

## Global Essay Competition 2025

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**Title: Fight or Be Fought On: West Africa's Path to Survival in a Divided World.**

Once upon an era, the United States stood unchallenged militarily, politically, and economically. Nevertheless, it is popularly said, "Nothing lasts forever." Today, the once-unipolar world order has fractured, giving rise to global powers like China and Russia, dividing the world into Western allies and anti-Western blocs. This shifting geopolitical landscape presents a critical risk: regions that fail to proactively engage in this realignment may become battlegrounds for proxy conflicts as major powers compete for control over resource-rich and strategically significant territories (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Dunne & Schmidt, 2020).

Nowhere is this more evident than in West Africa, where external powers—including the United States, China, France, and Russia—subtly fuel regional rivalries, supplying arms and strategic support to maintain influence. Political Scientist Mearsheimer's "bait and bleed" strategy which explains how powerful states incite conflicts among weaker rivals to their advantage, offers a fitting lens through which we can understand this dynamic (Toft, 2005). Currently, West Africa finds itself in this position—either asserting its sovereignty through regional unity or risk becoming a pawn in the struggle for global power. While foreign aid brings short-term economic and security benefits, it deepens dependency in the long run and sometimes fuels geopolitical rivalries, undermining stability. Without a collective approach to handling internal challenges and external influences, West Africa risks being used and left in peril in the new world order.

You might be asking, "Is West Africa truly that important?" The answer is yes! West Africa's abundant oil, gas, gold, uranium, and rare earth minerals, are critical for global industries and energy security (Bukhari, et al., 2024; Kohnert, 2024a). Its strategic location makes it a vital international gateway, mainly through the Gulf of Guinea, a major shipping lane for oil and other commodities (Aning et al., 2021). Additionally, the proximity to Europe and the Middle East enhances its value for military and logistical operations (Musa, 2024). Also, with a young and rapidly growing population currently over 400 million, West Africa represents a significant consumer market and labor force for economic investment and trade partnerships (Hicks et. al., 2023).

## **West Africa's Challenge in the Multipolar World**

Given West Africa's significance to the world despite not being fully equipped economically, militarily or technologically to assert themselves on the global stage, one might expect that with all of these resources, these nations would unite to protect themselves from being used by external powers. However, the reality leads us to see how the leaders have created a fragmentation, essentially presenting the region as a doormat for outside interference. This implies that external powers did not just force their way into this region like during the colonial times, but they were ushered in seeing as the region already lacked the spirit of 'togetherness'. While Western powers are undoubtedly exacerbating the current crisis in West Africa, the seeds of instability were sown long ago by endemic bad governance, corruption, and a failure to prioritize the needs of the population.

To better understand the current situation in West Africa, consider this recent chain of events (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024; Musa, 2024; Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025):

- Frustrated with ineffective governance, corruption, and foreign interference, citizens supported military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as a desperate attempt to restore national sovereignty and security.
- These coups, however, triggered strong reactions from the regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which, influenced by Western sentiments, imposed severe sanctions on the junta-led nations
- Feeling ostracized by ECOWAS and the broader international community, the military regimes sought alternative alliances and withdrew from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).
- The AES, driven by anti-Western sentiment, expelled the French and U.S troops, and instead, sought partnerships with non-traditional allies (like Russia, China, and Turkey), which has solidified an ideological and strategic divide in the region.

The ongoing AES-ECOWAS tension exemplifies a classic prisoner's dilemma in international relations—while both blocs would benefit from unity, mutual distrust drives them toward suboptimal outcomes by aligning with external powers. These Western and anti-Western powers they align with provide military support, financial resources, and political endorsement to their chosen factions, exacerbating insecurity and escalating violence in this region (Bukhari, 2024; Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Bassey et al., 2024).

France's weakening but persistent influence through its former colonies exemplifies the problematic nature of external engagement. Despite growing resistance leading to the cancellation of military agreements and expulsion of French troops in several countries, the resulting power vacuum has merely opened doors for other external actors to pursue their own interests (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Bukhari, 2024). For example, Russia's Wagner Group now rebranded as Africa Corps has established a formidable presence with troops in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, supporting authoritarian regimes in exchange for access to resources (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Faulkner et al., 2024). Adding to this complexity, Turkish-funded Syrian mercenaries are also active in Niger and Burkina Faso, safeguarding strategic economic interests like mines, despite a troubling record of human rights abuses (Kohnert, 2024a; Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025). This pattern mirrors other international conflicts, such as those in Syria, Ukraine, and Israel/Palestine, where the involvement of opposing international allies has led to greater complexity and disastrous outcomes (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025).

Some argue that external involvement brings tangible benefits to West Africa, including economic investments, infrastructure development, and military support against insurgencies. Chinese state-owned enterprises, for example, have played a significant role in critical projects involving crude oil, uranium, and solar energy within the AES, and within the region, China's Belt and Road Initiative has funded infrastructure projects (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2024). Similarly, the U.S. and the U.K. are securing access to vital minerals through initiatives such as the Minerals Security Partnership, which ties resource security to counterterrorism efforts and strategic competition against rival nations (Kohnert, 2024a). Proponents of these arguments claim that in partnering with global powers and getting key resources and expertise, West African nations can tackle their security and development problems.

However, while these partnerships may offer immediate relief, they most likely come at a long-term cost. Economic investments from foreign powers can lead to "debt traps," restricting West African nations' ability to invest in their own security and development (Bukhari, 2024; Kohnert, 2024b). Critics may further argue that West African states are not merely passive victims of global power struggles but active participants in shaping their external relationships. Yet, due to internal fragmentation and governance weaknesses, these nations struggle to negotiate from a position of strength, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and dependence on external actors (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Kohnert, 2024b).

