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Regional Instability and Transnational Security Threats in West and Central Africa: Implications for International Peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

West and Central Africa are now at the heart of growing instability, where local conflicts and cross-border security threats are putting serious pressure on both African efforts and international peace missions. This study investigates on how weak governance, terrorist groups, criminal networks, and separatist struggles have come together to create a complicated and fragile situation. It further investigates and focuses on key examples such as Boko Haram operations in the Lake Chad region, the Tuareg rebellions in Mali, and the crisis between English-speaking and French-speaking communities in Cameroon. These challenges do not stop at national borders. They take advantage of poor institutions, open frontiers, and deep social and economic divides. Due to this situation, violence keeps reoccurring in many communities. Thus, the research shows that heavy reliance on military solutions, most especially those led by foreign countries or large peacekeeping forces, often fails to deal with the deeper problems that fuel these conflicts. Instead, the study suggests a different approach. It calls for stronger cooperation between African countries, better political leadership that includes all voices, and local peace efforts that are rooted in trust and community needs. True and lasting peace will only come when security efforts are combined with long-term development, open dialogue to prevent conflict, and support for communities to recover and grow stronger. More so, the findings of this research encourage a major change in how global actors support peace in Africa. Instead of waiting to react to crises, there should be a clear focus on protecting people, building stronger institutions, and creating conditions where peace can take root and last over time.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, numerous reports on West and Central Africa facing several challenges of violent conflict, political unrest and economic hardship have emerged and this has shaped the region's current security situation. Among the most pressing of these problems are failures in governance, unresolved ethnic divisions, acts of terrorism that cross national borders, and the unchecked spread of illegal weapons within and across countries (Rashid, 2004; Souaré, 2010). In same vein, this has led to instability worsening due to open borders, fragile state institutions and the ripple effects of crises in nearby countries. These current conditions have allowed extremist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to gain ground and expand their operations (Forest, 2012; Larémont, 2011) in both regions. What began as country-specific security concerns has now taken on a broader, regional dimension, spreading across borders and making it harder to build lasting peace (Haacke & Williams, 2008). More so, the fall of the Libyan government in 2011, for example, has triggered a massive flow of weapons and fighters into the Sahel, leading to a surge in violence across Mali, Niger and Nigeria (Lacher, 2012; Hinshaw, 2013).

Hence, this research is important because it reveals how local frustrations have become entangled with global security threats, and further creating serious obstacles to

both regional stability and international peace. Armed groups operating in Mali, Nigeria and Cameroon now rely on networks that cross national lines, making traditional military responses less effective (Pham, 2012; Cook, 2013). At the same time, organized crime groups have taken advantage of weak states in the Sahel and Sahara to traffic people, move drugs and also smuggle weapons (Lacher, 2012). This blend of criminal, political and ideological activity has turned West and Central Africa into centers of complex security threats where different actors often work together for mutual benefit (Gourley, 2012). Moreover, recognizing how these threats are connected is essential for building peace efforts that go beyond surface-level solutions and tackle the deep-seated factors that allow violence to continue. The increasing involvement of outside powers through the so-called peacekeeping missions, military alliances and the their geopolitical competition has also added new layers of complexity to how peace is pursued in the region (Cabestan, 2018; Clarkson, 2024).

Addressing these issues is not only urgent for the region, but also for the wider world. Instability in the Sahel has forced millions of people from their homes, putting pressure on already struggling states and international aid systems (Security Council Report, 2012). In some cases, violence from the region has even spilled over into terrorist attacks outside Africa, which makes the need

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for coordinated responses even more pressing (Renard, 2010; Rao, 2013). Regional groups like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have tried to respond with mediation and peacekeeping efforts, but they often lack the capacity and unity to act effectively (Adedeji, 2004; Ukeje, 2005). International efforts, such as the United Nations mission in Mali (MINUSMA), have faced major challenges that limit their ability to make a lasting impact (MINUSMA, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2012). Understanding why these efforts often struggle is key to creating more effective and sustainable approaches.

