

WEST AFRICA

From a security complex to a security community

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In the post-Cold World era, West Africa, like most other regions of the world, experienced significant shifts in its approach to, and understanding of security. The outbreak of brutal domestic conflicts in the sub-region and ECOWAS's subsequent deployment of its peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, marked a turning point in the sub-region's attempt to develop a security architecture that began in the 1970s. This paper argues that in the post-Cold War era, West Africa is in the process of evolving from a security complex to a security community. The inter-linked nature of the conflicts in the Mano River basin reinforced the security interdependence of member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These factors, coupled with the close cultural and historical ties, geographical proximity qualifies West Africa as a security complex. The adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution and Peacekeeping, the supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the ECOWAS Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons are clearly aimed at the institutionalisation of conflict resolution mechanisms – a move away from the ad hoc approach of the 1990s. If the democratic peace theory holds true (that democracies do not fight each other), one could make the argument that democracies do not harbour dissidents from neighbouring states. Hence, the development and consolidation of a democratic ethos in the sub-region would lead to the eventual development of a security community.

'When you throw a stone into a pond, it sets ripples...there is an agreement within international circles that Liberia has been the epicentre of regional instability...would bring peace to the entire sub-region.'

General Abdulsalami Abubakar¹

Introduction

A major lesson learned during the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone is that instability in one state cannot be contained in that state alone, and poses grave danger to the security and stability of other states nearby. Hence, no member state can expect to isolate itself from the political crisis in another state. The Liberian crisis has had a

'domino effect' on its immediate neighbours (Sierra Leone and Guinea) and further afield through the military takeovers in Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia. The latter two were considered politically stable and free of military interference in national politics.

In addition to destabilising its immediate neighbours, the Liberian conflict contributed to

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the proliferation of small arms and light weapons – currently estimated at eight to 10 million. The conflict also created hundreds of thousands of refugees who sought asylum in neighbouring countries. With limited employment opportunities, some of the refugees resorted to criminal activities and, in some cases, fleeing ex-combatants offered their services as mercenaries in conflicts across the sub-region. It is common knowledge that former Liberian and Sierra Leonean fighters were involved in the on-going crises in Côte d'Ivoire. The presence of large numbers of former combatants as refugees, coupled with the diffusion of small arms into the refugee recipient countries also led to an increase in gun-related criminal activities in the host countries. Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Guinea witnessed an increase in violent crime, attributed to the presence of refugees and weapons from the Mano River conflict vortex.

Furthermore, efforts at resolving the crisis through the sub-regional peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, have not only led to high troop casualties in the mission, they have also diverted much needed resources for national and regional development programs. For example, Nigeria, in addition to losing well over one thousand of its soldiers on peacekeeping duties in Liberia and Sierra Leone, is estimated to have spent over US\$12 billion on peacekeeping efforts in both countries. Before the United Nations (UN) took over from ECOWAS troops in Sierra Leone, it is reported that Nigeria was spending at least US\$1 million per month to maintain its troops in that country. This massive expenditure on peacekeeping comes against the backdrop of dire economic conditions in Nigeria. Thus, one could make the argument that the security concerns of countries in the sub-region are so intertwined that it is inconceivable that they could ignore security developments in neighbouring countries. In other words, due to its close-knit nature, one could make the case that West Africa constitutes a regional security complex (RSC).

An RSC, as defined by Buzan, is 'a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.'² The central element in an RSC is its security relationships and the elements of interdependence that concern secu-

rity. At its establishment, ECOWAS focused on regional economic integration. Subsequently, however, ECOWAS realised the symbiotic relationship between economic development and security, as well as the interdependence of the elements of security relationships in the region. It therefore established two protocols to deal with regional security. The first was the 1978 Protocol Relating to Non-Aggression. Its main objective was to ensure an environment free of fear of attack or aggression by one state towards another. The second was the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence, in which members agreed that 'any armed threat or aggression directed against any member state shall constitute a threat or aggression against the community.'³

Members of an RSC are linked by what Lake refers to as a 'security externality.' He describes a regional system as a 'set of states affected by at least one trans-border, but local, externality that emanates from a particular geographic area. If the local externality poses an actual or potential threat to the physical safety of individuals or governments in other states, it produces a regional security system or complex.'⁴

Any conflict that takes place within an RSC and is seen by members as having considerable relevance and as a 'significant externality' qualifies as a regional conflict. It therefore tends to blur the line between intrastate conflict and a regional conflict. Within a complex, security is a matter of physical safety, but safety can be threatened or strengthened on any of several levels outside and inside each state.⁵

It should, however, be pointed out that not all local externalities pose a threat to the physical security of members of an RSC, but when it does, it serves as the glue that binds the states that constitute that particular security complex. Thus, the Liberian and Sierra Leone conflicts serve as the local externality in West Africa because they constitute a physical threat to both individuals and governments in the sub-region. These conflicts have precipitated the large flow of refugees and other displaced persons, the massive flow of small arms and light weapons, and other negative forces that contributed to varying degrees of instability in member states.

