

Policy Brief

From the Alliance of Sahel States to the Confederation of Sahel States: The Road is Clear, But Full of Traps

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The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), created on September 16, 2023, brings together Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso under a mutual defense agreement. The signing of the charter relating to this alliance, which bears the name Liptako-Gourma, was followed by meetings and plans for initiatives that will push the new structure further towards statutes for the alliance, transforming it into a confederation.

As an intermediate measure, the three states have already envisaged the creation of a common defense force. While the initiative is commendable, in that it seals the ambition of uniting the potential of these three countries, questions are being raised about its resistance to the vagaries of time, especially as it is being led by transitional military regimes that are supposed to hand over to civilian governments that may not pursue the same effort or develop the same ambitions.

INTRODUCTION

On September 16, 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed the Liptako-Gourma¹ charter, giving birth to the Alliance des États du Sahel, a structure intended to function as a strategic alliance for cooperation between its members. At first glance, the charter seems to prioritize the collective defense of the populations of the three states; but it also includes measures that go beyond cooperation within an alliance and develop a vision of integration of the three states within a confederal framework. This vision is a new development relative to the concepts previously adopted between the three countries. Indeed, ideas and initiatives for cooperation, mutual aid, and coordination in this area began as early as 1970 and continue to this day:

- The Liptako-Gourma Region Integrated Development Authority (l'Autorité de développement intégré de la région du Liptako-Gourma) was the subject of the memorandum of understanding of December 3, 1970;
- Another memorandum of understanding was signed on December 16, 2000, abrogating that of 1970
- The revised treaty of the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma States, signed on January 24, 2017, completed and amended the December 16, 2000, memorandum of understanding
- The text establishing the alliance, in September 2023, makes no reference to the former abrogated or amended charters. It gives the impression of a first step on a new initiative.

It is precisely in its level of ambition that the new charter differs from previous attempts at association and cooperation between the three states. It goes beyond the simple framework of cooperation for integrated development, moving towards more solid ties, even going so far as to envisage confederation. This paper explores the characteristics of these three countries and their circumstances, in order to examine the potential levers for rapprochement and integration, asking questions including:

- ***Despite its relevance, isn't the confederation project premature? (Part I);***
- ***What favorable winds are driving these states towards the realization of their integration ambitions, and how far will these winds take the entente between the three countries? (Part II);***
- ***What obstacles are likely to slow the momentum of the alliance project, potentially causing it to run out of steam in the face of security, economic, and political difficulties? (Part III).***

I. THE CONFEDERATION PROJECT

With a view to putting into practice their ambitions for closer ties and stronger links, the three states have declared that they are on the road to creating a confederation of Sahelian states. According to a statement by Burkina Faso's transitional president, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, ministers from the three alliance states met on February 16 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, to revise the Alliance's Charter and draw up a Treaty on the Confederation of Sahel States, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In the same vein, a press release from the Burkina Faso presidency stated that "the experts discussed subjects of common interest to the peoples of the three states and drew up a draft treaty on the creation of a Confederation uniting the three countries; they also formulated proposals for the institutional architecture of the Alliance of Sahel States, which should enable it to function effectively".

1. Liptako-Gourma refers to the "zone of three borders", a region where the borders shared by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger meet. The charter therefore symbolically takes the name of the place where the three countries meet.

Things therefore seem to be moving very quickly towards bringing the three states together in an institutional framework that, without achieving perfect union, could be conceived as a confederation, enabling the pooling of resources, facilitating a common perception, and accelerating the march towards a potential or eventual union. The problem posed by this initiative is not the speed with which the stages of creating institutional structures for a federal or confederal union are carried out, but rather whether the structure will last over the long term.