What makes this study unique from already existing work is its comprehensive research approach. It then looks at the way instability and security threats overlap across both regions and considers what it means for efforts to promote peace. Much of the existing research tends to focus on individual conflicts, like Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Tuareg uprising in Mali. Others treat West and Central Africa as two entirely separate regions (Tanchum, 2012; Bamfo, 2013). This study connects the dots between these areas, showing how the same structural problems drive conflict in both zones. It also examines the role of outside actors, including terrorist networks and countries like France, Russia and China, in shaping the region's security environment (Blyth, 2013; Clarkson, 2024; Cabestan, 2020). By doing so, the research offers a more complete picture and helps explain why many current strategies fall short. It also points the way toward more practical and locally appropriate solutions.

This study is especially timely because the security situation in West and Central Africa is changing rapidly. The rise of jihadist movements, combined with the return of authoritarian politics and continued governance failures, threatens the small gains some countries have made toward democracy (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012; Dowd, 2015). Meanwhile, foreign involvement continues to grow. For example, China's increasing role in both peacekeeping and infrastructure development is shifting power dynamics in the region (Cabestan, 2018; Benabdallah & Large, 2020). By exploring these evolving trends, this research provides practical guidance for governments, regional bodies, and international partners working to bring peace to one of the most volatile parts of the world. Above all, it shows that lasting peace cannot be achieved through military means alone. Real progress depends on fixing broken institutions, strengthening cooperation among neighboring countries, and addressing the economic and social issues that fuel unrest.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a scoping review methodology to examine the complex interconnections between regional instability and transnational security threats in West and Central Africa. The approach followed the five-stage framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which includes: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4)

charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. This structure provided a systematic yet flexible foundation for capturing the breadth of academic and policy literature addressing hybrid security threats across the region. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic, a narrative synthesis was applied in line with the guidance provided by Popay *et al.* (2006). This involved organizing findings thematically and interpreting relationships between concepts, events, and actors. The narrative synthesis was particularly suited to this study given the diverse nature of sources, which included journal articles, policy briefs, institutional reports, and grey literature.

The literature review process was grounded in the principles outlined by Snyder (2019), who emphasized the importance of literature reviews as a stand-alone research method for conceptual development and synthesis across disciplines. Following her recommendations, the selection criteria focused on relevance to the key themes of governance, terrorism, armed conflict, organized crime, and peacebuilding in the regional context of West and Central Africa. To locate relevant sources, Boolean search logic was applied across academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search combined keywords using logical operators to refine and expand the results. Some of the primary search strings included: "West Africa" OR "Central Africa" AND "security threats" OR "regional instability", "Boko Haram" OR "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" AND "transnational" OR "cross-border", "peacebuilding" AND "international response" OR "ECOWAS" AND "conflict resolution", "organized crime" OR "drug trafficking" AND "Sahel" OR "Lake Chad Basin". Searches were limited to English-language sources published between 2000 and 2024 to ensure relevance and recency. Snowball sampling was also employed, wherein reference lists of core studies were reviewed to identify additional key literature.

This multi-method review process enabled the study to draw from a broad array of sources while maintaining analytical depth. It ensured that emerging trends and regional variations were captured, and that the complex nature of transnational security in West and Central Africa was effectively contextualized within existing peacebuilding discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Historical Context of Regional Instability

The historical roots of instability in West and Central Africa are deeply intertwined with colonial legacies, post-independence governance failures, and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities. The arbitrary borders drawn during colonial rule disrupted traditional socio-political structures, creating states that were inherently fragile and vulnerable to internal conflict (Rashid, 2004; Souaré, 2010). Post-independence leaders often pursued authoritarian governance that excluded significant segments of their populations from political participation,

resulting in recurrent uprisings and coups (Adebajo, 2004). In countries such as Mali, Niger, and Chad, state authority has long been weak in peripheral regions, where historical marginalization has fueled rebellion movements like the Tuareg insurgencies (Daigne, 2012; Taje, 2010). These dynamics contributed to a cyclical pattern of governance crises and armed conflicts that have destabilized the entire region.