Consequently, with the superpowers relaxing their grip on their former client states, following

the end of the Cold War, members of an RSC (such as ECOWAS) are likely to play a central role in managing security in their back yards, especially in the face of rising incidence of conflicts in these sub-regions. One could therefore contend that ECOWAS's decision to send an intervention force into Liberia is a clear recognition of the inter-related nature of security concerns in the region. This was made explicit by the arguments advanced by the ECOMOG troop-contributing states, who pointed out, amongst other reasons, the security threat posed by the massive and uncontrolled flow of refugees. From the outset, the Liberian war had a regional dimension to it, with Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire serving as the main backers and mentors of the Liberian insurgents led by former President Charles Taylor. The regional nature of the conflict was further complicated by the presence of natural resources (diamonds, iron ore and timber) that fueled the conflict and sucked in more regional and international actors.

Although, there is no consensus on whether the existence of a regional security complex requires a hegemon, in West Africa, Nigeria plays a central role in shaping the emerging security architecture. Regardless of the controversy that dogged Nigeria's role in ECOWAS' peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone (including the international pariah status of its late head of state, General Sani Abacha) its commitment of large human, logistical and financial resources made it evident that, if used properly, Nigeria's resources can be a force for good in the sub-region. However, Buzan notes that a regional security complex 'should initially be characterised in terms of its power distribution', adding that 'where this power is dominant, states pursue security primarily via establishment and maintenance of what they consider a 'suitable' or 'stable' distribution of power.⁷⁶ The establishment of the Mediation and Security Council and other mechanisms set out in the Protocol on Conflict resolution, are clear demonstrations of attempts to address the unequal distribution of power in West Africa. Fears of Nigerian dominance have, in the past, driven its smaller and weaker neighbours into the hands of external powers such as France, whose regional relations with Nigeria have been tense. Such fears led to what I have referred to above as the 'French-overlay', which

hindered previous efforts at building a comprehensive security architecture in West Africa.

In spite of the fact that Nigeria used its hegemonic power to provide security as a public good to its neighbours, some of its actions have been controversial to say the least. For instance, Nigeria granted asylum to the ousted Liberian warlord-turned-president, Charles Taylor, in August 2003, without adequate consultation with other ECOWAS member States. This points to a worrying exercise of its hegemonic status in the sub-region. While some might argue that it was the most prudent thing to do to avert further bloodbaths, there is reason to believe that some of its smaller neighbours, such as Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, that were destabilised with the assistance of Charles Taylor are not happy with the decision. They are however, helpless in the face of Nigeria's unmatched economic and military muscle in the sub-region. It could therefore be argued that the development of rules, norms and regulations – such as the emerging ECOWAS mechanism – could allow it to benefit from a hegemon, while checking its excesses at the same time.

Like other security complexes, shared historical and cultural values are a strong component of the West African security complex. For example, Mali drew on its strong historical and cultural ties in the sub-region to promote the Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in 1998. Former President Alpha Oumar Konaré (currently the Chairperson of the African Union Commission) used the notion of 'shared frontiers' to convince other member states that the country's land borders should not be seen as barriers but rather as a peaceful space that merely separates them. Indeed, cultural affinity was even invoked to promote integration schemes and was central to the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975. The ECOMOG troop contributing states also used the notion of one being 'your brother's keeper' to justify their intervention in Liberia. The existence of common and shared cultural practices and values among a group of states can be a powerful justification for building a common security architecture and intervening in the security affairs of members. According to K Subrahmanyam, the South Asian security complex coincides with what he refers to as a 'civilisational area.'⁷⁷ Buzan also states that 'ethno-

cultural thinking underlies much traditional analysis of European history, with its emphasis on the role of Latin Christendom in defining a community of states.⁷⁸ It could therefore be argued that West Africa's shared historical and cultural values would foster efforts at building a regional security regime.

