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Withdrawal of Sahelian states from the economic community of West African States (ECOWAS): Stakes and Reconfiguration of West African Ports and Corridors

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Abstract. On the 29th of January 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger notified their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and creating the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) provoking a major break in West African trades' organization. This situation has some drawbacks particularly on the landlocked nations as AES countries because they are dependent on the ports of Abidjan, San Pedro, Lomé, Cotonou and Dakar for their external exchanges. In fact, transit traffic to these countries represents a significant portion of these ports' activity. This study's purpose is to analyze challenges and new configurations of West Africans Ports and Corridors following the withdrawal of these three Sahelian Countries from ECOWAS. The methodology takes in account African Documentary Research following the withdrawal of AES countries from ECOWAS and half-directives interviews with Port actors and Economic Operators. This new geopolitical area has different effects on port traffic with benefits for some ports and losses for others. Indeed, this development reinforces competitions between certain port platforms and leads to reconfigurations of historical corridors. In this new geopolitical situation West African Ports are obliged to move for new strategies in order to keep and strenghthen their economic attractiveness with Sahelian Economic Operators.

Introduction

From the end of 1980, the international system has been shaped by active regional integration dynamics all around the world. It is about the most important resurgence of regionalism since the Second World War, since the number of regional integration agreements concluded after the end of the 1980 exceeds that recorded during the regionalization waves of the 1960-1970 [1] as well as a renewal of regional integration in the 1990 [2; 3]. Thus, the policy of grouping nations into economic regions such as the EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, etc. is perceived as a factor in the development of trade exchanges between member states [4; 5]. It is in this dynamic that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was created on May 28, 1975, a regional organization comprising 12 member countries in West Africa. This organization's main objective is to promote cooperation and integration in the economic, social, and cultural fields, with the purpose of achieving economic and currency union through the total integration of member states' national economies (Revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993). If the initial objectives were essentially economic, the Community was subsequently taken over by political issues.

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However, since January 29, 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have officially announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS by creating the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This institutional shock is justified by the dissatisfaction of these three Sahelian states with the functioning of ECOWAS [6]. Moreover, the set up of AES by the three Sahelian states is particularly complementary to the economies of coastal states, with which the three Sahelian countries remained strongly linked. Indeed, landlocked Sahelian countries rely on several desert ports for their external trade [6], and the loss of these ports reflects national arrangements for access to the sea borrowed by Sahelian states from available coastal ports, in the state of differentiated networks related to their landlocked status.Truckers and regional political interactions [7]. This break inevitably leads to a reorganization of international exchanges in these landlocked countries without a maritime façade, whose natural ports are Abidjan, San Pedro, Lomé, Cotonou, Dakar. That said, this withdrawal undoubtedly has profound implications not only for the latter, but also for all other countries in the region, in terms of the mobility of goods and people, and commerce [8]. The objective of this study is to analyze the stakes and configurations of ports and West African corridors following the withdrawal of the Sahelian countries forming the AES from ECOWAS.

1 Presentation of the study area

Created by the Lagos Treaty of 28 May 1975, ECOWAS covered an area of 5.1 million km² and initially grouped 16 States, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde (joined in 1976), Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. However, after Mauritania's withdrawal in 2001, the organization counted 15 countries under the regional organization until 29 January 2025, when its name changed to 12, following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the community to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The charter of Liptako-Gourma was signed on 26 September 2023 in Mali. The AES is now a sub-regional organization covering an area of about 2.78 million km² and positions itself as an influence zone in West Africa (Fig. 1).