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point that reshaped security dynamics in West Africa. During the Cold War, superpower rivalries provided external support to client regimes, which in turn suppressed many internal conflicts (Rashid, 2004). However, with the withdrawal of superpower patronage in the 1990s, many regimes lost their coercive capacity, leading to a resurgence of civil wars and state collapse in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone (Abdullah & Rashid, 2004). The proliferation of small arms and light weapons further intensified these conflicts, making them more lethal and protracted (Bah, 2004). ECOWAS attempted to fill the security vacuum through regional peacekeeping missions, but these interventions often suffered from limited resources and political disagreements among member states (Adedeji, 2004; Ukeje, 2005). The legacy of these conflicts continues to shape contemporary insecurity, as former combatants and armed networks remain active across borders.

In Central Africa, similar patterns of instability have emerged from weak state institutions, contestation over resource wealth, and the involvement of external actors. The Central African Republic has experienced repeated cycles of rebellion and foreign military intervention, while Cameroon has grappled with the Anglophone crisis, which has escalated into a protracted armed conflict (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng *et al.*, 2023). These conflicts have regional spillover effects, with refugees and armed groups moving across porous borders into neighboring states, thereby regionalizing insecurity (Harrington, 2018). Moreover, Central African conflicts are often intertwined with West African dynamics due to shared trafficking routes, cross-border ethnic ties, and the mobility of mercenaries and extremist groups (Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Allansson *et al.*, 2017). This interconnectedness reveals that instability in one part of the region cannot be understood in isolation from broader transnational security trends.

The rise of extremist ideologies further compounded the historical grievances that drive conflict. In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram initially emerged as a localized Islamist movement responding to governance failures and socio-economic exclusion before evolving into a transnational insurgency with operational links to the Sahel (Forest, 2012; Pham, 2012). Similarly, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb capitalized on the political vacuum created by the fall of the Libyan regime to expand its presence in Mali and Niger, merging jihadist objectives with criminal networks involved in smuggling and kidnapping for ransom (Larémont, 2011; Lacher, 2012). These groups have blurred the lines between ideological

extremism, organized crime, and political rebellion, creating hybrid threats that challenge traditional security responses (Gourley, 2012).

Furthermore, international interventions have at times reinforced instability rather than resolving it. The French-led military operations in Mali, for instance, temporarily dislodged jihadist groups but failed to address the structural drivers of insecurity, leading to renewed violence and anti-foreign sentiment (Blyth, 2013; Rao, 2013). United Nations peacekeeping missions such as MINUSMA have faced operational constraints due to asymmetric warfare tactics employed by insurgents, as well as political fragmentation within Malian society (International Crisis Group, 2012; MINUSMA, 2013). These experiences highlight the limitations of externally driven peace-building efforts that do not adequately engage local communities or tackle governance deficits. Thus, the historical trajectory of instability in West and Central Africa reflects a confluence of domestic, regional, and global factors that have entrenched a persistent cycle of violence.

Key Drivers of Transnational Security Threats

The transnational security threats facing West and Central Africa are driven by a combination of structural vulnerabilities, governance failures, and the evolution of non-state armed groups. One of the primary drivers is the weakness of state institutions, which creates ungoverned spaces where armed actors can operate with impunity. Many governments in the region lack the capacity to project authority beyond urban centers, leaving vast rural areas susceptible to insurgent control (Souaré, 2010; Taje, 2010). Corruption, poor service delivery, and political exclusion have eroded citizens' trust in the state, fueling grievances that extremist groups and criminal networks exploit for recruitment (Dowd, 2015; Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012). In countries such as Mali, Niger, and the Central African Republic, the absence of effective governance has allowed jihadist groups, armed militias, and transnational smugglers to establish parallel systems of authority, further undermining state legitimacy (Forest, 2012; Larémont, 2011).