The effect of the crises that form the Mano River basin conflict vortex on the development of the emerging security regime – and the eventual security community – can be equated to the bitter experiences of the Second World War, which led to the development of institutional mechanisms such as NATO, the European Union and the Western European Union – eventually leading to the development of a security community in the north Atlantic area. Although some observers of developments in West Africa might dismiss these developments as mere institution building, the study has demonstrated a level of compliance by member states. Compliance with some aspects of the ECOWAS Moratorium and a greater degree of political tolerance are the most notable. For instance, since the adoption of the SALW Moratorium (1998), National Commissions (or their equivalents) have been set up in 13 of the 15 member states, nine countries have applied to the ECOWAS Secretariat for exemption certificates to import weapons, six countries have embarked on arms collection and destruction/development programmes and a good number have embarked on revising their national firearms legislation in preparation for eventual harmonisation. In addition, democratic principles are taking hold in several member states. This is marked by a reduced incidence of military coups, as was demonstrated by the public outcry which greeted attempts by the Togolese Armed Force to install a president through unconstitutional means, following the sudden death of country's president.

The external recognition of West Africa as a security complex was made possible by the removal of what Buzan refers to as *overlay*. According to Buzan, an overlay 'occurs when the direct presence of outside powers in a region is strong enough to suppress the normal operation of security dynamics among local states.'⁷⁹ The Cold War acted as an overlay because it subordinated the West African security dynamic to the superpower rivalry. What we are starting to see through the new ECOWAS security mechanism

is the actual security dynamic of West Africa. Buzan, however, cautions that 'since overlay is normally a transforming political experience, one can only speculate as to what the local dynamic might be once the overlay breaks up.'⁸⁰

The removal of the superpower overlay has been followed by a marked reduction in French military presence in its former colonies. Unlike other former colonial powers, France maintained a strong military presence in its former colonies in the sub-region. France's influence on its former colonies served as a major impediment to security cooperation in West Africa. The smallest and weakest francophone countries relied on France to 'protect' them from their powerful Anglophone neighbour – Nigeria. Consequently, France became a major player in the West Africa security league and kept a close watch on Nigeria's ambitions in the sub-region. France's open support for Biafran secessionists fighting to break away from Nigeria in the mid-1960s could be explained by this rivalry, aiming to reduce Nigeria to size. In addition to the end of the Cold War, the removal of the 'French-overlay', therefore presents West Africa with a unique opportunity to develop a sub-regional security mechanism that cuts across the linguistic divide. In fact, following France's 'reduced' influence on its former colonies, the purely francophone security mechanism *Accord de Non Aggression et d'Assistance en matiere de Defense* (ANAD) was incorporated into the new ECOWAS security mechanism in 2001. The incorporation of ANAD into the ECOWAS mechanism marked a turning point in West Africa's efforts to address security issues from one platform, instead of the competing platforms that characterised such efforts in the past.

Given the dissipation of the external overlay, the post-Cold War era, at least two kinds of division of labour are emerging to deal with conflicts in the sub-region. In the first instance, there is a division of labour between ECOWAS member states for peace support training programmes. In recognition of the limited resources in the sub-region and the existence of different doctrines and equipment between the armed forces of member states, the new mechanism calls for three-tier training programmes for peace support operations along the following lines: facilities in Côte d'Ivoire handle tactical level training (temporarily relocated to Mali in the wake of

the conflict in that country), while the facility in Ghana handles operational training, and Nigeria's facility handles strategic level training. This mechanism is meant to optimise the use of training infrastructure and resources and, among others, contribute towards standardisation and interoperability among the security forces in the sub-region. On the political front, the mechanism is meant to allay fears of Nigerian domination of the emerging mechanism. The inclusion of Côte d'Ivoire, a francophone member, could also ease the linguistic tensions that undermined previous efforts.