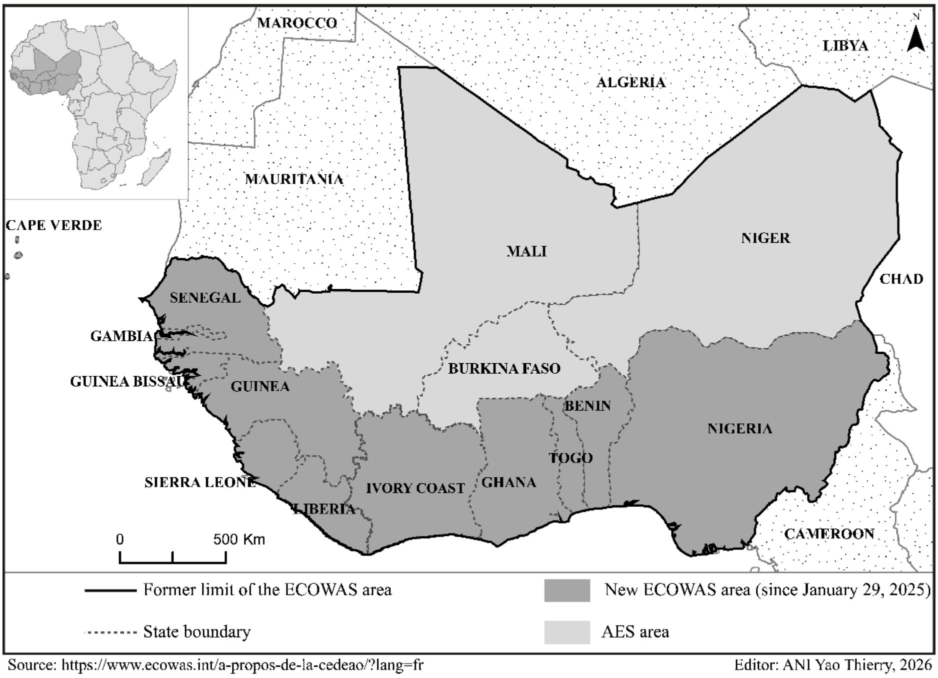


Fig. 1. The ECOWAS and the AES in the new West African geopolitical configuration

The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) aims to promote the free movement of persons and goods, the harmonization of member states' policies, political stability as well as the reduction of commercial barriers. While the AES (Alliance of Sahel States) charter indicates that the alliance is a window allowing the establishment of a common security framework for the three nations, by putting in place a "collective defense and mutual assistance architecture. The members of the alliance commit to jointly fight terrorism and organized crime within their common space.

2 Methodology

The methodology deployed in this study combines a qualitative approach that essentially consists of a documentary review and guided interviews. The documentary review consisted not only of consulting articles and treaties of a certain number of sub regional organization, notably the ECOWAS and the AES, but also and especially the analyses of geopoliticians interested in the question. These various manuscripts have allowed us to see and understand the different waves of regional groupings of states in economic, political, social, cultural, etc., terms; their functioning as well as the limits of these sub regional groupings. Furthermore, this documentary review has allowed the identification of the traditional corridors of the Sahelian countries before their withdrawal from ECOWAS and the alternative corridors of the latter since their exit from ECOWAS. Another aspect of this approach has focused on the official withdrawal texts (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso), customs or port statistics of ECOWAS and a thematic cartography of flows. As for the semi directive interviews, they were conducted with the marketing services of Ivorian ports through an intermediary from whom we were able to obtain information concerning the ports of Dakar, Lomé, Cotonou, Tema gathered within the Port Management Association of

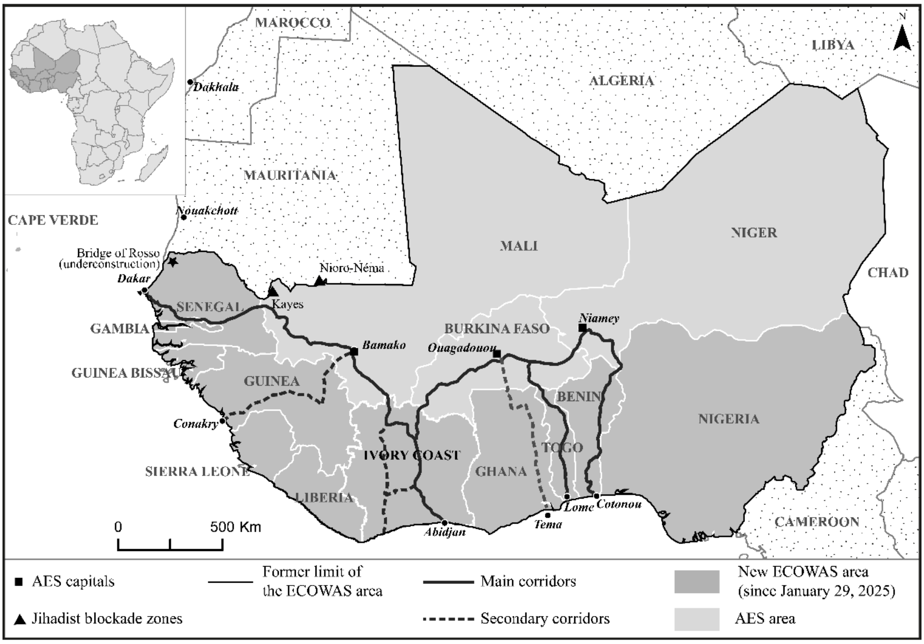
West and Central Africa (AGPAOC) and actors in the logistics chain of West African coastal countries and Sahelian countries as well as representatives of Burkina Faso and Mali shippers. The information gathered concerns the dessert corridors of Sahelian countries before and after their withdrawal from ECOWAS, transit ports and tonnages per port as well as the difficulties encountered with regard to the new geopolitical configuration of the West African region. This study is based on the port triptych of Vigarié, 1977 which brings into play three spaces, namely the port, the foreland and the hinterland. However, the analysis will focus on the port and the hinterland. Indeed, the hinterland is the continental attraction and dessert area of a port or, in economic terms, its continental market area