The risks of external interference coupled with the already existing problems in the region has not only created a geopolitical rift reminiscent of Cold War dynamics, but also created security vulnerabilities and diminished the region's collective capacity to address shared challenges (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Bukhari, 2024). These challenges include the rise of insurgent movements and terrorist groups in this region (i.e., Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS affiliates), which have accounted for 43% of global terrorist deaths. Additionally, climate change and environmental degradation have worsened conflict over land and resources between farmers and herders. All these factors have jointly contributed to increased instability, displacement, and humanitarian crises (Oluyemi & Adisa, 2025; Bassey et al., 2024; UNSC, 2024).

In 2024, it was projected that 48.6 million people in West Africa would experience food insecurity, with Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria being the most affected countries, as well as with more than 6.5 million internally displaced persons, alongside approximately 690,000 refugees and asylum seekers. Additionally, around 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers were present in Mauritania, while approximately 143,000 were in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. Between July and October, 1,535 fatalities, including civilians, military personnel, armed groups, and others, were recorded in Burkina Faso. Flooding in West Africa also resulted in at least 833 deaths in 2024 (UNSC, 2024).

### **Reclaiming West Africa's Future: Building Regional Unity in an Era of External Influence**

As the popular saying goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." This sentiment is deeply rooted in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual responsibility, and collective well-being (Nussubaum, 2003). From the general essay analysis, we can recognize that unity is by far the strongest defense against external dominance and internal instability in West Africa. Persistent divisions have left the region vulnerable to foreign interference, diverting attention from pressing domestic and regional challenges. To address these challenges, this essay proposes the One West Way (OWW) Initiative—a call for West African nations to embrace a unified 'African' approach to security and governance, guided by the spirit of Ubuntu.

The application of Ubuntu principles could significantly enhance cooperation between ECOWAS and AES in key areas of governance, security, economic development, and climate change resilience in the following ways:

- **Governance:** Sustainable governance in West Africa requires both ECOWAS and AES to have a constructive dialogue and a willingness to compromise in working together to address shared issues. ECOWAS must champion democratic values while remaining flexible in engaging with AES, as long as this leads to tangible improvements in governance and citizens' well-being (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024). However, this flexibility should not overlook the importance of closely monitoring governance practices across all other member states to ensure that they align with the expectations of their citizens and uphold good governance. Regionally, priority should be placed on collaboration among African nations over external influences. By harmonizing national policies, they can foster a stronger sense of regional unity and promote effective governance and collective decision-making (Bassey et al., 2024).
- **Security:** ECOWAS and AES must combine their strengths to address insurgency and regional instability. Establishing robust channels for sharing intelligence and coordinating operations will be vital in countering security challenges, given their geographical proximity and the cross-border nature of many security issues (Kohnert, 2024a). This crisis presents an opportunity to reevaluate and improve existing frameworks, such as the Accra Initiative, to enhance regional security cooperation (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024; UNSC, 2024).
- **Economic Development:** ECOWAS and AES should pool resources for projects in agriculture, energy, and infrastructure to drive economic growth and reduce insecurity caused by poverty and underdevelopment (Kohnert, 2024a). Additionally, cooperation on currency and monetary policies could pave the way for a unified West African currency and a stronger economic bloc (Fisher & Oludemi, 2022; Kohnert, 2024a).
- **Climate Change:** Given the region's vulnerability to climate-related challenges, such as desertification and resource depletion, ECOWAS and AES must jointly develop and implement strategies for climate resilience. By combining local knowledge with scientific research from professionals—who didn't get in through nepotism, these strategies can offer sustainable solutions for the environmental challenges facing the region (UNSC, 2024). Collaborating on climate issues will not only protect resources but also create new opportunities for sustainable development in farming, water management, and energy.

Some might call this initiative idealistic, but a purely realist plan could make things worse, increasing instability and dependence on external powers. After all, realism's emphasis on military might and self-interest has NOT brought lasting peace or prosperity to West Africa. Regional leaders must also recognize that the dominant foreign players in West Africa hold permanent seats and veto power on the UN Security Council—meaning they can push their own agendas and potentially block anything that threatens them. Without a values-based approach like the Ubuntu, the region will miss out on building resilience, unity, and long-term growth. Solutions need to come from within, since outside help has often been unhelpful and backfired.

Overcoming mistrust and ideological differences between the AES and the ECOWAS will require concerted efforts (Aning & Bjarnesen, 2024; Kohnert, 2024a; Musa, 2024). Also, while reducing the influence of external powers is necessary for fostering genuine regional independence, political differences, external alliances, and divergent national interests may hinder this cooperation, which calls for strong mechanisms of conflict resolution (Kohnert, 2024a). In this light, the OWW Initiative offers a promising path ahead. In order to escape this geopolitical chess game, regional leaders must prioritize unity over division. Strengthening regional bodies, investing in self-sufficiency, and reducing dependence on external actors are critical steps toward sovereignty.

Finally, the OWW Initiative highlights the importance of engaging future generations in regional and national decision-making and community development for sustainable partnerships. Successful leadership requires bridging generations, as Leaders of Today gain valuable insights by considering future generations' perspectives, while Leaders of Tomorrow benefit from the wisdom and network of their predecessors.

So, will West Africa finally take control, or will it keep being a puppet in global power games?

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