The success of this structure and its progress towards a unified path certainly has the economic, social, political, cultural, and natural levers to ensure a successful institutional rapprochement. But how far can the three states go together, and can they sustain their project over the long term? Various complex actions are needed:

- **Diplomatic:** the three states must negotiate all the clauses that will ensure the project's longevity and success, without upsetting their entourages or exacerbating the suspicions and opposition of their neighbors. ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), the community to which the three countries belong, is already showing a certain animosity insofar as it considers the seizures of power by the new regimes to be unconstitutional;
- **Economic:** Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso must settle the question of integrating the economies of the three states and create a closer economic union, by harmonizing tax policies, trade regulations, and economic infrastructures. They must, if not resolve the issue of economic relations with ECOWAS, at least map out new paths for relations and trade with this community;
- **Political:** action by alliance members will have to convince the political forces and populations of the states to support such a union, which may require lengthy awareness-raising campaigns, public debate and internal institutional reforms in each state;
- **Security:** action must strengthen interoperability between the armies of the three member states and create a common defense framework, which could include mutual defense agreements or the creation of a common defense force;
- **Cultural and social:** cultural and social exchanges should be encouraged between the populations of the three states to foster a sense of common identity and solidarity.

These actions would require considerable political commitment on the part of the alliance's leaders, and a willingness to compromise on the part of the three states. They would also have to take into account the cultural, political, and economic diversity of each state. The process will be long and complex, and requires careful preparation.

II. SIMILARITIES AND SHARED MOTIVATIONS FACILITATE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Common Characteristics

The three countries share many geographical, economic, and cultural characteristics. They are located in the same region and share several hundred kilometers of borders. They are (or were)

members of ECOWAS. With vast, partly desert territories (Mali and Niger)², the three countries share a semi-arid climate and common environmental challenges, including desertification and water scarcity. Economic, demographic, and social data shows a high degree of similarity between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Table 1).

Table 1 :

Overview of the Economic, Demographic, and Natural Resource Characteristics of the Three Members of the Alliance of Sahel States.

Indicator	Burkina Faso	Mali	Niger
Area (km ²)	274,200	1,240,192	1,267,000
Population (2022 estimate)	21,751,000	20,250,833	26,803,275
Population density (inhab/km ²)	79.4	16.3	21.2
GDP (estimate 2021, in billions of U.S. dollars)	15.75	19.98	10.27
GDP per capita (estimate 2021, in U.S. dollars)	729	986	372
GDP growth (estimate 2021)	5.4%	5.1%	5.8%
Main economic sectors	Agriculture, mining, services	Agriculture, services, industries	Agriculture, stock rearing, minerals
Natural resources	Gold, manganese, zinc, nickel	Gold, phosphates, uranium, bauxite	Uranium, coal, oil, metal ores
Literacy rate (%)	36.5%	35.6%	19.1%
Life expectancy at birth (years)	61.9	60.5	62.7

In addition, the states have ethnic populations, many of which span the three countries, creating a demographic and cultural continuity that reinforces territorial and geographical continuity.

This demographic, territorial, and cultural continuity is reinforced by similar historical legacies, marked by European colonization and post-independence challenges related to governance, education, and economic development. They share a common history as former French colonies, which has influenced their political institutions, legal systems, and official languages.

This common history has given rise to a shared feeling, with all three countries expressing, at almost the same time, a rejection of the former occupying power. This feeling cements the ties between the three countries, and can help their integration efforts. The three countries face similar security challenges, including the threats of terrorism, intercommunal conflicts, and drug and arms trafficking in the Sahel region. This common challenge creates a shared perception of danger and can serve as an ingredient to accelerate the creation of an integrated structure.³

2. On January 28, 2024, these three states decided, by mutual agreement, to leave this community.

3. In the first week of March, the Chiefs of General Staff of the armed forces of the Sahel Alliance (AES) agreed to set up a joint force that will be operational as soon as possible. The announcement was made on March 7 by Brigadier General Moussa Salaou Barmou, Niger's Chief of Staff.

2.2 Authorities Highly Motivated for the Integration Project

The authorities of the three countries appear to be highly motivated by the integration project, and seem to be stepping up the pace to achieve it:

- About twenty ministers from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger met on February 15 in Ouagadougou to study the creation of a confederation between the three countries. They drew up a draft treaty on the Confederation of Sahel States;
- Reunited in Niamey on March 6, the army chiefs of the three countries announced the creation of an anti-jihadist Joint Force. This “Joint Force of ESA countries (...) will be operational as soon as possible to take into account the security challenges in our area”, said General Moussa Salaou Barmou, Niger's Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, in a statement issued at the end of the meeting.