3 Results

The withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS implies consequences for the transit traffic of traditional West African ports in terms of gains or losses according to port platforms. This context accentuates inter-port competition on the West African coast and leads to a reconfiguration of historical corridors, forcing ports to adapt their strategies of attractiveness and loyalty of Sahelian economic operators

3.1 Service corridors of the AES countries: between geopolitical, security stakes and strategic opportunities.

The traditional service corridors of the AES countries for their international export and import exchanges pass partly through the main West African coastal ports, which are the ports of Abidjan, Dakar, Lomé and Cotonou, and partly through other ports that could be described as secondary ports, notably the port platforms of San Pedro, Conakry, and Tema (Fig. 2). But since their withdrawal from ECOWAS, these access corridors to the sea for the AES countries, called natural ports or traditional corridors, have been weakened due to the direct or indirect application of several ECOWAS sanctions and coercive measures. This situation affects the AES countries and especially Niger.



Source: Policy center for the new south, 2025 Editor: ANI Yao Thierry, 2026

Fig. 2. Main and secondary dessert corridors of the AES countries

Since the withdrawal of Niger from the ECOWAS, the port of Cotonou, which was formerly the first transit port on the West African coast until 2019 and the natural port of Niger, has been abandoned in favor of the port of Lomé, which is now the first natural transit port in this port range. In this regard, the port of Lomé has become the point of passage for the AES countries. In terms of transit traffic, these are respectively 3 828 515, 3 813 403 and 3 283259 tonnes of goods from the AES countries that are transiting through the port of Lomé itself, and the evolving trend is downward. In response, the AES countries have undertaken a strategic diversification of their natural corridors, notably by maintaining pragmatic cooperation with countries like Ghana and Togo, which have a more neutral stance in this crisis that shakes West Africa, contrary to Ivory Coast and Benin, with which relations remain tense. Indeed, transit traffic from the AES countries through or towards West African coastal ports differs according to the diversity of access and political sensitivity. Also, the natural dessert ports of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which are respectively the ports of Dakar, Abidjan, Lomé and Cotonou, have experienced a regain or a decrease in traffic according to the countries since the signing of the Liptako Gourma treaty on September 26, 2023 (Fig. 3)