Terrorism is a central transnational threat that has evolved beyond local insurgencies to form regional networks spanning the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and parts of Central Africa. Boko Haram's metamorphosis from a local religious movement into a regional terrorist organization demonstrates how violent extremism can transcend borders when states fail to address underlying socio-economic and political grievances (Pham, 2012; Cook, 2013). Similarly, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates have exploited porous borders to move fighters, weapons, and illicit goods across Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Burkina Faso, blurring the distinction between domestic and transnational conflict (Gourley, 2012; Hinshaw, 2013). These groups often cooperate with local smuggling networks, kidnapping enterprises, and mercenary outfits, creating hybrid threats that

simultaneously serve ideological and economic purposes (Lacher, 2012). The interconnectedness of these networks has made isolated national security strategies ineffective, as destabilizing actors can retreat across borders and regroup.

Organized crime, particularly the trafficking of drugs, arms, and humans, reinforces instability by providing financial resources to armed groups and eroding state authority. The Sahel-Sahara corridor has become a major route for cocaine smuggling from Latin America to Europe, with profits fueling local conflicts and incentivizing collaboration between jihadist groups and criminal syndicates (Lacher, 2012; Renard, 2010). Kidnapping for ransom has emerged as another lucrative industry for extremist groups, further internationalizing the security challenge by targeting foreign nationals and humanitarian workers (Larémont, 2011; Gourley, 2012). The convergence of terrorism and organized crime has created a self-sustaining cycle where illicit economies finance insurgencies, and insecurity in turn facilitates criminal enterprises. This dynamic undermines both national and regional peace-building efforts by perpetuating violence and weakening legitimate economic structures.

External interventions, while sometimes necessary, have also contributed to the persistence of transnational security threats. The French military interventions in Mali and the broader Sahel disrupted jihadist strongholds temporarily but did not eliminate their operational capacity, leading to a re-emergence of violence in new areas (Blyth,

2013; Rao, 2013). Moreover, the geopolitical competition between foreign powers such as France, Russia, and China has added new layers of complexity to regional security governance. Russia's growing military presence in Mali through the Wagner Group has shifted local power dynamics, while China's involvement in peacekeeping and infrastructure projects reflects its expanding strategic interests in the region (Clarkson, 2024; Cabestan, 2018; Benabdallah & Large, 2020). These competing foreign agendas sometimes undermine coordinated peace-building initiatives, creating fragmented approaches that fail to address the root causes of insecurity.

On the other hand, environmental stress and socio-economic marginalization have also amplified transnational security risks. Climate change-induced desertification, resource scarcity, and competition over grazing lands have exacerbated farmer-herder conflicts in Mali, Niger, and northern Nigeria, which extremist groups exploit to expand their influence (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Dowd, 2015). The resulting displacement of populations increases the pool of vulnerable communities susceptible to radicalization or recruitment by armed groups (Finkel *et al.*, 2016). Rapid urbanization without adequate economic opportunities has further entrenched poverty and inequality, creating fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root in urban peripheries (Mousseau, 2011; Raleigh, 2015). These structural factors reveal that transnational security threats are not solely the product of militant organizations but are deeply linked to governance, socio-economic, and environmental challenges.

Table 1: Key Transnational Security Threats in West and Central Africa

Threat Type	Main Actors or Groups	Regional Impact	References
Terrorism and Insurgency	Boko Haram, ISWAP, AQIM	Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, Cameroon	Cook (2013); Forest (2012); Pham (2012)
Armed Rebellions	Tuareg groups, jihadist coalitions	Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger	Blyth (2013); Rao (2013)
Organized Crime	Smugglers, arms and drug traffickers	Sahel-Sahara trafficking routes	Lacher (2012); Renard (2010)
Separatist Movements	Ambazonia fighters, Anglophone groups	Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions	Annan <i>et al.</i> (2021); Beseng <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Communal Conflicts	Farmer-herder militias	Nigeria, Mali, Niger	Benjaminsen & Ba (2009); Dowd (2015)

Regional and International Responses

The complexity of security threats in West and Central Africa has necessitated a multi-layered response involving regional organizations, international actors, and national governments. At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a pivotal role in conflict management through mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Adedeji, 2004; Sesay, 2005). ECOWAS interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire set precedents for regional peacekeeping, although these missions revealed significant challenges related to financing, coordination,

and political legitimacy (Ukeje, 2005; Obi, 2009). In the case of Mali, ECOWAS deployed diplomatic and security measures before the French-led intervention, but its limited capacity to counter well-armed jihadist groups underscored the need for stronger regional cooperation (Bamfo, 2013; Adebajo, 2004). While ECOWAS has been instrumental in setting normative frameworks for democracy and security, its responses have sometimes been reactive rather than preventive, constrained by member states' political will and resource limitations.