The second form of division of labour is that between ECOWAS and the international community. Essentially, in the post Cold War era, Britain, France and the United States have all been involved in conflict resolution programmes in partnership with ECOWAS. For instance, Britain used its powers at the Security Council to support the peace process in Sierra Leone and at one point even deployed troops to bolster the UN peacekeeping force that was close to collapsing. At the moment, troops from France, and ECOWAS member states (under the umbrella of UN peace operations) are maintaining a fragile peace in Côte d'Ivoire. This arrangement suits Britain, France and the US because they provide ECOWAS with resources and other forms of logistical support to undertake peace support operations in areas where they are not willing to risk their own troops. A glaring example of this was the crisis that erupted in Liberia in August 2003. Despite the United States' historical ties with Liberia and the unfolding humanitarian tragedy, the US did not intervene to stop the carnage. This forced ECOWAS to send troops to Liberia for a second time, while the US only deployed a small force of marines for a limited time. Although a UN force has since taken over from the ECOWAS force (ECOMIL), the initial task of pacifying the belligerents was left to ECOWAS. This division of labour is based on what I refer to as 'the blood and treasure' dynamic, driven by the fact that West Africa has little or no strategic significance in the current global (dis)order. Consequently, Western powers are more inclined to provide the 'treasure' (i.e. financial and logistical resources) needed for peacekeeping missions, leaving countries in the sub-region to provide the 'blood' (i.e. man-

power). However, such external assistance is often restricted to areas of interest to external actors, and is limited in duration without long-term dividends for post-conflict peacebuilding.

The adoption of the Protocol on Conflict Resolution and the supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001, and the Moratorium on SALW, indicates recognition by ECOWAS member states of the interdependent nature of security in the sub-region. West Africa is also recognised by outside observers and actors as a subsystem that constitutes a security complex. For, instance, interaction with key western powers such as the United States, Britain and France in the post-Cold War world has been underpinned by this fact. In other words, the security policies of these countries reinforce the interdependent nature of the West African security system. In the 1990s, Britain, the United States and France pursued policies aimed at strengthening the capacity of member states to deal with conflicts in their backyards. The Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) by the United States (later the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance, or ACOTA the *Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix* (RECAMP) by France, and the British Military Assistance Training Team (BMATT) – currently the British Peace Support Training – are examples of such initiatives.

Unlike previous security arrangements such as the Protocol on Non-Aggression (PNA) and the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (PMAD), the new conflict resolution mechanism goes a step further by addressing conflicts within member states. This is in recognition of the fact that domestic conflicts, often supported by neighbouring states, constitute the greatest threat to human security in the sub-region. In dealing with intra-state conflicts, the new mechanism breaks new ground by challenging the notion of sovereignty, which was jealously guarded by member states in the post-independence period. The focus on intra-state conflicts can be related to Lake's conception of 'security externality,' which links members of an RSC. The potential spill-over effect of domestic conflicts, as was manifested by the Liberian civil war, serves as a powerful 'security externality' prompting ECOWAS to explore strategies for preventing conflicts and resolving them as they break out. Security

externalities can be either positive or negative, thereby creating costs or benefits. Consequently, the 'desire to reduce...greater social costs or capture the larger social benefits...motivates efforts at regional cooperation, but it is the national or private returns that guide state policy.'¹¹ Thus, one could make the argument that the destabilising effect of domestic conflicts on neighbouring states guides member states' approaches to security co-operation in West Africa. Hence, the new ECOWAS mechanism could be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the costs of domestic conflicts on neighbouring states, while trying to maximise the benefits through cooperation.

In light of the foregoing analysis, one could make the argument that the identification of West Africa as a security complex backed by the emerging security regime – epitomised by the ECOWAS Moratorium, the Protocol on Conflict Resolution and that on Democracy and Good Governance – would invariably move the sub-region from a security complex to a security community. At this point it is pertinent to highlight the notion of security community as espoused by its chief architect Karl Deutsch, who describes a security community as 'a group which has become integrated, where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with reasonable certainty over a long period of time.'¹² The Deutschian notion of security communities was based on a study of 'inter-state' relations in the North Atlantic area, but it is also applicable to the West African scenario. Although most conflicts in the sub-region are considered 'domestic' in nature, all of them have a regional dynamic involving one or two other member states. For instance, the Mano River conflict vortex involved several countries in the sub-region and further afield. At the start of the conflict in 1989, the Liberian insurgents were supported by Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, while Liberia, Burkina Faso, and Côte D'Ivoire supported the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone. In addition, both Sierra Leone and Guinea have (at different times) supported forces opposed to the former Liberian president, Charles Taylor.