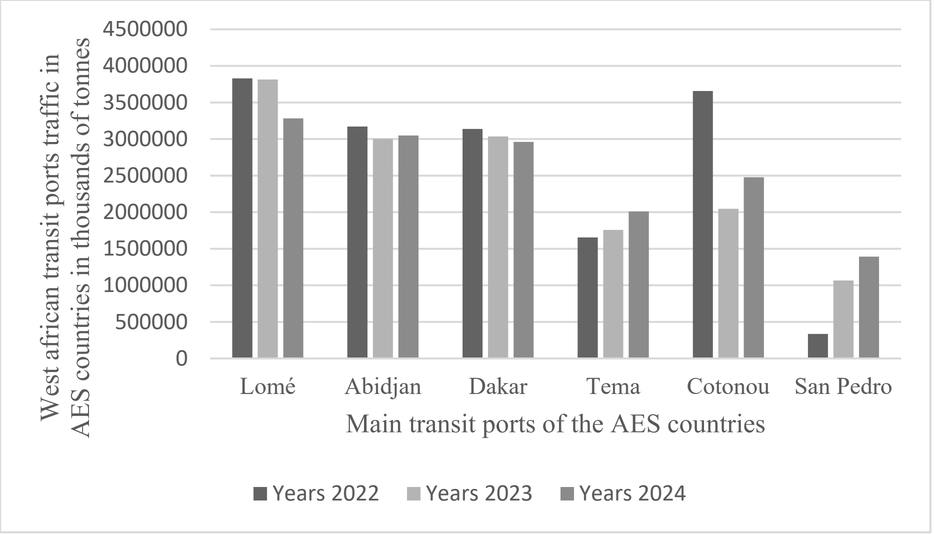
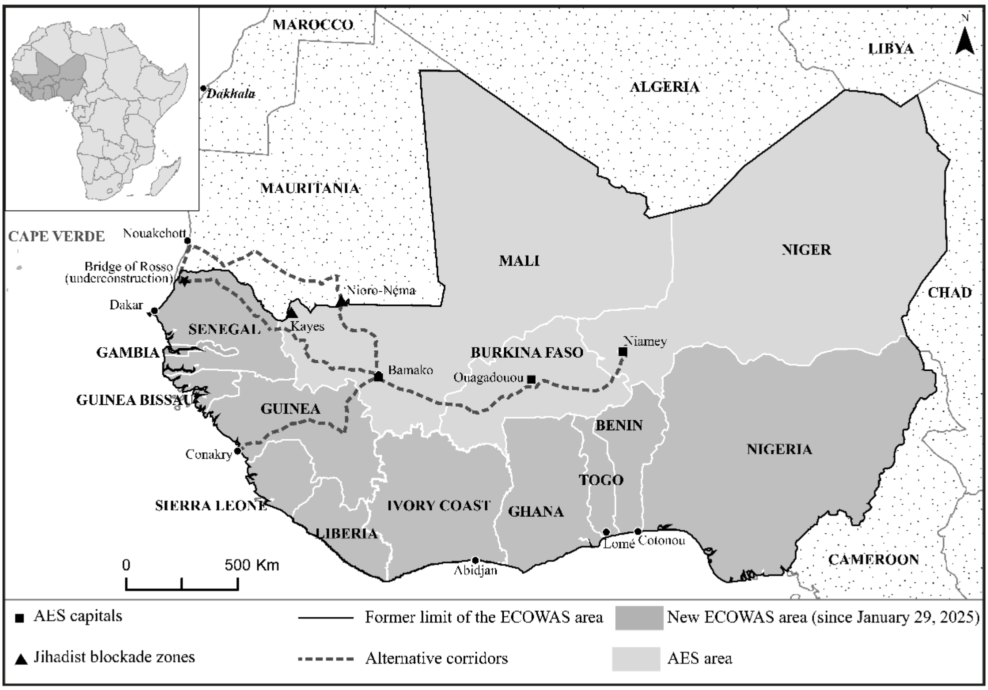


Fig. 3. Transit traffic of coastal ports of the CEDEAO from 2022 to 2024 (source: APA, 2025)

Regarding the available statistics, in general, transit traffic through the main West African coastal ports has been declining since 2022, except for the ports of San Pedro, Tema, and Abidjan to a lesser extent. The sharpest declines were recorded at the port of Cotonou and, to a lesser degree, at the port of Dakar, where transit traffic fell from 3 657 187 tonnes and 3 171 047 tonnes in 2022 to 2 478 045 tonnes and 2 961 024 tonnes in 2024, representing drops of 1 179 142 tonnes and 210 023 tonnes, or 32, 24% and 6%, respectively. In fact, the explanation that could justify this decline in Dakar's traffic is that the Dakar-Bamako corridor is permanently exposed to persistent insecurity. For example, the Kayes-Nioro road axis has been at the heart of a block of the jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin (JNIM) since September 2025. This state of affairs has heightened insecurity on the corridor and hindered Mali's supply lines. In contrast, the port of Abidjan, the main transit hub for Burkina Faso, has experienced traffic stagnation of over three million tonnes, despite diplomatic tensions with Burkina Faso and Mali. Meanwhile, the ports of San Pedro and Tema saw their transit traffic rise from 335 734 tonnes and 1 654 261 tonnes in 2022 to 1 392 463 tonnes and 2 009 165 tonnes, representing increases of 1 056 729 tonnes and 354 904 tonnes, respectively. In short, while all ECOWAS coastal ports experienced a decline in transit traffic, this drop was most noticeable at the port of Cotonou and, to a lesser extent, at Dakar. Moreover, total transit traffic of 45 678 204 tonnes of goods handled by West African coastal ports during the analysis period shows the port of Lomé captured 10 925 177 tonnes of goods destined for and originating from the AES countries, either, 23. 91% of the total volume to Abidjan (20.18%), Dakar (19.99%), and Cotonou (17.91%). Thus, Lomé has become the leading transit port in West Africa ahead of Abidjan, Dakar, and Cotonou. While competition among the ports of the region already existed before the withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS, this dynamic has intensified in the new geopolitical context. It now highlights two categories of port authorities: those that, with explicit government support, like Lomé and Tema, develop commercial strategies (reducing customs clearance times, integrating customs systems with AES countries to smooth corridors, direct promotional offensives, visits, and bilateral agreements to secure market shares).