The African Union (AU) has complemented ECOWAS efforts through its Peace and Security Council and the African Standby Force framework, but it faces similar

challenges in mobilizing rapid and effective interventions. The AU's involvement in the Sahel has largely been through coordination with subregional bodies and support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a regional security initiative involving Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad (Souaré, 2010; Taje, 2010). However, the G5 Sahel has struggled with funding, operational capacity, and divergent national priorities, limiting its effectiveness against transnational jihadist networks (International Crisis Group, 2012). Furthermore, the AU's dependence on external donors for financing peace operations has raised concerns about the sustainability and autonomy of African-led solutions (Deltenre & Liégeois, 2016). These limitations highlight the need for more integrated regional strategies that address governance deficits, economic development, and security sector reform simultaneously. The United Nations has engaged in peace-building through missions such as MINUSMA in Mali and MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, providing stabilization forces and supporting political dialogue (MINUSMA, 2013; Badache *et al.*, 2022). However, UN missions in the region have faced criticism for being overly focused on military stabilization without adequately addressing the socio-political roots of insecurity (Paris, 2024; Clausen & Albrecht, 2021). Asymmetric warfare tactics by insurgents have also increased casualties among peacekeepers, raising questions about the feasibility of

traditional peacekeeping in volatile environments like the Sahel (Lanteigne, 2019). Additionally, coordination between the UN, regional organizations, and national governments has often been fragmented, leading to duplication of efforts and inconsistent approaches to conflict resolution (Zyck & Muggah, 2012). External powers have also shaped the security landscape through military interventions, training programs, and geopolitical competition. France's Operation Serval and subsequent Operation Barkhane were critical in halting jihadist advances in Mali, but their long-term impact has been contested, with some local populations viewing them as neo-colonial (Blyth, 2013; Rao, 2013). Russia has gained influence in Mali and the Central African Republic through security partnerships and the deployment of private military contractors such as the Wagner Group, altering the balance of power among external actors (Clarkson, 2024). Meanwhile, China's involvement has been primarily through peacekeeping contributions, infrastructure development, and limited security cooperation, signaling its growing interest in African stability without overt military engagement (Cabestan, 2018; Benabdallah & Large, 2020). This influx of external actors has created both opportunities for security assistance and challenges related to coordination and competing strategic interests.

Table 2: Regional and International Responses to Security Threats

Response Mechanism	Lead Actor(s)	Scope and Limitations	References
ECOWAS Peacekeeping	ECOWAS, AU	Limited funding, political divisions	Adebajo (2004); Bamfo (2013)
French Military Actions	France (Serval/Barkhane)	Short-term tactical success, long-term fragility	Blyth (2013); Clarkson (2024)
UN Peace Missions	United Nations (MINUSMA, MINUSCA)	Resource constraints, asymmetric threats	Paris (2024); Badache <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Local Mediation Efforts	Civil society actors	Build resilience but lack funding and scale	Annan <i>et al.</i> (2021); Beseng <i>et al.</i> (2023)
External Power Partnerships	China, Russia, US, EU	Competing agendas weaken coherence	Cho (2025); Cabestan (2018)

Civil society organizations and local peace-building initiatives have attempted to fill the gaps left by state and international actors. In Cameroon, for example, grassroots organizations have worked to mediate between separatist groups and government forces, although shrinking civic space has limited their effectiveness (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, community-based conflict resolution mechanisms in Mali and Nigeria have sought to address farmer-herder tensions and other local disputes that fuel broader insecurity (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). While these initiatives are essential for building local resilience, they require greater integration with national and regional strategies to achieve sustainable peace. The lack of coherence among regional, international, and national actors has hindered the development of a comprehensive security architecture capable of addressing the hybrid nature of threats in West and Central Africa.

