continuing the military and economic cooperation with non-African powers such as Russia, Turkey, or China, to rise in the region as military alliance.

However, for the AES to rise as a major force in Africa, it must align its military ambitions with its political and economic realities. The vision for an 'African NATO' remains aspirational for now, but the bloc represents an important step towards a greater self-determination in a region that has long been shaped by external forces.

For now, the alliance stands as both a symbol of resistance against foreign interference and a test of the Sahel's ability to manage its own future.

DISCLAIMER

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