3.2 Alternative corridors of the AES: between security constraints and capacity limits of substitution ports

The alternative corridors of the AES countries for their commercial exchanges, after their withdrawal from the ECOWAS, are not only subject to security constraints but also to the substitution ports through which the traffics are confronted with limited capacities and long detours leading to an increase in logistical costs compared to the pre-crisis trade road (Fig. 4).



Source: Policy center for the new south, 2025 Editor: ANI Yao Thierry, 2026

Fig. 4. Alternative corridors of the AES countries for their commercial exchanges

One of the substitution corridors of the AES (Alliance of Sahel States) countries is the one linked to Guinea. In reality, the Guinean capital (Conakry) is closer to Bamako (991 km) than the other West African coastal capitals, notably Abidjan and Dakar. This distance advantage does not attract the economic operators of the Sahelian countries, especially Mali, of which only 5 % of traffic passed through the port of Conakry. However, since the embargo imposed by ECOWAS in 2022, the port infrastructure of Conakry has captured up to 20 % of the traffic of the AES countries. This dynamic of traffic capture by the AES countries is hampered by the high maritime cost of shipping goods to or from Conakry (up to USD 1,000 more per container compared with Dakar or Lomé), limiting the use of this corridor for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This gap is mainly explained by structural and operational problems (low productivity, chronic congestion, high handling fees, insufficient security). These overheads are reflected in additional charges imposed by freight forwarders. Moreover, the port of Conakry faces frequent congestion of its terminals and limited processing capacities of its infrastructures due to the progressive increase in its traffic from or to the AES countries. These various factors reduce the capacity of the port of Conakry to be a competitive alternative corridor. In order to absorb the growing traffic volume of the AES countries, an alternative corridor is needed. Apart from this alternative corridor, the Nouakchott-Bamako railway corridor is a maritime access option for Mali and the two other AES members. The operationalization of this corridor is materialized by the strengthening of coordination since 2024 between Mauritanian and Malian authorities, notably in terms of transit facilitation and security of the Nioro-Néma segment, identified as one of the most vulnerable segments due to the activity of armed groups in the surrounding areas. In this dynamic of diversifying the corridors of the AES countries, the “royal Atlantic initiative for the Sahel” launched in 2021 aims to provide the landlocked Sahelian countries with direct access to the sea in the long term. This project plans to relieve Dakhla via multimodal corridors (road and rail) crossing Mauritania towards Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In the end, this Atlantic corridor could reduce by 20 to 30% the costs and import-export delays of the Sahelian countries. This crisis shaking West Africa through the creation of the AES gives the Sahelian countries the possibility to diversify their supply corridors and avoid economic asphyxiation.