This desire for acceleration is reinforced by several factors that strengthen the desire of the authorities for the alliance project under an institutionalized structure. These motivating factors include

- **The imperative of economic development:** the three countries are among the poorest in the world, with fragile and undiversified agricultural economies, limited access to basic services such as education and health, and high rates of poverty and unemployment. Integration and the pooling of wealth and potential is their only chance of overcoming this situation;
- **Capitalizing on economic interdependence and complementarity:** the economies of the three countries are often complementary, with varied natural resources and industrial potential. An economic union could promote more-efficient use of resources and stimulate economic growth;
- **Regional stability:** a strengthened political and security union could help reinforce the three countries' roles in regional stability. Such a union would underpin stability in the region, by coordinating efforts to combat terrorism and facilitating the peaceful resolution of cross-border conflicts;
- **Cultural exchanges:** a regional union could promote cultural exchanges and strengthen social ties between the populations of the three countries, thus fostering a sense of unity and solidarity, and reinforcing the soft power of the three states;
- **Capacity-building:** together, the countries concerned could strengthen their institutional, economic, and security capacities, enabling them to better address common challenges including poverty, climate change, pandemics, and defense;
- **Geostrategic position:** the Sahel region occupies an important geostrategic position in West Africa. A union between these countries could strengthen their political and economic weight on the regional and international scenes;
- **Commercial benefits:** a union would facilitate cross-border trade and access to new markets for companies in all three countries, which could stimulate economic growth and promote job creation;
- **Synergy in development:** by joining forces, the three countries could benefit from synergies in areas including agriculture, infrastructure, education, and health, which could translate into faster progress in human and economic development;

III. FACTORS LIKELY TO HINDER THE INTEGRATION PROJECT

While a number of factors are in favor of the project developed by the three alliance states, auguring well for its success, there are also a number of blocking and hindering factors, both structural and cyclical, which may put the brakes on the momentum achieved to date.

As with any forward-looking analysis, it is wise to analyze not only the favorable factors that support the project, but also those that may hold it back. The governments in place must take these factors into account and neutralize them in order to avoid pitfalls along the way.

3.1 Legal and Political Uncertainties

The first issue that gives rise to uncertainty about the future of the Alliance of Sahel States is a legal-political one. It lies in the fact that the current regimes of the three alliance states are the product of military coups d'état, and the countries are now led by military cadres, albeit with civilian participation. The three leaders of these regimes declare that they are only leading the transition to democratic governments, with free elections to be held within a relatively short timeframe. The current governments are therefore transitional and, a priori, are not empowered to take measures that would change the nature and political status of a state, or to take strategic decisions that would alter the historical course of the three countries.

While it is recognized that the de-jure remit of a transitional government may vary according to the specific context in which it operates, the fact remains that a transitional government's main tasks are to:

- Manage the political transition, and its main responsibility is therefore to facilitate a peaceful and orderly transition to democratic elections;
- Maintain law and order during the transition to avoid chaos and conflict;
- Ensure the continuity of public services, which must continue to function effectively despite the political transition;
- Possibly reform institutions to make them more transparent, accountable, and democratic.

However, the three governments in power are going beyond these tasks by creating a military alliance and planning to form a confederation. These transitional military regimes may have enjoyed popular support during the coups that brought them to power, but does this give them the right to change the constitutional statuses of their respective countries? There is also the question of whether post-transition governments will approve of the integration project initiated and implemented by military governments. There is even a legal question. Do transitional governments have the authority to take such strategic decisions as the creation of federations or confederations?

The integration project seems to be linked to the declared exit of the three countries from ECOWAS, which has resulted from the reaction of this regional economic community to the coups d'état that have taken place there. However, if the transitions are completed, and Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso see the emergence of democratically-elected civilian governments, ECOWAS would certainly revise its position and the three countries, or one of them, might no longer see the point of a mini-lateral integration project. Would the alliance still exist? The three countries risk ending the project either by mutual agreement, or following the withdrawal of one of the parties. Another factor adds to the uncertainty surrounding the future of the project. The political parties that win the post-transition elections could be ideologically different from, or even opposed to,

the values advocated by the juntas currently leading the transitions. Can the alliance project then be maintained? Depending on whether they are conservative or progressive, the new holders of power could diverge from the current project, or even denounce the agreements established by the transitional governments.