Implications for International Peacebuilding

The evolving security landscape in West and Central Africa holds profound implications for international peacebuilding. One of the key lessons from the Boko Haram insurgency, the Malian crisis, and the broader Sahelian instability is that peacebuilding cannot rely solely on military interventions or top-down stabilization strategies. International efforts that prioritize counterterrorism without simultaneously addressing governance deficits, socio-economic exclusion, and local grievances risk perpetuating cycles of violence (Dowd, 2015; Finkel *et al.*, 2016). For instance, the French-led operations in Mali succeeded in dislodging jihadist groups from urban centers but failed to create sustainable governance structures, leading to the resurgence of violence in rural areas (Blyth, 2013; Rao, 2013). Another implication is the growing necessity of

regional approaches to peacebuilding. The transnational nature of contemporary security threats in Africa manifested in the movement of armed groups, trafficking networks, and extremist ideologies across porous borders requires cooperation beyond national jurisdictions (Haacke & Williams, 2008; Renard, 2010). The G5 Sahel Joint Force, despite its shortcomings, illustrates an attempt to develop collective security mechanisms capable of addressing threats that no single state can handle alone. Similarly, ECOWAS and the African Union have provided platforms for regional diplomacy and conflict resolution, but their effectiveness depends on enhanced political will, sustainable funding, and stronger institutional capacities (Adebajo, 2004; Bamfo, 2013). For international peace-building actors, this means that supporting and strengthening African-led initiatives must remain a central priority rather than imposing externally designed solutions that lack regional legitimacy.

The internationalization of African conflicts has also highlighted the importance of multilateral coordination. United Nations peace operations like MINUSMA and MINUSCA have been tasked with stabilization in complex environments marked by asymmetric threats, but their mandates and resources often lag behind the realities on the ground (Paris, 2024; Badache *et al.*, 2022). In addition, competition among external powers such as France, Russia, China, and the United States has created overlapping agendas that sometimes undermine coherent peace-building strategies (Clarkson, 2024; Cabestan, 2018). To mitigate this fragmentation, there is a growing call for a more pragmatic and pluralistic approach to peacebuilding that aligns international support with African regional priorities, engages local communities, and minimizes the geopolitical rivalries that complicate stabilization efforts (Cho, 2025; Clausen & Albrecht, 2021). Local ownership and community resilience emerge as critical pillars for sustainable peace. Experiences from Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, Nigeria's northeastern states, and Mali's rural communities show that when peace processes exclude grassroots actors, they fail to address the underlying drivers of violence (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng *et al.*, 2023). Supporting traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and civil society initiatives can bridge the gap between local needs and national or international interventions, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of peace-building outcomes. Hence, international actors must therefore prioritize inclusive governance reforms, livelihood programs, and justice mechanisms that empower marginalized populations and rebuild trust between citizens and the state (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Dowd, 2015).

Lastly, the security dynamics in West and Central Africa challenge traditional notions of peacebuilding by revealing the fluid boundaries between conflict, terrorism, organized crime, and governance failures. Hybrid threats where extremist groups blend ideological, criminal, and political agendas demand adaptive strategies that go beyond conventional peacekeeping or state-centric stabilization (Lacher, 2012; Tanchum, 2012).

For the international community, this implies rethinking peacebuilding to include conflict-sensitive development, cross-border security governance, and preventive diplomacy aimed at disrupting the enabling environments for violent extremism (Souaré, 2010; Zyck & Muggah, 2012). Moreover, the lessons from the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin underline that international peacebuilding must shift from crisis-driven responses to long-term engagement that prioritizes resilience and institution-building over reactive military deployments. In essence, the experiences of West and Central Africa reveal both the limitations of traditional peace-building models and the opportunities for more innovative, context-driven approaches.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing regional instability and transnational security threats in West and Central Africa requires a multidimensional approach that integrates security, governance, development, and diplomacy. Based on the patterns observed in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and conflict-affected areas of Central Africa, the following policy recommendations emerge for national governments, regional organizations, and international actors.

