



REPORT

Sahelian Crisis and the Decline of Multilateralism

Online
Oisín Palmer
Research Assistant



European Business Council for Africa and the
Mediterranean (EBCAM)



www.ebcam.eu



+32 456 79 11 50



Avenue Toison d'Or 77
1060 Brussels - Belgium



CONTEXT

The Sahel region has entered a new phase of instability following successive military coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). These regimes have since withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), forming the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and rejected many Western-led multilateral stabilisation mechanisms. This marks a critical shift in regional dynamics and reflects the broader global trend of declining multilateralism.

A recent webinar, hosted by the International Crisis Group, brought together **Comfort Ero** (President & CEO) and **El-Ghassim Wane** (former UN Special Representative in Mali and head of MINUSMA), moderated by **Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim**, to unpack these developments and assess what they mean for regional security, African agency, and the future of global governance.

KEY THEMES

1. Collapse of Multilateralism in the Sahel

- The military regimes' withdrawal from ECOWAS and refusal to cooperate with UN and EU-led missions represents a deliberate dismantling of multilateral institutions.
- ECOWAS, while once viewed as a pillar of West African unity, failed to present a coherent or effective response to the coups.
- The AES explicitly challenges ECOWAS's legitimacy and reflects frustration with perceived Western influence in regional bodies.

2. Rise of Bilateralism and Global Rivalries

- With multilateral frameworks weakened, external powers such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran, Qatar, and the UAE are filling the void, competing for influence through bilateral deals.
- This shift echoes broader global trends: a weakening of the rules-based international order and intensification of multipolar competition.

3. Africa's Place in Global Governance

- Africa remains underrepresented in key global institutions:
 - No permanent seat on the UN Security Council.
 - Structural biases in the international system perpetuate technical and economic inequalities.



- Yet African-led organisations like the African Union (AU) are beginning to assert more influence, albeit with coordination challenges and limited visibility in crises such as Mali.

4. Security and Regional Cooperation

- Despite criticisms, African actors have taken meaningful, though sometimes ineffective action:

Examples include Senegalese, Ivorian, and Togolese deployments to Mali under previous multilateral missions.

- However, regional security frameworks remain strained:

Porous borders (e.g., Niger-Nigeria).

Francophone - Anglophone political divides.

Limited coordination between regional and continental bodies.

STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

Weakening Multilateral Order

- The current multilateral system, built post-World War II, has often excluded African voices. This exclusion has fostered resentment and weakened trust.
- The Sahel exemplifies how global multilateral decline is most acutely felt in regions already grappling with insecurity, inequality, and marginalisation.

Africa's Own Multilateral Norms Under Strain

- Military takeovers undermine not only global but also African regional institutions.
- There is an urgent need for the AU and sub-regional bodies to reform, coordinate better, and visibly lead in crises.
- Local ownership and political realities.
- The coups are not necessarily a sign of pro-military sentiment, but rather a rejection of “performative democracies” perceived as externally imposed and unresponsive.
- Youth disillusionment is a major driver. ECOWAS and the AU must address this risk.