3. 2 Obstacles to be Taken Into Consideration

Over and above the questions of political and legal appropriateness that surround the ambition to create a confederation between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, operational elements must also be taken into consideration:

> **Unfavorable internal factors:**

Political and ethnic divergences: the Sahelian states share a number of socio-political trends resulting from ethnic diversity, and a multiplicity of ideologies and political orientations. Historical rivalries and differences of interest between the various ethnic and political groups can hamper the consolidation of a confederation. It is doubtful whether the confederation project will be accepted by all these tendencies and in all three countries; the project cannot succeed without the support of the different communities:

- **Weak institutions:** State institutions in all three countries are in a state of transition; this provisional character is a weakness and makes it difficult to establish an effective governance structure for a confederation;
- **Political instability and security:** Political instability and armed conflict in these countries can compromise efforts to establish a confederation. Terrorism, which these countries are striving to combat, and organized crime, which is rampant in the region, can make cooperation between member states difficult.
- **Economic weakness:** Widespread poverty and weak economies in the region may limit the resources available to support a confederation, and create disagreements over the distribution of resources.

> **External factors:**

- **Regional and continental interference:** External influences, such as rivalries between regional and continental powers, can complicate efforts to create a confederation by exerting pressure on certain member states, or fueling local conflicts. It is therefore legitimate to wonder about ECOWAS's reactions to the future confederation. Nigeria is already reopening its borders with Niger, and the country has been promised the lifting of ECOWAS sanctions. Wouldn't such measures serve to dissuade Niger from an alliance with Mali and Burkina Faso?
- **Foreign interference:** Foreign interference, particularly by international players seeking to pursue their own strategic interests, can disrupt regional consolidation processes and create divisions among alliance states. It is easier for foreign powers to negotiate with weak, isolated states than with a confederation that provides its members with greater consistency;
- **Terrorist threats:** The presence of terrorist and insurgent groups in the region, including Boko Haram, the Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans and the État Islamique au Grand Sahara, create an atmosphere of insecurity and undermine agreements between member states. This makes regional cooperation and integration difficult;
- **Environmental challenges:** Environmental challenges including desertification and the scarcity of natural resources, can aggravate tensions between alliance states, and make cooperation on the creation of a confederation more difficult;

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- **Economic pressures:** Economic pressures exerted by external powers, such as the conditions imposed by international financial institutions, can influence the economic policies of member states and hinder the establishment of a confederation based on common regional interests.

In conclusion,

the three Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are ruled by military regimes that lead transitional governments. The leaders of these three countries, which have suffered from the sanctions imposed by their neighbors and also by foreign powers, are developing plans to cooperate with each other in the face of strong and sometimes even violent reaction from their immediate environment. They have thus created an alliance, mainly military, called the Alliance of Sahel States, but they are going beyond a simple alliance by creating a common armed force and, above all, by considering integration into a confederation. These states have a number of assets in their favor, not least the strong push by their leaders for confederation status. However, this ambition may be hampered, or even undermined, by other unfavorable factors.

To bring the confederation project to fruition, the leaders of these countries must:

- **Avoid rushing into the implementation of this project, and take the time to put in place the conditions for its realization;**
- **Rally the population behind their ambitions to ensure a solid base and foundation. For instance, the confederation project could be put to a referendum to gain the blessing of the people; and also**
- **Capitalize on the help of certain countries that are trying to assist them, such as Morocco, which is initiating an idea to open up the alliance states by linking them to the Atlantic Ocean.**

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Since 2018, Bassou has been directing and editing the collectively written annual report on Africa's geopolitics, which is published by the Policy Center for the New South. His work has been disseminated through numerous prestigious think tanks and institutions. Notable contributions include 'Towards EU-MENA Shared Prosperity' (Bruegel, 2017) and 'Evolving Human Security Challenges in the Atlantic Space' (Jean Monnet Network, 2019). He is also a frequent contributor and participant in the HEC-PCNS Strategic Dialogues and their corresponding written volumes.

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