3.3 Port Competition in West Africa: Capturing and Securing Transit Traffic from the AES Countries

Despite the withdrawal of the Sahelian countries that formed the AES (Alliance of Sahel States) from the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), their access to coastal ports in West Africa for their commercial exchanges remains a concern for port authorities. These authorities have deployed strategies to capture more transit traffic in order to secure economic operators in the AES. These strategies are summarized in offers of logistical attractiveness and diplomacy. Indeed, the port authorities of Lomé and Tema continue to strengthen the logistical attractiveness of their ports in terms of investment to remain regional hubs. In fact, the Togolese and Ghanaian authorities have clearly expressed their willingness to capture more transit traffic from the AES countries through an active diplomatic and economic rapprochement strategy, positioning themselves as a substitute partner in the face of tensions with ECOWAS. In this dynamic, port authorities are undertaking additional diplomatic efforts, investing in technology by implementing digital platforms (online payments and documents), eliminating multiple cumbersome controls, and initiating customs interconnection with the AES countries. In addition to these actions, the autonomous port of Lomé conducts active promotion missions and works closely with the Togolese revenue office to streamline corridors and reduce delays. As for the port of Abidjan, although its transit traffic has experienced an approximate 6% decline due to insecurity and the application of Ivorian measures during the crisis affecting the AES countries, Abidjan remains attractive thanks to its road and rail network and a developed railway. In addition, the port authorities of Abidjan are implementing incentive measures, such as a 30% reduction in port duties, to attract AES transit traffic and grant fiscal exemptions for imports and exports. Meanwhile, the port authorities of San Pedro maintain permanent contact with representatives of shippers from the AES countries, notably the IEMACI and CBC, by addressing the demands of Burkinabé and Malian shippers and removing illegal barriers on the section, as well as providing escorts for traffic fluidity at the destination and departure from the port of San Pedro. Furthermore, the port authorities of San Pedro are developing incentive mechanisms for certain shippers from the AES countries through tariff exemption corridors. These advantages are adjusted based on the volume of goods imported or exported via the port of San Pedro, in a logic of securing traffic and strengthening port attractiveness. In this sense, the commercial and marketing director of the port of San Pedro stated that these commercial actions allow Burkinabé and Malian shippers to always send their goods through their own port, even though relations remain tense between Côte d'Ivoire and the two Sahelian countries.

4 Discussion

The withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS is a reality since the signing of the Lipkato-Gourma charter on September 26, 2023, in Mali. However, the ECOWAS withdrawal does not in itself mean the end of commercial relations between the two organizations [6], but it has implications for the supply of the three Sahelian countries, which depend on their neighbors' infrastructures to import essential goods and to export their minerals [6], as well as other products. Trade continues certainly between the two blocs as long as they remain members of UEMOA [9]. On the contrary, this rupture constitutes a blow to West African economic integration. The signs of this new geopolitical configuration in the region are perceived through the decline in traffic gains of the main range of the West African port gateway, except for the traffic gains of the substitution port (Conakry) and secondary ports (San Pedro and Tema). But what must be noted is that the two blocs no longer share the same currency, namely the CFA franc. These results confirm the general observation of the growth of COA ports over the last decade, whose market share dynamics remain contrasted in West and Central Africa [10]. This reconfiguration of transit traffic allows us to affirm that the AES countries constitute hinterlands of coastal ports that are not captives but rather contested. As a result, the strong development of the Abidjan-Lagos corridor highlights an intensification of competing logistics [10], even when the AES countries were still part of ECOWAS. However, the unavailability of 2025 data does not allow us to see the different trends over time in terms of transit traffic dynamics. The new geopolitical environment forces the Sahelian countries to redesign their supply circuits through the establishment of new transit corridors and logistics that reshape regional trade dynamics. Above all, the Sahelian countries must meet the challenge of securing their various desert corridors [11]. Indeed, they depend on a limited number of corridors to access Atlantic ports (C. Jabbar, 2025), with the removal of a single axis from service potentially disorganizing national supply, increasing costs, and slowing cross-border exchanges [C. Jabbar, 2025]. The blockage on the Kayes-Niamey axis, imposed in September 2025 by JNIM, illustrates this state of affairs. The separation being effective, the two parties should create a formal cooperation framework capable of facilitating not only the exchange of goods and people but also, and above all, addressing the jihadist rise in the sub-region for the well-being of the populations of the two regional organizations.

5 Conclusion

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS constitutes a major turning point in the economic geography of West Africa. This political break leads to a progressive reconfiguration of Sahelian logistics corridors linking the Sahelian countries to Atlantic ports. The results of this study show that this situation accentuates competition between the ports of the West African coastline and favours a redistribution of transit flows to the benefit of politically neutral and logistically competitive platforms. In this context, the port of Lomé appears as one of the main beneficiaries of this reconfiguration, while traditional ports such as Cotonou or Dakar experience traffic losses. This new geopolitical configuration forces port authorities to reconsider their attractiveness strategies and strengthen logistical cooperation with Sahelian countries. In the long term, the emergence of alternative corridors, notably via Mauritania or the Moroccan Atlantic initiative, could durably transform regional trade dynamics. Ultimately, the withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS does not put an end to commercial exchanges with coastal countries, but rather contributes to a reconfiguration of regional logistics networks. The future evolution of these dynamics will depend on the ability of states and port authorities to secure corridors, improve transport infrastructures and maintain cooperation mechanisms favourable to fluid exchanges in West Africa.

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