First, strengthening governance and state legitimacy is essential for sustainable peace. Weak state institutions, pervasive corruption, and governance failures have created conditions for insurgent groups to thrive by exploiting local grievances (Dowd, 2015; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). Governments in the region must prioritize inclusive political settlements, decentralization of power, and improved service delivery to marginalized communities. Enhanced transparency in the security and justice sectors would rebuild public trust, while addressing long-standing issues such as land rights and intercommunal tensions would mitigate some of the structural drivers of violence (Cederman *et al.*, 2010; Elfversson, 2015). International partners should support these reforms through capacity building, technical assistance, and conditional aid that incentivizes governance improvements rather than enabling elite rent-seeking behaviors.

Second, regional security cooperation must be consolidated and made more effective. ECOWAS, the African Union, and subregional initiatives like the G5 Sahel Joint Force should receive sustainable funding and technical support to improve their operational capabilities (Adebajo, 2004; Bamfo, 2013). Regional actors need to harmonize intelligence sharing, border security measures, and joint operations to disrupt the transnational networks of jihadist groups and criminal syndicates (Renard, 2010; Haacke & Williams, 2008). Moreover, mechanisms for conflict prevention should be strengthened, with early warning systems linked to rapid political and diplomatic interventions rather than waiting for crises to escalate into full-blown conflicts (Souaré, 2010; Zyck & Muggah, 2012). The international community can play a supportive role by aligning assistance programs with African-led priorities rather than imposing fragmented and externally driven security agendas.

Third, international peace operations must adapt to hybrid threats and focus on long-term stabilization rather than short-term crisis response. Missions like MINUSMA have demonstrated the challenges of deploying peacekeepers in environments where terrorism, organized crime, and political instability converge (Paris, 2024; Badache *et al.*, 2022). Future peace operations should adopt more flexible mandates that integrate civilian protection, state-building, and support for local reconciliation processes. The United Nations should improve coordination with regional organizations and external actors to prevent duplication and ensure that peacekeeping efforts are complemented by political and economic initiatives (Clausen & Albrecht, 2021; Cho, 2025). Furthermore, international donors should provide predictable funding for peacebuilding beyond military stabilization, emphasizing governance reform, economic recovery, and social cohesion.

Fourth, community-based peace-building and local resilience must be prioritized. Top-down approaches alone cannot resolve deeply rooted conflicts fueled by ethnic marginalization, livelihood insecurity, and historical injustices. Grassroots organizations, traditional leaders, and local civil society actors should be empowered to mediate disputes, rebuild intercommunal trust, and contribute to disarmament and reintegration programs (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng *et al.*, 2023). Involving women and youth in peace-building initiatives would help address generational grievances and create alternative pathways to violent extremism. International partners can support these efforts by funding locally designed projects, providing training for community mediators, and ensuring that national policies reflect local realities rather than externally imposed templates.

Finally, a shift toward preventive diplomacy and long-term regional development is necessary. The Sahel and Lake Chad Basin crises have demonstrated that neglecting economic development and climate resilience exacerbates insecurity by fueling competition over scarce resources and enabling extremist recruitment (Tanchum, 2012; Lacher, 2012). Policies that integrate peacebuilding with climate adaptation, sustainable agriculture, and cross-border trade can reduce the vulnerability of local populations to armed group exploitation. Preventive diplomacy should focus on mediating tensions before they escalate, involving regional leaders, international mediators, and multilateral institutions to manage disputes over resources, governance, and identity (Dixon, 1996; Zyck & Muggah, 2012). In this regard, peacebuilding should be seen not as an isolated intervention but as part of a broader strategy for human security and socio-economic transformation in Africa.

By implementing these recommendations, West and Central Africa could gradually move toward greater stability, resilience, and regional cooperation. For the international community, the key lies in supporting African-led solutions, promoting inclusive governance, and ensuring that peace-building efforts are comprehensive rather than narrowly focused on military

security. Only through such an integrated approach can the region escape the cycles of instability that continue to undermine both local and international security.