Thus, ECOWAS's efforts to develop a security mechanism that emphasises the need for

strengthening democratic practice across the sub-region, would contribute to the eventual development of a security community. The widening of the democratic space in all member states would reduce the chances of insurgents seeking support from neighbouring states since their grievances could be addressed through the democratic process, either nationally or through regional institutions. In the past, oppressive one-party states and military regimes succeeded in forcing political dissent underground, which led to the kinds of violent power contests that erupted in the 1990s. If the democratic peace theory, which states that 'democracies don't fight each other' holds true, one could conversely argue that 'democracies will not undermine their neighbours by supporting dissidents from neighbouring states.' Thus, current efforts at building democratic values in the sub-region would minimise the possibility of members destabilising their neighbours by supporting insurgent movements from those countries. In a nutshell, increased political dialogue within and between member states would reduce the possibility that states will resort to war to solve political differences. The attainment of this status quo would eventually lead to the development of a security community where conflicts are solved using peaceful means.

In order to foster ECOWAS's efforts to build a security regime in the West African Security complex that will eventually become a security community, this paper makes the following recommendations.

ECOWAS should adopt a more holistic approach to security, to ensure a further broadening and deepening of the current understanding of security in the sub-region. There is a need to strengthen the socio-economic aspects of security such as rising unemployment, rampant diseases, high mortality rates and poverty in general.

The ECOWAS Moratorium should be transformed into a convention, thereby making it legally binding on all member states. This would not only oblige member states to implement the Protocol but would strengthen ECOWAS's hand when dealing with unscrupulous middlemen/women and other 'spoilers.'

Since small arms constitute a major threat to human security in West Africa, efforts should be made to build a strong link between the illicit trade in weapons and the drugs trade. This would

invariably compel the major arms producers to comply with the Moratorium by controlling the flow of weapons from their countries, with the hope that it could contribute to stemming the tide of the drugs trade.

Since the police play a central role in enforcing the Moratorium, there is an urgent need to develop strong links between the police services in the sub-region. Valuable lessons could be learned from the South African Regional Police Chiefs Organisation (SARPCCO), which, to date, has worked effectively with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in its efforts to control illicit weapons proliferation.

The ECOWAS early warning mechanism should include a strong peer review mechanism that could serve as a check on politicians in the sub-region. Although democracy seems to be taking hold in several countries in the sub-region, it is threatened by the existence of soldier-turned-civilian heads of state or 'pseudo-democrats.'

ECOWAS should develop and strengthen its links with civil society across the sub-region. Developing such links would elicit contributions from ordinary citizens in the integration process, thereby making its policies and projects more representative. In the past, integration efforts have been largely state-driven, with limited consultation with the citizenry. In most cases that meant a lack of knowledge of ECOWAS programmes by ordinary citizens.

This paper also recommends that ECOWAS devise a mechanism that will allow it to focus on security issues without losing sight of the economic rationale that led to its establishment almost 30 years ago. For instance, the ECOMOG operation in Liberia and Sierra Leone diverted ECOWAS' attention away from its goals of economic integration. Scarce human and financial resources were diverted to support peace efforts in the sub-region. Valuable lessons can be

learned from the division of labour between the European Union (EU) and the West European Union (WEU), which, though focusing on different issues, complement each other.

Finally, ECOWAS should also ensure democratisation of the decision-making process because this would reduce the level of controversy and acrimony. That would minimise the chances of a repetition of the crises that dogged ECOWAS following its peacekeeping efforts in the 1990s. Such a process would also contribute to reducing, and possibly eradicating, the regional linguistic divide along former colonial lines that has undermined integration efforts in the past.

Notes

- 1 *New African* No. 425, January, 2004, p. 39. General Abubakar was ECOWAS' chief mediator in the current Peace Process in Liberia. He is a former Nigerian Head of state credited for returning that country to democratic civilian rule, following the sudden death of General Sani Abacha.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of regional security complexes see Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 1991, p 190.
- 3 The subject of regional conflict resolution mechanism in West Africa is discussed in detail by Gani Joses Yoroms, 'Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution in ECOWAS,' *Accord Occasional Paper*, No. 8 1999. p 2.
- 4 *Ibid*, p 49.
- 5 See David A. Lake, 'Regional Security Complexes: A Systems Approach,' (in Morgan and Lake (eds.) *Regional Orders – Building Security in a New World*, Pennsylvania State Press, 1997. p 31.
- 6 Cited in Morgan and Lake, *Ibid*, p. 33.
- 7 Cited in Buzan, *op. cit.*, p 196.
- 8 *Ibid*, p 196.
- 9 Buzan, *op. cit.*, p 198.
- 10 *Ibid*, p 198.
- 11 Lake, *op. cit.*, p 2.
- 12 Karl W. Deutsch, *Political Community at the International Level*. Random House, Inc, 1954 p 98.