Discussion

The patterns of regional instability and transnational security threats in West and Central Africa reveal a complex and evolving security landscape shaped by local grievances, state fragility, and international interventions. The Boko Haram insurgency, the Tuareg rebellions in Mali, and the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon demonstrate that conflicts in the region are rarely confined within national borders; rather, they are embedded within broader networks of political, economic, and ideological contestations (Dowd, 2015; Tanchum, 2012). This transnational dimension complicates traditional peace-building strategies that focus narrowly on national governments, highlighting the need for approaches that address cross-border dynamics and regional cooperation. A key finding across the case studies is that military-centric responses have yielded only temporary relief and often exacerbated underlying tensions. International counterterrorism operations in Mali and the Sahel disrupted insurgent advances but failed to create sustainable governance or address the socio-economic marginalization that fuels recruitment into armed groups (Blyth, 2013; Rao, 2013). Similarly, peacekeeping missions such as MINUSMA have been constrained by limited mandates and resources, operating in environments where terrorism, organized crime, and communal violence intersect (Paris, 2024; Badache *et al.*, 2022). These outcomes underscore the limitations of externally driven stabilization efforts that do not sufficiently integrate local contexts, governance reforms, and community resilience. Another critical insight is the importance of regional institutions in addressing the transnational nature of threats. ECOWAS and the African Union have shown potential as platforms for coordinated security responses, yet their capacity remains limited by financial constraints, political divisions, and reliance on external donors (Adebajo, 2004; Bamfo, 2013). Strengthening African-led security architectures is therefore essential, not only for crisis response but also for preventive diplomacy and long-term stabilization. At the same time, external actors such as France, China, Russia, and the United States often pursue competing agendas in the region, creating overlapping interventions that sometimes undermine cohesive peace-building strategies (Clarkson, 2024; Cho, 2025).

Furthermore, the discussion reveals that sustainable peace requires the inclusion of grassroots actors and a focus on community resilience. Local populations bear the brunt of violence, yet they are frequently marginalized in national and international peace processes (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng *et al.*, 2023). Building peace from below through traditional mediation, civil society engagement, and livelihood support can address some of the structural drivers of conflict that top-down approaches overlook. This bottom-up perspective also ensures that

peace-building initiatives are more context-sensitive and legitimate, enhancing their chances of success over the long term.

Finally, the discussion highlights the necessity of rethinking peace-building as part of a broader human security agenda. Climate change, resource competition, and demographic pressures intersect with political grievances to fuel instability in ways that cannot be resolved through security measures alone (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Lacher, 2012). Integrating peace-building with climate adaptation, development, and governance reforms is essential to reduce the vulnerability of communities to extremist and criminal networks. In this sense, regional instability in West and Central Africa offers lessons for global peace-building efforts by demonstrating the need for holistic, adaptive, and locally driven strategies.

CONCLUSION

Regional instability and transnational security threats in West and Central Africa are shaped by an intricate web of governance failures, socio-economic marginalization, and the opportunistic expansion of violent non-state actors. The region demonstrates that localized grievances can easily escalate into hybrid security threats when combined with porous borders, weak institutions, and organized criminal networks. While regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union have attempted to respond, their limited resources and political constraints have left much of the burden to international peacekeeping missions and external military interventions. However, these top-down approaches have achieved only temporary stability, often failing to address the structural drivers of conflict. Sustainable peace in the region requires shifting from reactive crisis management to proactive peacebuilding. This involves strengthening governance and legitimacy, fostering inclusive development, and improving regional cooperation mechanisms to address threats that no single state can tackle alone. Equally important is the integration of grassroots actors and local communities into peace processes to ensure solutions are context-sensitive and widely accepted. Moreover, aligning international interventions with African-led priorities is critical to avoid fragmented and competing agendas that undermine collective security. Furthermore, the experiences of West and Central Africa underline that peacebuilding must transcend military stabilization and embrace a holistic human security approach that links security, governance, and socio-economic resilience. Only through such integrated and adaptive strategies can the region move toward lasting stability and contribute to broader global peace efforts.

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